Mentoring, Technology, and Social and Emotional Learning
Findings from the Evaluation of iMentor’s College Ready Program

Lisa Merrill
August 2020
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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Earning a college degree is widely recognized as the most reliable pathway to economic stability (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2013). But we know from a wide range of research that access to college is neither easy nor equitable, and that traditionally underrepresented students (including low-income students and Black and Latino students) continue to matriculate and earn degrees at disproportionately low rates (Bailey & Dynarski, 2011; Black & Coca, 2017; Kane, 2004). We know, too, that the solution to these challenges cannot be found solely in the classroom (Heckman & Rubinstein, 2001; Heckman et al., 2006). Indeed, there is a growing consensus that college success relies on a concert of academic and social emotional learning (SEL) skills (Farkas, 2003; Farrington et al., 2012; Durlak, et al., 2011), strong guidance during the college application process (Roderick et al., 2008; La Rosa et al., 2006), and financial, academic, and social support throughout college (Kuh et al., 2006).

What is less clear is the specific types of programming that can effectively close the opportunity gaps. Mentoring programs represent one promising area, with a large body of research showing that relationships between adults and youth, such as those formed in mentoring programs, can improve youth’s odds of success. The iMentor College Ready Program combines school-based mentoring with technology and aspects of whole school reform in an effort to boost students’ college readiness. The program matches low-income youth with college-educated mentors and focuses on helping them develop close relationships through online communication and monthly in-person events, held over the course of students’ four years of high school. In turn, iMentor believes these relationships help students develop the mindsets, skills, and knowledge necessary to reach and succeed in college.

In 2010, the Social Innovation Fund (SIF) awarded a grant to iMentor to support a rigorous evaluation of the College Ready Program. iMentor engaged the Research Alliance for New York City Schools to conduct a mixed methods evaluation of the program in eight New York City high schools. The study included about 1,600 students who received iMentor programming and comparison students who did not have access to iMentor. Our evaluation assessed the implementation of iMentor in the eight study schools and its impact on students’ social and emotional learning, academic outcomes (like attendance and progress toward high school graduation), college going activities, and transitions to college. This summary highlights key
findings and lessons from our study. Please see the full report and appendices for more details.

**Key Findings**

**Schools struggled to implement iMentor’s College Ready Program as designed.**

The eight schools in our evaluation generally did not meet iMentor’s benchmarks for program implementation, and implementation levels declined over time. On average, students were more engaged in 9th and 10th grade than they were in 11th and 12th grade. While most students were matched with a mentor across the four years of the study, they generally did not interact with their mentor as frequently as iMentor would like.

**Despite these challenges, iMentor produced small, positive changes in students’ critical thinking and self-advocacy skills.**

iMentor accomplished an important goal by matching students with a mentor and providing ways for them to interact. Students also had access to the weekly iMentor class, which focused on teaching important SEL competencies. Our findings show that, after four years of implementation, iMentor had a small positive effect on two of the nine SEL outcomes we measured, critical thinking and self-advocacy—both of which may provide an important foundation for navigating transitions to college and a career. Other SEL skills, such as growth mindset, task persistence, and initiative, did not improve as a result of the program.

**iMentor did not increase participation in college and career activities.**

iMentor provided students with opportunities to engage in college and career activities during class, such as writing a resume and filling out college applications, as well as during events (including visits to college campuses). Our results suggest that many NYC students are engaged in these kinds of college and career activities. The high levels of participation among comparison students left little room for iMentor to add value. We found that iMentor students were more likely to compare financial aid packages, which could help students assess the costs of colleges they might attend. Many schools reported that iMentor took the place of prior college access programming, and, at times, was working alongside other college-focused supports.
iMentor improved high school graduation rates.

Our analyses found no statistically significant impacts on students’ attendance rates or credit accumulation throughout high school. However, iMentor students were about 8 percentage points more likely than comparison students to graduate. The increase in high school graduates was driven mostly by students earning a Local Diploma—a less rigorous option that allows students to graduate with lower scores on the required New York State Regents exams. These findings suggest that iMentor may be particularly helpful for students who are struggling academically; without the support that iMentor provided, fewer of these students would have graduated at all.

We also looked at iMentor’s impact on students’ college enrollment, which is one of the program’s central goals for participants. The differences between the iMentor and comparison students were not statistically significant but were in a positive direction. For example, iMentor students were about 3 percentage points more likely to enroll in college than students in the comparison group, with most of the increase concentrated in two-year institutions.

Students with stronger relationships experienced larger gains.

Our exploratory analyses found that students who felt very close to their mentors had large, statistically significant growth on all the SEL competencies we measured and some college activities. This suggests that increasing the proportion of students with stronger relationships might be a promising strategy to enhance iMentor’s impact. In contrast, we did not find that students who had higher levels of participation in the program (e.g., attended more events or communicated with their mentor more often) had larger impacts.

Moving Forward

Not many new, innovative programs submit themselves to a rigorous, public evaluation. iMentor’s engagement and interest in the evaluation prompted some important programmatic improvements. For example, iMentor began hiring PMs with more classroom experience and reorganizing how iMentor staff interacted with school leaders, after our research found challenges in some of the weekly classes and wide variation in the levels of collaboration between iMentor and school staff. iMentor also revamped its online email system to include a chat feature after our research showed that students found the prior system outdated, and that informal communication (like texting) was associated with stronger relationships. While these
changes presented some challenges for evaluating iMentor’s impact (with programming becoming somewhat of a moving target), it is encouraging that iMentor was able to adapt as program staff learned more about what was working well and what needed to be improved. In retrospect, the program may not have been ready for a rigorous impact analysis. More formative research, aimed at assessing and improving implementation, could have provided valuable information to hone the program model early on.

Over the seven years of this evaluation, the implementation and impact data raise important questions regarding iMentor’s theory of action. The evidence generally doesn’t show a relationship between iMentor activities and anticipated outcomes. The fact that student engagement is not strongly related to relationship development and that students who meet iMentor’s engagement goals do not show larger impacts raises questions about the program model. Should iMentor invest in different activities that might lead to increased closeness and strengthening students’ SEL? For example, iMentor staff reported that field trips (like ice skating) were particularly useful for nurturing closeness. Should mentees and mentors do more events of this kind? Perhaps there are other iMentor activities that we did not measure that contribute to students feeling close to their mentors and strengthening their SEL skills? In particular, it is possible that the work of the PM, which we had relatively little data on, is especially important for fostering closeness. It may also be that closeness is a function of the quality of the match—we suspect that some students and adults are more likely to be close with another because of who they are, not because of the activities they engage in.

Consistent with the literature, our study highlighted that whole-school mentoring interventions are difficult to implement and that school-wide impacts are often hard to achieve. We encourage iMentor and other programs to continue to investigate how a blend of technology-based communication and in-person meetings can be leveraged to foster close mentoring relationships and, ultimately, better student outcomes. In response to their own learning and this evaluation, iMentor has been conducting focus groups with PMs, students, and mentors to gather their perspectives about how to develop strong relationships. We look forward to seeing how their program evolves given this information and how they can continue to inform the mentoring field.
Endnote


References


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