The Research Alliance for New York City Schools

iMentor's College Ready Program
Examining Implementation and Impacts for 10th Graders

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A large and growing body of research shows that relationships between adults and youth, such as those formed in mentoring programs, can improve youth's odds of success. In *Foundations for Young Adult Success*, Nagaoka et al. (2015) describe relationships with supportive adults as a necessary underpinning for students' development. Studies of formal mentoring programs, most notably Big Brothers Big Sisters, have demonstrated a variety of benefits for youth and highlighted the importance of close relationships between mentors and mentees (Grossman & Rhodes, 2002; Herrera et al., 2007). More recently, Bayer et al. found that students who had a close relationship with their mentor made significant academic gains, whereas students who did not have a close relationship saw little improvement (2013).

The iMentor College Ready Program combines school-based mentoring with technology and aspects of whole school reform, in an effort to improve students' college readiness. The program matches low-income youth with college-educated mentors and aims to help them develop close relationships through online communication and monthly in-person events, which take place throughout students' four years of high school. In turn, iMentor hopes to leverage these relationships to help students develop the mindsets, skills, and knowledge necessary to reach and succeed in college.

The Research Alliance for New York City Schools is conducting a mixed-methods evaluation of iMentor's College Ready Program in eight New York City high schools. This report (the third, so far, from our evaluation) examines the College Ready Program's impact on a variety of outcomes at the end of students' scheduled 10th grade year and updates our analysis of the program's implementation across schools. It also begins to explore whether students' engagement with key components of the College Ready Program has any association with positive outcomes. iMentor's leaders have emphasized two priorities that they believe are important to achieve the program's goals: developing close mentee-mentor relationships and meeting thresholds for participating in various program activities. Thus, we explore how student outcomes differed across these two domains.

This information may help identify opportunities to strengthen the program, and will provide useful context as we continue to investigate iMentor's impact on student outcomes in future years of the study. Our findings may also offer valuable insights

for other mentoring and youth development initiatives that seek to foster supportive relationships between students and adults.

How Was iMentor Implemented During the 10th Grade?

iMentor identifies its key program components as: (1) matching students to the recruited pool of mentors; (2) supporting the mentee-mentor relationship; (3) teaching non-cognitive skills and college knowledge in weekly classes; and (4) providing opportunities for the mentee-mentor pair to interact, online and in person. Drawing on program data iMentor collects and surveys conducted as part of our evaluation, we found that:

- Across all eight evaluation schools, 77 percent of students had been matched with a mentor by December of their 10th grade year; about 49 percent of students remained matched with their original mentor from 9th grade. Schools and cohorts varied between 58 percent and 94 percent of students matched.

- 37 percent of students met or were approaching iMentor's goal of weekly online interaction with their mentor.

- 45 percent of students met or were approaching iMentor's goal of attending six events per school year, and 60 percent of students attended events at least twice.

- Students reported relatively high levels of closeness with their mentors. On the spring survey, 11 percent of 10th graders reported feeling "Not close" or "A little close" to their mentor, while about 48 percent said they felt "Somewhat close," and 40 percent "Very close". Notably, just 33 percent of students who reported feeling "Very close" to their mentor met all of iMentor's participation goals; 57 percent of these students were approaching iMentor's goals.

iMentor sets participation goals for school-level implementation, as well as individual student participation. Overall, we found that schools have struggled to meet iMentor's implementation goals, but that participation in key activities has varied substantially across schools and student cohorts (see Figure 1 in the full report for more information about the cohorts and timeline for our study). There was no overall upward trend in implementation levels over time; rather, implementation levels rose and fell, across the various program components and schools. Many schools were successful in matching students, but a few struggled with preliminary matches and with matches ending. No school met iMentor's goals for pair interaction, as measured through online communication and event attendance. Still, students reported

relatively high levels of closeness with their mentor, and, perhaps surprisingly, many of the students who reported feeling close did not meet iMentor's participation goals.

These findings raise a number of questions: How did iMentor staff and school personnel make decisions about iMentor's implementation? Did personnel choose to emphasize certain program components and deemphasize others? If so, why? What challenges did schools encounter in the areas where implementation declined? And what resources helped some schools improve in key areas?

About iMentor's College Ready Program

iMentor provides the following supports and resources to partner schools:

- **College-educated mentors,**

- **iMentor support staff**, including Program Managers (PMs) assigned to each school,

- **A proprietary data platform, Canvas,** that facilitates interactions between mentors and mentees and tracks key program data, and

- **A college-readiness curriculum** that is taught in weekly iMentor classes.

In each partner school, iMentor PMs engage in four key activities:

- **Matching** mentees and mentors based on gender and shared interests,

- **Supporting** mentee-mentor pairs,

- **Teaching** college knowledge and non-cognitive skills in a weekly class, and

- **Providing opportunities for mentees and mentors to interact** through Canvas posts and monthly events.

iMentor's approach is distinctive for several reasons. First, few mentoring programs have embraced technology as fully as iMentor, which uses its online platform as the main form of contact between students and mentors. Second, iMentor attempts to serve *all* students at the school, for the entirety of their high school career; mentoring programs typically serve only a subset of students, and often for a shorter period. Finally, iMentor includes a College Ready curriculum that is taught during the school day; it is unusual for a mentoring programs to have a curricular component that is taught like an elective class during school. iMentor's ultimate goal is for students to enroll and succeed in college, defined by completing a 2- or 4-year degree or even entering directly into a career. (For further details, please see our previous reports.)

What Were the Effects of iMentor After Two Years of Implementation?

Overall, iMentor had a small, positive, statistically significant impact on some student experiences and attitudes, but not on students' attendance or academic performance. Compared to similar students who did not have access to iMentor, the average iMentor 10th grader:

- Was much more likely to have a mentor;
- Was slightly more likely to have developed a resume and researched a possible career path;
- Had slightly higher college aspirations, resilience and critical thinking; but
- Was not more likely than their peers to have completed a variety of college preparation activities;
- Did not have a higher grade point average (GPA), attendance rate, or number of credits;
- Was similarly likely to be chronically absent; and
- Was similarly likely to be on track to graduate.

Were Stronger Outcomes Associated with Closer Mentoring Relationships or with the Intensity of Participation in iMentor Activities?

Looking only at students who had access to iMentor, those who reported feeling very close to their mentors had some stronger outcomes compared with those who did not feel as close. (Note that for this exploratory analysis, we did not look at attendance or academic outcomes.) We found that students who felt closer to their mentor:

- Displayed moderately stronger growth across a range of non-cognitive skills, such as goal setting behavior, reilence, persistence, and critical thinking; but
- Did not participate in more college and career activities or express higher college aspirations.

By contrast, iMentor students who participated more fully in iMentor activities generally had similar outcomes as those who did not. Students who participated more intensely:

- Displayed similar non-cognitive skills, with the exception of stronger resilience and goal setting behavior,

- Expressed similar levels of college aspirations, and

- Participated in similar levels of college and career activities, with the exception of being more likley to visit a college campus, particularly colleges outside of NYC but in New York state.

Conclusion

Overall, we found few impacts from iMentor on students' college-related activities, non-cognitive skill development and academic achievement. The program had some small positive and statistically significant impacts on critical thinking and internal resilience, as well as on career activities. Of all the outcomes we tested, these are most closely related to iMentor's 10th grade programming. iMentor and comparison students were equally likely to participate in more generic college readiness activities, such as researching and visiting colleges. We hypothesize that this may be because many comparison students were participating in these activities through other programs.

As in previous reports, we should emphasize that these findings are based on two years of participation in a four-year program and do not mean that iMentor will not ultimately have impacts on outcomes like high school graduation and college enrollment. Nonetheless, these findings raise questions for iMentor about whether the program is accomplishing what it is intended to at this stage, especially in terms of the non-cognitive skills where we did not see any impacts.

Our exploratory analyses suggest that iMentor's effects on non-cognitive skills might be mediated by mentor-mentee closeness. In other words, feeling very close to their mentor may help students develop their non-cognitive skills. By contrast, the non-cognitive outcomes of students who participated more intensely in iMentor's program activities did not, on the whole, differ from those of students with lower levels of participation.

Based on these findings, we suggest that iMentor redouble its efforts to investigate how and why some pairs are closer than others. Is it personality types? Mentor characteristics, or training? Program Manager support? Participation in certain events? Communication through online chatting, emails, or texts? Are some pairs choosing to communicate with phone calls and text messages, instead of through the

Canvas platform? Is the content of their communication different? Are they meeting, outside of formal iMentor events? In certain circumstances, it may make sense for iMentor to prioritize relationship building over activity participation, given that outcomes did not vary for students with higher and lower participation levels.

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