"I didn't know you could just ask:" Empowering underrepresented college-bound students to recruit academic and career mentors[☆,☆☆]

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A B S T R A C T

This study investigates a new approach to cultivating mentoring relationships in which adolescents participate in workshops to develop their capacity to recruit mentors and other supportive adults who can help advance their academic and career goals. Drawing on in-depth pre- and post- interviews, research observations, and participant feedback and workshop materials from a pilot intervention conducted with 12 ethnic minority students in their senior year of high school, this study explores whether and how the intervention influenced participants, as well as mechanisms of change. Results suggested that the intervention increased the value students placed on social capital and mentoring relationships, developed their knowledge, skills, and self-efficacy in how to develop such connections, and influenced their interactions with potential academic and career mentors. Although additional research is needed, this study highlights the potential of a relatively low-cost intervention to support underrepresented college-bound students in developing relationships that are crucial to college and career success.

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1. Introduction

In the current paper, we propose a new approach to cultivating mentoring relationships that seeks to empower adolescents and emerging adults to recruit mentors and other supportive adults from their existing social networks. Substantial research indicates the key role of mentoring relationships and social capital in adolescents and emerging adults' transition to college, particularly among low-income, racial or ethnic minority, and first-generation college students (e.g. Crisp, 2010; Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2006; Stanton-Salazar, 2011; Tinto, 1993). Unlike traditional mentoring programs, which have focused primarily on developing relationships by assigning formal mentors to youth, this intervention focuses on training youth so they can identify, recruit, and maintain the support of adults whom they believe would help advance their academic and career goals. The current qualitative study represents an initial step in developing and exploring whether and how a group intervention for underrepresented students transitioning from high school to college may influence students' capacity to develop and maintain relationships with potential academic and career mentors.

1.1. Educational attainment among underrepresented students

In recent years, there has been a growing interest in expanding college access to students historically underrepresented in higher education, including those from first generation, low-income, and racial or ethnic minority backgrounds. This interest stems from the significant disparities in college retention among these groups (e.g. Chen, 2005; Mortenson, Stocker, & Brunt, 2010; Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004; U.S. Department of Education, 2014). Indeed, the United States has the highest college dropout rate in the industrialized world (Symonds, Schwartz, & Ferguson, 2011), and low-income, first-generation students are nearly four times more likely than their higher income and continuing generation peers to leave after the first year of college (Engle & Tinto, 2008). There is, therefore, a critical need for the development of new strategies that support low-income, racial or ethnic minority, and first-generation college students in achieving their educational goals.

1.2. The role of social capital in educational attainment

Research and theory indicate that social capital plays an important role in contributing to educational attainment and academic success (e.g., Kuh et al., 2006). Social capital refers to the resources, information, and support that an individual has access to through their social networks (Bourdieu, 1986; Jarrett, Sullivan, & Watkins, 2005) and includes both the networking relationships that provide access to information, opportunities, and material resources, as well as more ongoing or intensive ties that characterize mentoring relationships. A growing body of

literature demonstrates that social capital, and mentoring relationships in particular, are associated with a range of positive outcomes among both adolescents and adults, including psychological, behavioral, academic, and occupational outcomes (e.g. Crisp, 2010; Stanton-Salazar, 2011). During the transition to college, students' social networks undergo substantial changes, including a weakening of high school and community connections (Rios-Aguilar & Deil-Amen, 2012). Cultivating social capital in college is important both in replacing ties that may have been lost during the transition, as well as in developing new forms of social capital that can provide support related to college and professional success. Moreover, as students transition to new settings during early adulthood, connections with professionals in and beyond their social networks can take on increased significance, providing vital information and resources that can enhance academic and career opportunities (e.g. Burt, 2005; Granovetter, 1983). Institutional agents, which Stanton-Salazar (2011) has defined as high-status, non-kin individuals, are particularly well positioned to provide social and institutional support that includes resources, opportunities, privileges, and services.

Research suggests that connections with faculty on campus may represent a particularly important form of social capital, especially for underrepresented college students (Baker, 2013; Barbatis, 2010). In fact, supportive interactions with caring faculty and staff on campus have been identified as the "single most potent retention agent on campus" (Crockett, 1985, p. 245). A study of on-campus support among African American and Latino college students suggested that support from faculty was the most important type of social support in contributing to academic success (Baker, 2013). Other studies show that interactions with faculty both in and outside the classroom influence student engagement and academic achievement (Deil-Amen, 2011; Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005). In some cases, connections with faculty and staff may evolve into mentoring relationships, which appear to be especially beneficial. In mentoring relationships, the connection moves beyond casual interaction to intentional support and advocacy. Research has shown that college mentoring can increase students' sense of social and academic integration, their grade point average (GPA), and their persistence and retention in college (Crisp & Cruz, 2009; Phinney, Torres Campos, Padilla Kallemeyn, & Kim, 2011).

Although the value of social capital, including both mentoring relationships and lower intensity support, is well-documented, data suggest that first-generation, low-income, and racial/ethnic minority college students are less likely to develop such relationships (e.g. Berardi, 2012; Museus, 2010; Terenzini et al., 1994; Tinto, 1993), especially with institutional agents whose support may be particularly valuable (Stanton-Salazar, 2011). In fact, difficulty developing meaningful on-campus connections has emerged as a key explanation for low rates of degree completion among racial and ethnic minority students (e.g. Baker, 2013; Museus & Quaye, 2009; Tinto, 1993). Furthermore, a qualitative study of first year Latina/o college students' social networks revealed a loss of academically and professionally relevant ties from high school, and minimal development of new academically and professionally relevant ties that would support them in moving towards academic and career goals (Rios-Aguilar & Deil-Amen, 2012).

Disparities in social capital may stem in part from differences in the expected roles between first-generation students and faculty which translate into differences in students' willingness make requests for accommodations and use supports such as open advising and faculty office hours (Collier & Morgan, 2008). One study suggested that ethnic minority and first-generation college students may be less likely to engage in help-seeking behaviors compared to White students and continuing-generation students, respectively (Berardi, 2012), while another indicated that low-income students feel less confident in their ability to use email to communicate, putting them at a significant disadvantage when connecting with professors and other on-campus mentors (Berardi, 2013). Additionally, cultural values may emphasize self and familial reliance, which may pose barriers to seeking support

outside of the family (Colin, 2001; Sánchez, Reyes, & Singh, 2006). Finally, professors may differentially respond to student overtures for support based on the student's background. For example, research has demonstrated that professors were less likely to respond to students' emails when the students had more typically racial or ethnic minority or female names versus when they had more typically White male names (Milkman, Akinola, & Chugh, 2014).

Despite the fact that underrepresented college students are at greatest risk for dropping out of college and may benefit most from such support, it appears that universities are not doing enough to foster such relationships. Taken together, this research suggests that increasing social capital and mentoring relationships, among underrepresented students transitioning to college may be an effective approach to increasing college persistence and educational attainment.

1.3. Current strategies to increase mentoring relationships

The majority of programs designed to foster the development of supportive relationships focus on formally matching incoming college students with advisors or mentors (Crisp & Cruz, 2009). Academic advising is the most prevalent strategy used to foster such relationships and provide one-on-one support to students, with most colleges and universities assigning all students a formal advisor. A recent study, however, showed low satisfaction with formal advisers among students (Allard & Parashar, 2013). Higher levels of satisfaction were reported for unassigned or informal faculty advisors, yet fewer than half of students reported having informal advisors, and such students were disproportionately juniors and seniors. Moreover, a distressing 12% of students reported never having met with an advisor during their college experience. In fact, data suggest that students who are most in need of support (i.e., those who are struggling academically) may be least likely to use academic advising services (Alexitch, 2002).

In part to compensate for insufficient use of and/or support from university-wide advising systems, many institutions have adopted mentoring programs that match more vulnerable students with formal mentors. Research on mentoring programs directed specifically at racial or ethnic minority and first-generation students have demonstrated positive impacts (e.g. Bordes & Arredondo, 2005; Campbell & Campbell, 1997; Phinney et al., 2011; Santos & Reigadas, 2005). Nonetheless, there are a number of limitations to such an approach. First, formal, one-on-one mentoring programs depend on recruiting sufficient numbers of volunteer mentors to their programs, which significantly limits the number of students they can serve. In addition, the benefit of such relationships depends on the quality of the relationship that develops and the amount of contact (Campbell & Campbell, 1997; Phinney et al., 2011). Unfortunately, not all formal mentoring relationships result in close and enduring relationships (Grossman & Rhodes, 2002). In fact, even in a well-structured college mentoring program with significant resources, mentors and mentees met only, on average, six times per year (Campbell & Campbell, 1997). Another concern about mentoring and advising programs is that students who could most benefit from services may be less likely to seek out those services (Alexitch, 2002). This could be due in part to such interventions relying on presumed skills for engaging with adults in college settings that may not have been as well cultivated among first-generation college students as they often are among their middle-class counterparts (Lareau & Cox, 2011).

1.4. A new approach to mentoring relationships

An innovative approach that may address many of the above limitations is Youth Initiated Mentoring (YIM). Unlike traditional models of mentoring in which youth are matched with volunteer mentors, under the YIM model, youth receive training in mentor-recruitment strategies and then nominate mentors from among the non-parental adults who are already part of their social networks (e.g., teachers,