Peer mentoring to support first-generation low-income college students

Matching incoming college students with older peers like them can help ease their transition and show them a way to persist when the path gets tough.

By Sean Plaskett, Diksha Bali, Michael J. Nakkula, and John Harris

By definition, first-generation college students cannot rely on family members' insider knowledge of higher education to guide them on the path to college. They may have access to school counselors, mentors, or older friends to help them map out their way, but for students attending under-resourced high schools, even these sources of guidance can be hard to find.

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Given this scarcity of supports for college planning, many students — even those who are very well-qualified academically — struggle to make a smooth and successful transition to higher education. That's a major reason why only 50% of first-generation college students from low-income backgrounds earn a degree, compared to 64% of low-income students who are not first generation (DeAngelo et al., 2011). So how, at a time when few states are willing or able to hire greater numbers of guidance counselors, can these students get the information and advice they need?

The need for models

Learning by experience in novel situations is difficult, particularly when those novel experiences are as complex as the realities of college life. Yet, given the relative lack of family modeling, first-generation students have no choice but to learn as they go, proceeding in trial-and-error fashion as they get started in college.

Trial-and-error is hardly a recipe for sustained success, especially when students confront challenges that they don't know how to manage. If anything, this persistent state of uncertainty and insecurity can lead to imposter syndrome (i.e., feeling fraudulent, inadequate, and incompetent among peers), a phenomenon of particular salience for first-generation students and one frequently associated with a host of mental health problems (Cokley et al., 2017).

A much more effective strategy is to learn from competent, relatable models, people who can draw on their own experiences to help first-generation students build a sense of self-efficacy and achievement (Jacobi, 1991) without making them feel stigmatized.

Peer mentors often fit the bill particularly well, especially when they are themselves successful first-generation and/or low-income (FGLI) college upperclassmen. Such students possess the knowledge, skills, and experience to guide and support their mentees effectively, and their similar backgrounds tend to give them powerful insights into the social and emotional challenges their mentees face.

In a recent study, we examined a program that connects incoming students with mentors from areas similar to those within the major city from which the mentees matriculate. Mentors and mentees were selected on the basis of being from high-poverty school districts in a large urban center graduating predominantly FGLI college students who are thus at heightened risk for dropping out of college. Pairs were encouraged to meet weekly, and the average pair met seven times in 2016-17. Half the mentors met an average of 12 times and half met an average of only twice. The program provided lists of potential topics to discuss and offered supervision from a half-time coordinator. Mentor oversight consisted of a multiple-day training retreat before the school year, regular supervision (which varied in frequency across sites), and a handful of training sessions (on time management, financial planning, etc.).

Consistent with previous research on assessing match quality (Nakkula & Harris, 2005), we focused on the balance between *instrumentality* (the logistical, academic, and social-emotional needs that mentors help mentees to meet) and *relationality* (the quality of the mentoring relationship itself).

We found that mentoring relationships were capable of producing a variety of instrumental benefits for the incoming students — for example, mentors helped them apply for scholarships and other forms of financial aid, helped them select classes and strengthen their study skills, and helped them make friends and connect with people and organizations on campus. However, mentees saw the greatest instrumental benefits when they had a strong relationship with their mentor (e.g., they developed shared empathy, trust, respect, and closeness). Indeed, we found that the best matches integrated these two factors, in an approach we call *relational instrumentality*. That is, the incoming students were most successful when their mentors didn't just help them meet their immediate needs but also bonded with them personally.

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The value of social learning

In the program we studied, relational instrumentality appears to be a key characteristic of matches that effectively supported first-generation students' transition from high school to college. Mentees Tracey and Ezra spoke directly to that dynamic, praising both the logistical support their mentors gave them and the quality of their personal relationship:

TRACEY: It's helpful on a personal level because these are your peers that are a year or two or three older that can still connect with you and help you make the transition coming from home in high school in a completely different environment, and help you get accustomed to this college campus and tell you about scholarships, financial aid, different organizations, different programs that can benefit you and get you on your feet.

EZRA: Sometimes I forget that she's my mentor because she's really cool. Other than just our once a week meeting I see her a lot. She's helped me with financial aid workshop. She referenced me to somebody in the financial aid office and he helped me with financial aid things.

(Both of these examples happen to refer to supports related to financial aid, but we have similar examples having to do with helping students select courses, find their way around campus, gain a sense of belonging, and so on.)

Social learning theory posits that vicarious learning ("if s/he can do it, so can I") can promote an individual's self-efficacy when facing novel contexts (Newman & Newman, 2016). This dynamic is exemplified in a match where the mentee (Kory) was in danger of not completing his first year of college due to financial issues — a common challenge among the FGLI population. When he revealed these financial issues to his mentor (Rachel), she knew from experience what to do:

He told me that he was having problems with financial aid and tuition . . . We kinda have the same backgrounds where Kory doesn't really wanna ask his parents for much. I felt the same way when I was getting into college, so I made sure that I applied for a lot of scholarships and tried to get a nice amount of hours of work study and save on a lot of things.

. . . I helped him make a Fast Web account 'cause I had one — I still have one, I still use it . . . I just, you know, encouraged him to do it. And he was like "Ok, I will" and he would like text me during the week and ask me different questions about the application. So he was actually doing it. That was really cool.

Kory's feelings of uncertainty evolved into a sense of self-efficacy once he followed his mentor's example. And Rachel, consistent with our broader findings about relational instrumentality, believed that her ability to help Kory stemmed in part from her ability to relate well to him.

Strategies for effective peer mentoring

Effective mentors build trusting relationships with their mentees and adopt mentee-centric, respectful approaches. This begins with establishing the right kind of match, but also includes ensuring that the pairs share a strong commitment to the match and engage in activities that promote relational instrumentality.

Building relationally instrumental matches

The program initially emphasized relational compatibility, specifically personality, in their matchmaking (an approach consistent with generally accepted best practice in youth mentoring). However, the program eventually shifted to include an emphasis on instrumental compatibility, especially related to mentees' academic focus. This tends to be important to many mentees, as one, Kayla, put it:

It would really help if I could get someone that's like right in my major . . . that knows how to make your way. You need someone who has the experience so they could tell you like certain pitfalls to avoid and things like that.

Once a pair has begun meeting, engaging in shared relational activities can enhance the mentee's inclination to accept or even seek support, thereby bolstering the match's instrumentality. Shauna, a mentee in our program, described it this way:

When we first met that's when it seemed more "mentory." I didn't know her and she didn't know me so it was like trying to get to know each other and, you know, go by the rules of the program. But as the first semester went on she would text me and stuff and let me know about different programs or events on campus and we would go to them together. Just different events being put on by organizations. Just go to the gym together, do yoga. And we volunteered together too. Other than just our once a week meeting I see her a lot. She's helped me with financial aid things, she introduced me to one of her friends in the engineering major, and one of the girls she introduced me to, we have a class together so it's kinda cool.

Fostering trust

In keeping with the program's primary intent, mentees tended to be strongly focused on persisting and succeeding at school. However, our interviews indicated that the best outcomes for mentees occurred in matches characterized by high levels

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of trust, a trait implicated in psychosocial support (Terrion & Leonard, 2007). Rachel, a mentor, noted that:

If [the mentees] don't feel like they can trust you with a lot of things . . . you really aren't doing your job as a mentor. You're limited in a lot of things that you can share with them because they're not really trying to engage in conversation with you.

Dana provides a mentee's perspective:

[My mentor is] so easy to talk to and such a great listener. I feel like I can open up to her and tell her everything that's going on in my life. She helps me get tutored, specifically history because I'm not really a history fan.

The matches in the program tended to start off with a strong basis for trust because the mentors and mentees often come from similar backgrounds. And that trust informed the mentees' willingness to discuss their needs and the instrumental support the mentors provided in response.

Mentee-centric mentoring

Our data repeatedly highlighted the importance of mentors keeping an even balance between the roles of older peer and friend; the mentor should not seem like an authority figure. As a guiding principle for engaging mentees, mentors should seek to empower and support already growing students, not fill "empty vessels." Mentors can share judiciously about themselves — focusing on lighthearted stories or lessons from their own past — to bolster mentees' comfort with their own sharing, but the mentors should take the lead in determining what to talk about and how much to share. Consider the following comment by Aaliyah, a mentee who highlighted how her mentor successfully struck this delicate balance:

We were talking about academics. Every once a while, we might tell a story from [our lives] that's related to our conversations. And, you know, we laugh all day. One time, we were . . . just talking about being from Philadelphia . . . we just let our conversation flow very easily when we were talking. But [our conversations] stay . . . on the point even if sometimes we sidetrack.

Committing to the process

No matter how compatible a match was or how well prepared the mentor was, reciprocal commitment appeared important in building strong mentoring relationships. The first level of commitment included communicating about scheduling meetings, showing up for them, and being available. Aaliyah explained how important her mentor's commitment was:

> [My first mentor] made it [seem] like "I am about to graduate, I have other responsibilities." He had more than one mentee. He had about four or five. That was another thing. So, it was like I was not his main concern. He had other things to deal with. But with D., I know I am her only mentee. She's closer to me in age. I felt like I could actually go and talk to her more than I could with [my first mentor].

Mentees, too, needed to be committed to benefit from the relationship, as Misha, a mentor, noted:

> My first mentee, we got to know each other and we found commonalities between us. The second mentee, we didn't click as quickly. When you're like a freshman and you feel like you [don't have] enough time to get your work done, and stressed and stuff like that . . . that's what she was going through. [My mentee] was like, "Oh I don't have time to meet, I don't have time, I don't have time, I don't have time." Before you know it, a month goes by and you don't really care, you know?

For mentees, commitment involved not just making time, but also asking questions that draw on the mentor's ability to be a resource. Mentors expressed that engaged mentees were often the ones they could give more information to, stressing the importance of mentees being advocates for themselves.

Starting in high school

Highly competent FGLI college juniors and seniors can act as highly relatable, effective role models for FGLI freshmen. However, the younger students cannot benefit from that resource unless they actually enroll in college and engage with the supports available. Too often, peer mentoring programs find that fewer students have opted to join the program than the program is equipped to serve. This appears to be due in part to two things: students not knowing about this relatively new program and students not thinking they need the program.
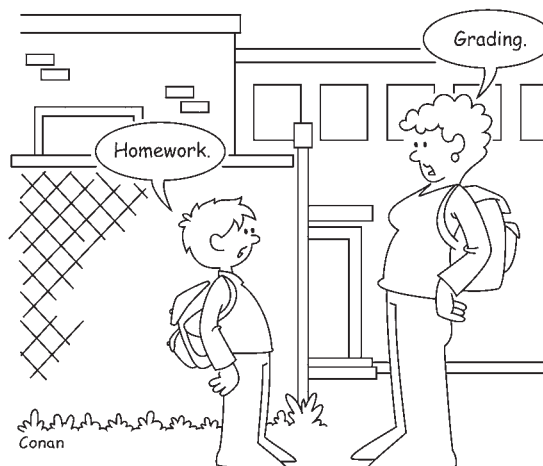
Both secondary school practitioners and university-level staff can help scaffold that connection. Program staff and mentors should participate in summer services (e.g., pre-freshmen orientation or bridge programs) designed to engage students before they are lost to the very whirlwind the program would help them negotiate. High schools can meet the program halfway by educating students about opportunities for mentoring and helping them connect with available resources.

Additionally, educators could offer mentoring and related programs for high school students to promote college-readiness skills. Programs such as iMentor (https://imentor.org) are applying just such a model of uninterrupted support to smooth students' transition from high school into college. Providing models and mentors can help students see the path ahead before they take the next steps, thereby making it easier for them to choose those steps with care.   **K**

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