

The Take on College Summer Fellowship Program: Impacts of College Mentorship on First-Generation and Low-Income High School Students

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Abstract

Current research on the impacts of mentorship is limited to either first-generation or low-income students if either of those identities is addressed at all. This project extends this analysis to include both identities. Using the Summer Fellowship Program organized by nonprofit Take on College, this paper delves into the profound impacts mentorship and a curated workshop curriculum can have on college and career readiness on 18 junior and senior high school students from 10 different states, all of which are first-generation and low-income. This research finds that best growth results occur on topics such as writing the personal statement, as well as financial aid. In addition, the results imply workshops with a higher level of interactivity are more successful at improving students' understanding of the material. Using the data found, I will also provide recommendations for future organizers on which topics can be most beneficial for first-generation and low-income students.

Keywords: mentorship, underserved learning, first-generation, low-income, college access

1. Introduction

As a nonprofit college counseling organization based in Washington, serving over 300 students across 14 states, Take on College (ToC) aims to meet the education and resource needs of first-generation and low-income college-bound students. Given the greater challenges that students belonging to under-represented groups face in accessing college counseling, career preparatory courses, and academic or emotional support, ToC is committed to addressing these national accessibility gaps. Our goal is to eliminate the guesswork and stress from college applications by delivering high-quality, effective mentorship and resources directly to students in need. The values from which Take on College originated reflect the interdisciplinary cooperation and collaboration that must become more widespread if we are to better serve underrepresented and underserved students. Take on College seeks to create an avenue for better preparing students from underrepresented backgrounds to achieve their educational goals while backing them with academic and emotional support.

According to a Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce report, white students are disproportionately represented at selective public colleges and make up 64% of freshman enrollment despite only being 54 percent of the college-age population. Meanwhile, only 7% of Black freshmen and 12% of Latino freshmen attend selective public colleges, despite making up 15 percent and 21 percent of the college-age population respectively.¹ The phenomena of racial and gender inequities must become the center of serious and widespread recognition on both academic and social fronts.

The services we offer include providing personalized personal statements, supplemental essays, or scholarship essay writing help, connecting our students with undergraduate mentors across the U.S., and most recently, initiating a Summer Fellowship Program Pilot Project. We applied funds from the Matelich Summer Challenge Grant to pilot an initiative in the Summer of 2021 to provide comprehensive access to college mapping/planning workshops, application writing, and counseling services to a planned cohort of 20 students, 95% of which identified as BIPOC. There were five mentors and three administrative leads, from universities ranging from the University of Puget Sound, University of Michigan, University of Texas, University of Washington, and the University of California-San Diego. Guest speakers were invited, including Financial Aid Director at the University of Puget Sound, Bryan Gould, as well as a nonprofit leader from FirstGenFirst, Jazmin Reyes. Mentors were each assigned a pod of 2-3 participants, all of which met individually throughout the program, as well as during the class time. The program met Mondays and Wednesdays starting on June 29, 2021, to August 11, 2021. Each session was 90 minutes long and included presentation time, pod time, and interactive activities.

Our goals are outlined below:

Goal 1: Provide comprehensive access to college mapping/planning workshops, application writing, and counseling services to a cohort of 20 who are first-generation and low-income (FGLI) students

Table 1: Outlined Goals for the Summer Fellowship Program

Outcome 1	Students will demonstrate an understanding of the timeline and academic requirements of college application
Outcome 2	Students will analyze components of successful personal statement, supplemental application, and scholarship settings in various professional and academic contexts
Outcome 3	Students will gain an understanding of available campus wellness services and demonstrate an understanding of how to seek out additional resources for mental health support

¹ Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, Our Separate & Unequal Public Colleges: How Public Colleges Reinforce White Racial Privilege and Marginalize Black and Latino Students, 2018.

Goal 2: This program will provide students with financial literacy skills that will be applicable during the college application process, such as applying for financial aid and scholarships.

Outcome 1	Students will be able to understand and apply for the FAFSA and CSS applications.
Outcome 2	Students will be able to read different financial aid offers and choose the best one after their offers are given.
Outcome 3	Students will be able to learn the strategies of writing an effective scholarship essay.

1.1 Literature Review

While the literature on mentorship is widespread, the research and implications of college counseling for first-generation and low-income students are rare. For the purposes of this research paper, first-generation students are those whose parents have not graduated with a four-year bachelor's degree in the United States, while low-income students are those who qualify for the federal free or reduced lunch program. This paper seeks to bridge the gap that is prevalent in mentorship literature by providing insight into the results of a program designed exclusively for both first-generation and low-income students.

Using this lens, we can extend the conventional wisdom across work that emphasizes the importance of mentorship and the impacts that can come out of programs. These can include providing emotional support students need to nurture their college goals, helping them prepare for entry and a smooth transition into college.² Furthermore, the act of discussing college with mentors can increase the interest among students who will become the first generation in their family to attend.³ As Woods and Preciado summarize in their research *Student–Mentor Relationships and Students' College Attitudes*: “Mentoring, particularly in the college-preparation-program setting, is unique in that it provides access to information, opportunities for skill development, and chances to build strong relationships with others who have experience with college. Mentors can serve as role models for students, especially for those who lack college role models among their peers or family members.”⁴

This paper will explore the implications of how students who have lived experience of being both first generation and low income (FGLI) can specifically benefit from the Summer

² Levine, A. and Nidiffer, J. 1996. *Beating the Odds: How the Poor Get to College*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

³ DuBois, D. L., Hollaway, B.E., Valentine, J.C. and Cooper, H. (2002). “Effectiveness of Mentoring Programs for youth: A Meta-Analytical Review.” *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 30, 157–197

⁴ Woods, C. & Preciado, M. (2016). *Student–Mentor Relationships and Students' College Attitudes*. *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk (JESPAR)*, 21(2), 90-103. DOI: 10.1080/10824669.2015.1127767

Fellowship Program. While studies focus on programs that target one or the other (or neither), this research will delve into how FGLI students can grow within a college mentorship program such as this one. This research attempts to answer the question of how to best curate mentorship programs for first-generation and low-income students by taking into account the topic taught and the levels of interactivity.

Methods

The following data was collected via Google Forms at the start and end of each lesson, with each student having as much time as they needed before the presenters moved on. In Table 2, the questions represent a broad set of topics surrounding the college application process that were comprehensively asked before the program started and on the last day of the program. Students were then asked to rank each question (except the last one that was 1-10) on a scale from 1-5, 1 representing the least amount of knowledge and 5 being the highest.

Within each lesson, there were also pre and post-surveys with questions curated around the content of the material presented. For instance, the Making a College List/Brainstorming a Personal Statement lesson asked:

1. I know how to choose which colleges to apply to that fit me.
2. I can explain the differences between different types of colleges and universities (ex. community, liberal arts, public/private, professional schools, etc.)
3. I understand how to brainstorm a personal statement topic
4. I understand how to write a thesis statement for my personal statement
5. I am ready to begin writing my personal statement

Students were then similarly asked to rank each statement on a scale of 1-5. The results from each lesson are presented in the table below.

For the second component, to measure the level of interactivity in each workshop, we used a scale of 1-5. This started from 5, in which the presenter engaged the students all the time, 4, some of the time, 3- occasionally and 2- a few times and 1- never. Specific measures of this included asking if there were any questions consistently, calling on students to provide their thoughts and ideas and having pauses in presentations for students to send a reaction emoji or answer and check in question in the chat. Interactivity also included activities that the students could actively participate in. These aspects of engagement were then put onto the scale for a final cumulative score for each workshop.

Results

From Table 2 (below), the statements with the least amount of change were students planning to attend a post-secondary (after high school) educational institution (0.01 increase) and those who have multiple friends or family members who will be, are currently enrolled in, or have graduated from a post-secondary educational institution (0.9 increase). These results show that the students entering the Summer Fellowship Program already have the goal of attending college. The second highlighted result, although it was one of the smaller changes, shows that students now feel more connected to their fellow participants and mentors, all of whom are

either in college or will be. Despite smaller increases, these results show a personal growth reflected in the participant's mindset.

Table 2

Question	Pre Program	Post Program	Change
I plan to attend a post-secondary (after high school) educational institution	4.888888889	4.9	0.011111111111
I have multiple friends or family members who will be, are currently enrolled in, or have graduated from a post-secondary educational institution	3.277777778	4.2	0.9222222222
I understand all of the materials required to be submitted in a college application	3	4.6	1.6
I can name multiple schools I will be applying to	3.555555556	4.6	1.044444444
I am happy with my current SAT/ACT score or have plans to retake the tests	3.222222222	4.4	1.177777778
I know what I am going to write about in my personal statement / Common application / Coalition essay	2.333333333	4.5	2.166666667
I understand how to minimize the cost of attending college	2.333333333	4.5	2.166666667
Rate your understanding of how financial aid works	2.444444444	4.5	2.055551

I have created a resume that I am proud of	3.055555556	4.2	1.144444444
On a scale of 1 to 10, rate your readiness to apply to colleges (writing your personal statement and other essays, happiness with your test scores, confidence in recommendation letters, etc.)	5.166666667	8.6	3.433333333
N	18	10	

The biggest increases come from the statements: “I know what I am going to write about in my personal statement/Common application /Coalition essay” and “I understand how to minimize the cost of attending college (both had increases of 2.167). This is particularly due to the emphasis on writing a personal statement (as different sections of the process were split between three lessons throughout the program). Take on College mentors further met with members of their pod outside of class time to work on their personal statements. Thus, it was expected that students would have a higher amount of progress when it came to their personal statements. The results from the first statement connects back to the original goal of “students will analyze components of successful personal statement, supplemental application, and scholarship settings in various professional and academic contexts”, as students obtained the ability to take on core parts of the college application process.

For their understanding of financial aid, the results emphasize the importance of college counseling including financial aid education for FGLI high school students, whose average of their knowledge coming into the program was only 2.44, compared to the 4.5 score at the end. This outcome also connects back to one of the original goals of the program: “Students will be able to understand and apply for the FAFSA and CSS applications”, indicating the growth students were able to obtain.

In Table 3, the smallest increases in understanding were on the 7/21 lesson on Teacher/Counselor/Peer Recommendations (change of 0.97) and 7/5- Making a College List/Brainstorming a Personal Statement (change of 1.32). For future lessons and recommendations for other organizers, smaller topics such as Recommendations could be combined with other lessons. It is notable to highlight that the highest increases in understanding were the lessons on Creating a Resume/Making a LinkedIn (2.25) and Interviews for College and the Workplace (2.1). Due to the FGLI audience of the sessions, this implies that future programs should heavily consider career preparation topics in their curriculum. Topics such as interviews and resumes were particularly relevant to the college application process, but access to these

topics is limited. Thus, it is crucial to include lessons in career preparation and embed them into college counseling programs.

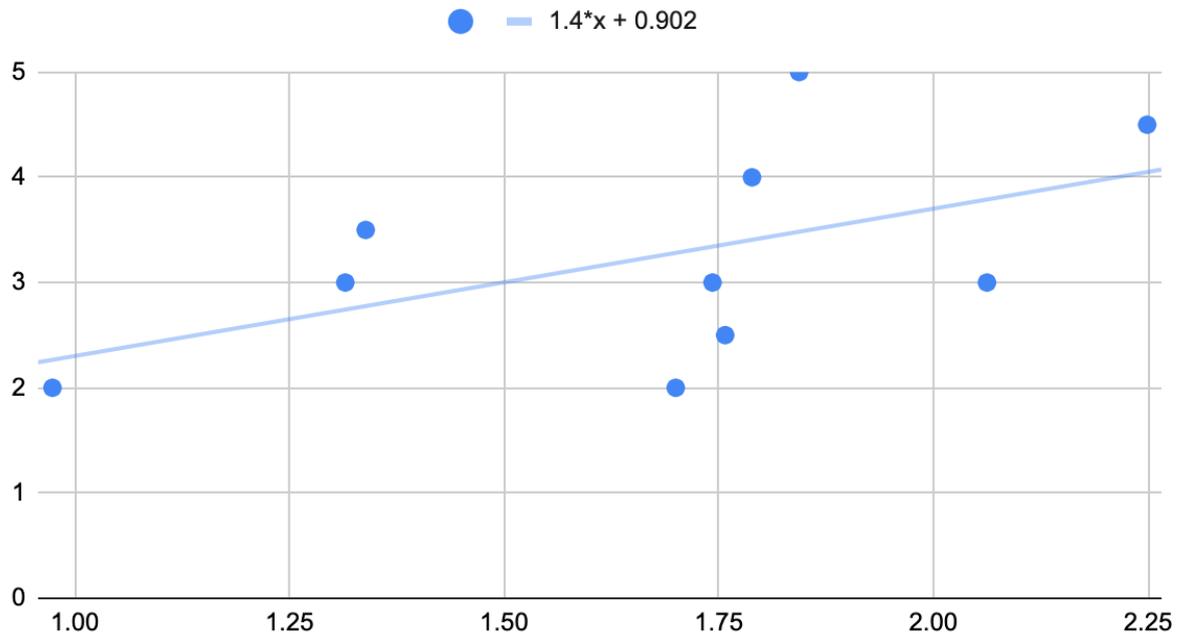
Table 3

Date	Topic	Average Change
7/5	Making a College List/ Brainstorming a Personal Statement	1.31512605
7/7	SAT/ACT Testing	1.338888889
7/12	Application Portals and Extracurriculars- PS 1st Draft	1.788827839
7/14	Writing Supplemental Essays	1.7
7/19	Paying for College/ PS 2nd Draft	1.742857143
7/21	Teacher/Counselor/Peer Recommendations	0.9740740741
7/26	Finding and Applying to Scholarships	1.757575758
7/28	Creating a Resume/ Making LinkedIn	2.249090909
8/2	Interviews for college and the workplace	2.0625
8/4	How to Network on LinkedIn & Cover Letter	1.84375

Furthermore, with this program being on Zoom, this paper stresses the importance of interactivity in workshop lessons. As shown in the graph below, there is a positive correlation between how interactive a workshop is versus the improvement in the class’s understanding of the material. This could imply that students learn better when presenters actively engage them with the material by consistently asking them questions and creating opportunities for them to interact with fellow peers and mentors.

Figure 1: Workshop Interactivity vs. Change in Material Understanding

Workshop Interactivity vs. Change in Material Understanding



To address issues of validity, it is important to note for the validity of the findings that the number of students at the beginning of the program (originally intended for 20), only had 18 on the first day and then 10 on the last day. This was due to a variety of reasons, including timing conflicts with other summer programs, the current bandwidth of students, and some attendees participating asynchronously and not taking the surveys. If this project were to be reiterated, asynchronous participants would also be asked to take the survey.

Furthermore, due to the nature small N of this research project and the many opportunities for one-on-one mentorship, it would be harder to apply to other programs with a larger number of participants. However, our participants did represent 10 different states, and thus the diversity in our selection of our fellows could have cross-state implications. In addition, the online nature of the program is unique to the pandemic, and the implications would be different in an in-person program. Future Summer Fellowship Programs are in discussion to be in-person to increase engagement and participation. Therefore, due to the small N design and the number of students varying from only 10-18, the results of this project and its external validity are limited.

Conclusion

With 95% of Summer Fellowship participants identifying as BIPOC and 100% who are first-generation and low-income students, there is importance and urgency to address the needs of the diverse American student population using studies that draw results directly from the historically underserved communities. This study highlights the need for comprehensive writing, financial aid, and career preparation curriculum, as well as the proactive inclusion of interactive activities and presenting methods. New approaches to college mentorship for

FGLI students could explore avenues of exclusively one-on-one mentorship and how that might better indicate college application preparedness. In addition, a large-N study (for instance, a larger program that benefits anywhere from 100-500 students) could benefit the current field of literature greatly and complement this research. The Summer Fellowship Program concluded on August 11, 2021, but the mentor-mentee relationships still persist today, as mentors continue to meet with mentees on their college applications. Thus, when organized and curated thoughtfully, mentorship and workshop programs can have a lasting impact on mentees and their mindset on applying to college.

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