



“I didn't know you could just ask:” Empowering underrepresented college-bound students to recruit academic and career mentors☆☆☆



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ABSTRACT

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

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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,

coaches, family friends, extended family members). Recent research suggests the efficacy of YIM in improving academic and career outcomes and reducing delinquent outcomes in the context of the National Guard Youth Challenge Program (NGYCP), an intensive program for adolescents who dropped out of high school (Schwartz, Rhodes, Spencer, & Grossman, 2013; Spencer, Tugenberg, Ocean, Schwartz, & Rhodes, 2013). Data indicated that the YIM approach resulted in longer lasting relationships than traditional formal mentoring programs. Moreover, a three-year follow-up suggested that YIM may have the capacity to attenuate the erosion of effects typically observed among youth intervention programs (Schwartz et al., 2013). Providing students with a skillset that they can use to recruit mentors throughout their college experience may address the problem of erosion of impacts that is typically observed in traditional formal, time-limited mentoring relationships (Asetline, Dupre, & Lamlein, 2000; Herrera, Grossman, Kauh, & McMaken, 2011; Scrivener & Weiss, 2009).

YIM may be especially appropriate in the college context because it provides older adolescents and emerging adults with the autonomy to identify supportive adults who may be the best fit for their personality and needs, rather than being assigned a mentor who may or may not be a good match for them. Additionally, YIM may allow students to seek out and tailor relationships with non-parental adults in a manner consistent with cultural norms, values and expectations around these types of connections, particularly for students from cultural backgrounds that emphasize familial relationships (including extended and fictive kin) as primary resources for social capital (Colin, 2001; Sánchez et al., 2006). Consistent with previous research, it is also possible that student initiated relationships may lead to a relatively greater investment on the part of both the student and the mentor, and thus, closer and longer-lasting relationships than in traditional mentoring programs (Schwartz et al., 2013). Students also can recruit multiple mentors to support their goals over time. In fact, research suggests the importance of developing networks of multiple mentors or supportive connections rather than relying on a single one-on-one relationship (Murphy & Kram, 2014; Sánchez, Esparza, & Colón, 2008; Wallace, Abel, & Ropers-Huilman, 2000).

By directly targeting and promoting the development of help-recruiting skills, YIM may confer upon youth a valuable skillset that they can draw upon throughout their lives (Balcazar et al., 1991). The capacity to recruit support represents an important skill for young people to develop and one that can promote positive development across a range of contexts (Sterrett, Jones, McKee, & Kincaid, 2011). More generally, a review of a range of approaches to social support interventions suggested that social support skills training may be especially helpful (Hogan, Linden, & Najarian, 2002). Thus, the strategy of developing students' capacity to recruit support has the potential to lead to greater social capital, more engaged and prolonged mentoring relationships, and improved outcomes compared to traditional college mentoring programs. Finally, by training youth in help-recruiting and self-advocacy skills, YIM may also help students, particularly first-generation, low-income, and racial or ethnic minority students, to take better advantage of existing resources and services on campus. For example, in addition to increasing the likelihood that students will develop mentoring relationships with faculty and staff, they also may be more likely to seek support through tutoring, advising, career counseling, and/or mental health counseling services, as well as to become engaged in academic or extracurricular clubs or activities. In this way, YIM may also allow students to derive benefits through engagement in existing university services, subsequently increasing students' institutional engagement and sense of belonging.

1.5. Connected scholars program (CSP)

The CSP intervention builds on the strengths of the YIM model, in particular, the innovative strategy of encouraging youth to look within their existing social networks for mentors. However, instead of

supporting a single formal mentoring relationship, the goal of the intervention is to develop the skills and attitudes necessary to allow emerging adults to recruit mentors and cultivate supportive relationships throughout their lives, with a focus on those who can help them develop and move towards their academic and career goals. Thus, the intervention consisted of a series of group workshops with students designed to develop such skills and attitudes, but it did not include formalizing a one-on-one mentoring relationship with a nominated mentor, thus eliminating the infrastructure and potential liability that formal mentoring programs entail. The current qualitative study aims to explore whether and how this innovative pilot intervention may influence participants.

CSP was targeted towards first generation college-bound seniors in their last semester of high school. The decision was made to provide the intervention prior to students beginning their first year of college so that they would be able to begin creating connections during their first semester in college. This is particularly important in the context of disproportionate numbers of students who drop out of college in their first year, a rate that is approximately one third at both public and private four-year institutions, and even higher for two-year institutions (ACT, 2014), and research suggesting the key role of academic and professional social capital in students' first year of college (Rios-Aguilar & Deil-Amen, 2012).

The 8-session workshop included three main components: 1) instruction and discussion of the importance of mentoring relationships, social support, and social capital, 2) exercises designed to help students identify current and potential sources of mentoring relationships and social capital in their lives, with a focus on supports located on campus, and 3) practice engaging in strategies to build connections and develop mentoring relationships, with a focus on relationships with university faculty and staff mentors. Activities included: identifying the ways in which mentoring relationships can reap academic, career, and psychological benefits; constructing visual representations of existing and potential sources of support ("eco-maps"); identifying various support services and contexts on campus; developing skills for composing emails, scheduling, and meeting with instructors/professors; developing skills for identifying, reaching out to, and conducting interviews with professionals in identified academic and career interests; engaging in role-plays ranging from professional introductions to asking for support or guidance; and discussion of how to manage potential rejection. Throughout the intervention, emphasis was placed on issues that may be especially relevant to first-generation, low-income, and racial or ethnic minority students, such as challenges that may arise around connecting with mentors and other sources of social capital across cultural contexts. For example, extensive discussion of "code-switching," or moving between variations in (verbal and body) language based on context, was incorporated into the workshop. The workshop culminated in a "Networking Night," in which students met with a range of professionals and university staff members, introducing themselves and their interests, asking questions, and building connections. A more detailed description of the scope and sequence is provided in Appendix A.

1.6. Current study

The current qualitative study provides an exploratory investigation of this new approach in a pilot intervention serving 12 students in the last semester of their senior year in high school in a program serving low-income, racial or ethnic minority, and/or first-generation college bound students. The study explores whether and how the intervention influenced participants, as well as mechanisms of change, through the use of in-depth pre- and post-intervention interviews, research observations, and process evaluation throughout the intervention. Conducting a pilot intervention and collecting in-depth process evaluation data from participants prior to a large-scale impact evaluation allows for looking "inside the black box" (Nelson, Cordray, Hulleman, Daroow, & Sommer, 2012, p. 378) to understand the ways in which

the intervention may influence participants' knowledge, attitudes, skills, and behaviors. This is a particularly important step in developing and refining a new intervention prior to large-scale dissemination and evaluation.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Participants were recruited to participate in the workshop from the senior class in the Urban Scholars program, an after school and summer college preparatory program serving low-income, racial or ethnic minority, and/or first-generation college bound students from partner schools. The program takes place on an urban, public university campus in the Northeast. After school and during the summer, students attend academic classes designed to supplement the public school curriculum. Students receive a small stipend for participating in the program. Of the 14 students in the program's senior class, 12 students participated in the workshop, and two students were unable to participate in the workshop due to scheduling conflicts. All participants were in their last semester of high school (spring of their senior year). All participants were ages 17 or 18, and 50% were female. The majority of participants were of Haitian ethnic background (11 of 12) and one was participant was of Cape-Verdean ethnic background.

2.2. Procedure

The researchers met with the senior class in the Urban Scholars program to describe the research project and invite students to participate in the study. Students who were under 18 years of age brought consent forms home to their parents or guardians and signed assent forms, and students who were 18 years old signed their own consent forms. All students were informed that they could choose to participate in the workshop without participating in the research study. The intervention consisted of eight weekly sessions, each of which lasted 1.5 h, with a 10 min break. Students attended an average of 6 classes. The intervention was led by the PI and the co-PI (first and second author, respectively). The PI was a post-doctoral fellow with a doctorate in clinical psychology, and the co-PI was an advanced graduate student in clinical psychology. Both instructors had prior experience teaching undergraduate classes. The PI identifies as White and European-American and the co-PI identifies as Black and African-Malawian.

2.3. Data sources

2.3.1. Individual interviews

Pre- and post-intervention individual interviews lasting between 45 min and 1.5 h were conducted with all participants. All interviews were audio-recorded. The majority of pre-interviews were conducted in a two-week period prior to the start of the intervention. Due to scheduling challenges, however, pre-interviews for 3 participants were conducted in the week following the first workshop session. Post-interviews were conducted within the month following the last intervention session.

Interviews were in-depth and semi-structured (Seidman, 1991) in format, focusing on participants' perspectives on non-parental adult support, including support solicited and received, the types of support they perceived as beneficial, and factors that hindered or facilitated adolescents' efforts to recruit support. Interview protocols were used primarily as a guide, and participants were invited to share stories and specific incidents, and follow up questions were asked to elicit further depth. The post-interviews included the same questions as the pre-interviews, as well as an additional questions focusing on participants' experiences in the workshop and their perceptions of how the workshop had influenced them. Interview protocols were designed to elicit

both positive and negative feedback on the workshop. Interviews were conducted by either the PI or co-PI.

2.3.2. Research observations

A research observer was present during all workshop sessions, attending to processes and impacts of the workshop, and documenting observations and reflections both during and after programming. Observation data were used to provide a context for interview data and were explicitly reviewed during data analysis for examples of negative cases contrasting with interview data.

2.3.3. Individual session feedback and workshop materials

After each session, all participants completed a feedback form describing their main "take-away" from the session and questions that remained. In addition, written documents from in-session and out-of-session assignments provided information about participants' understanding of the concepts and skills presented in the workshop. The individual session feedback and workshop materials were also reviewed during data analysis for examples of negative cases contrasting with interview data.

2.4. Data analysis

Interviews were transcribed and verified for accuracy. Data analysis was conducted by a team of researchers, including the PI and co-PI, as well as two additional team members who were not involved in the intervention, according to the guidelines provided by Braun and Clarke (2006) for thematic analysis. A primarily inductive approach maintained openness and allowed for the emergence of themes (Patton, 1990). First, all members of the research team conducted in-depth readings of the complete interview transcripts. Initial themes were identified by the research team and used to construct a codebook. Then, one member of the research team (who was not involved in the development or delivery of the intervention) used the codebook to code all of the original interviews using NVivo, a qualitative analysis software program. The codebook continued to be refined throughout the coding process, with any revisions to the codebook being discussed and agreed upon by the research team. Coding was then reviewed and discussed by the full research team.

2.5. Researcher reflexivity

Reflexivity consists of researchers attending to their interaction with the research process, with the goal of increasing validity and ensuring that conclusions reflect participant experiences, as opposed to any assumptions of the researchers (Finlay, 2002). This was particularly important since the PI and co-PI developed the intervention. To maintain reflexivity, the PI kept a journal to record thought processes and "bracket" assumptions. In addition, all four researchers on the data analysis team engaged in ongoing reflexive discussions, with a focus on privileging the voices of participants rather than prior research findings or the goals for the intervention.

2.6. Verification

Triangulation of data, including use of interview data, research observation, individual session feedback, and workshop materials, was used to increase validity and allow for a richer and more comprehensive understanding of participants' experiences (Patton, 1990). In addition, member checks were conducted with youth at the conclusion of the study. Feedback indicated that the results and interpretations are consistent with participant experiences. Auditing was conducted through conversations with members of the research team who were not involved in the development or delivery of the intervention.

3. Results

Participants initially described a number of barriers to cultivating relationships with non-parental adults, the most common of which was the tendency to rely primarily on themselves and their families. Based on their experiences in the workshop, however, they described an increased understanding of the ways in which relationships with non-parental adults could be beneficial to them and the types of support that can be provided through such relationships. They also reported developing their ability to initiate relationships, particularly with potential academic or career mentors, as well as increasing their self-efficacy in interacting with such adults. In the context of greater motivation to develop social capital and greater skill and self-efficacy in how to do so, participants described greater efforts to develop and maintain such connections and specific plans for how to connect with potential mentors in college. At the same time, with a few exceptions, social networks tended not to increase within the duration of the 8-week workshop.

3.1. Barriers to cultivating social capital

In pre-interviews, the most common barrier to developing mentoring relationships or asking for support from non-parental adults was participants' value of the importance of only relying on oneself or one's family for support. One student stated, "I just try to figure things myself, and if I can't, I don't know, I just leave it the way it is," while another noted, "I don't really feel comfortable talking to adults other than my parents." The majority of participants described feeling uncomfortable talking about "personal stuff" with anyone outside of their family. One participant shared discomfort with the idea of having a mentor outside of her family, explaining, "I feel like it would be kind of like disrespectful to go talk to somebody else about your personal problem instead of like your family. It would be like, telling them that like you don't have that much trust in them," which was also echoed in other interviews. Themes around the importance of self- or family-reliance also arose extensively in discussions in the workshop as documented by research observations. Particularly in the first workshop session, students described a reluctance to ask for support or help, expressing concern that to do so would mean that they were overly dependent and could not cope on their own.

Additional barriers to reaching out to non-parental adults that arose in pre-interviews included participants' shyness and perceived unavailability or time limitations of the adults from whom they desired support. One student cited her "shyness" as the primary issue that would get in the way of her developing a mentoring relationship, "cause, like, I'm scared to talk to people...or like I don't wanna get rejected by them." This theme of shyness was more common among female participants than among male participants. A related theme that was also present, particularly among female participants, was the concern that adults, especially teachers, did not have sufficient time to talk to them. One young woman noted, "I don't really like to ask for help, I feel like I'm taking [my teacher's] time away...and I felt like I was annoying her kind of," while another explained that her teacher did not have time to talk during lunch, and she (the student) was reluctant to talk to her after school "because I knew there would be like a lot of people."

3.2. Increased understanding of the value of social capital

All of the participants in the workshops described increased understanding of social capital and social support as a result of the workshop. In particular, they described increased value on social capital and knowledge of the ways in which relationships could be beneficial. The theme of the importance of connections emerged strongly in post-interviews, as illustrated by a student describing how, through the workshop, "I learned that it's good to go out and make connections, because even if you don't need them now, as long as you keep in touch with the person, you never know what might come up in the future."

Another student described the value of support, stating, "Even though you cannot get to there by yourself, but knowing connections, people who are going to help you out, is gonna get you there." This was particularly important in the context of many students entering the workshop with strong ideas about the importance of self-reliance, as described earlier. Yet, a theme present among all of the students' feedback following the first workshop was the importance of building "social capital" and "connections." Moreover, even when students continued to express a strong value on self-reliance at the end of the workshop, they were able to identify how connections may provide them with specific types of support using language learned in the workshop, such as "informational support," particularly related to college and careers. At the end of the workshop, a number of students also emphasized the importance of having more than one mentoring relationship and knowing who could provide support in different areas, noting for example, "it's not all the mentors that's gonna be available and it's not all the mentors that can help you with everything."

3.3. Greater skills and self-efficacy related to cultivating social capital

All of the students also described developing new skills related to cultivating social capital and/or increasing their confidence in their ability to use such skills. One student summarized the changes, saying, "I know ways to talk to somebody and trying to get some information, help, support, asking for something, it's easier for me now, to get the connection that I need to." Much of this development was related to networking, which was a new concept to most of the students. For example, one student noted, "I didn't know you can just ask a person if they know someone that kind of related to something you want to do," referencing lessons around professional networking. Students described increased confidence in their abilities to present themselves professionally and, generally, how to "talk to" to professors and other adults.

A number of students made reference to code-switching, for example describing how in Haitian culture, making eye contact with adults can be viewed as disrespectful, while in the United States, making eye contact is valued. They also described learning how to "properly" email professors, which was discussed extensively in the workshop, with many students, for example, describing surprise that "hey" could be considered an inappropriate email greeting. Many students, especially the young women, described feeling more confident approaching adults. One student noted that the workshop helped her get out of her "shy zone" and built confidence in her ability to interact with adults and professors in college. Another explained, "I mean, I'm still shy, but not like as much as I was. Like, I could go to someone and actually talk to them about something, like informational support or something like that."

All of the students emphasized both in individual session feedback and post-intervention interviews that engaging in role-plays in class and "real-world" practice interacting with non-parental adults was key in developing their skills and confidence. Although these activities were described as the most challenging parts of the workshop, they were also described as the most beneficial. A number of students described the utility of being "forced" to engage in conversations with non-parental adults. For example, one student described how although an assignment to interview an adult was "out of my comfort zone...I still did it because it was homework" and subsequently it felt "easier to do something like that in the future." Another student explained how the progression from talking to "somebody in our family, to a professor, to somebody outside [during Networking Night]," allowed her to gradually increase her confidence. The majority of students described Networking Night as especially influential in increasing their self-efficacy, particularly for students who described themselves as shy. For example, one more reticent young woman stated, "[Networking Night] kind of seemed nerve-wracking at first, but after that, it was more comfortable," and

noted that “it made me more aware of how I should be networking more, and how networking isn’t as hard as it seems.”

3.4. Changes in interactions with non-parental adults

The majority of students also described changes in how they interact with non-parental adults. One student described, “I always used to be the guy who just sits around, cause I didn’t like approaching people... So now I’m like, ‘I should go for it’...cause...you’re always gonna need somebody there to help you, somebody by your side, somebody who always has your back.” Similarly, another student expressed, “Before, I wasn’t a fan of asking like strangers for help...so because of that workshop, it’s kind of changed my plan, that whenever you know somebody can help you, to always pursue them and get that help from them.” Overall, whereas in pre-interviews students described asking for help only from those adults who were most familiar and available, such as college counselors or staff at their afterschool program, in post-interviews, they shared examples of reaching out to “weak ties” or asking for help or advice from multiple people if the first person they asked could not provide support. Following the intervention, one student described reaching out to and having an extended conversation with a college athletic coach about his interests and experience. Another student described her persistence in navigating the financial aid process, pursuing multiple people after the first two people she approached did not have the time to talk with her. Students were also more likely to describe using multiple methods to reach out to adults, such as email or texting, rather than waiting until they encountered someone in person (i.e., at school). One student began expressing his appreciation to adults in his social network who had provided with him support. He noted, “Like when I email [program staff], I say ‘thank you very much for all the support that you give me throughout the project.’” More generally, another student explained how, prior to the workshop, if a teacher asked a question of the class he would tell a classmate the answer rather than answer it himself, and following the workshop, he understood the importance of speaking up in class and had the confidence to actually do so.

All students also were able to identify specific strategies for how to both maintain current relationships and build new connections in college. One student described realizing that “there’s steps like you gotta go through to keep that relationship going,” particularly in the context of transitions (such as the transition from high school to college). Another student described asking both a teacher at school and a staff member from her afterschool program whether she could keep in touch with them in college and ask for support if necessary. She noted, that the workshop “made me learn the skills I needed to communicate more and stay more in contact with somebody.” Multiple students described specific plans to email and text staff from their afterschool programs to maintain their relationships and support during the transition to college. In addition to maintaining connections from high school, students also expressed a desire to identify and connect with potential mentors on campus, with one student noting, for example, that he was “more likely to want to look for a mentor” due to the workshop. All of the students were able to describe specific plans for building relationships on campus including attending office hours, speaking up in class, emailing and talking to professors after class, and joining extracurricular activities. Of these, one of the most frequent strategies that students mentioned was talking to professors. The majority of students cited specific activities in the workshop in which they role-played introducing themselves to a professor after class and an assignment in which they attended “mock office hours” with a professor on campus whom they did not know as especially helpful in preparing them to approach professors in college.

Despite the fact that students described changes in the way they interacted with non-parental adults and plans for developing and maintaining relationships in college, the majority of students (with a few exceptions of students who described having already developing new

connections as a result of what they learned in the workshop) did not report changes in their current relationships or immediate expansions of their social networks. One student noted that the workshop did not change her current relationships, but “clarified” them, giving her an understanding of who in her social network could provide specific types of help or support. In sum, although the majority of students did not experience significant changes in their social networks during the course of the workshop, they described changes in how they understood and approached relationships with non-parental adults which they expected to influence their relationships in college, both through the maintenance of relationships from high school as well as the development of new connections on campus.

4. Discussion

4.1. Implications for research and practice

The results of this study point to the capacity of a relatively low-cost and low-burden intervention to influence young people’s relationships with potential academic and career mentors. Specifically, results indicated that the intervention was able to increase the value students place on social capital and mentoring relationships, develop their knowledge, skills, and self-efficacy in how to develop such relationships, and to change the way in which students interact with adults in educational and professional settings. By providing students typically underrepresented in college settings with explicit training in the importance of mentoring relationships and social capital as well as strategies to cultivate such relationships, this intervention potentially represents a means to increase underrepresented students’ capacity to recruit academic and career mentors throughout college and in the workforce.

Data also suggested the importance of explicitly discussing with underrepresented students the importance of developing social capital and mentoring relationships to academic and career success and giving them “permission” to reach out to such adults, as well as providing opportunities to directly practice interacting with adults in academic and professional contexts. Similarly, normalizing help-seeking behavior and framing the cultivation of social capital as a necessary component of professional development and college success, rather than an indication of over-dependency or lack of self-reliance, allowed adolescents whose cultural values emphasized self-reliance to engage in specific forms of help-seeking behaviors. In particular, distinguishing between different types of social support, specifically between informational and instrumental support versus emotional support, was important for students who felt it would be disrespectful or disloyal to seek emotional support from adults outside of their family. Specifically, for some students, the term “mentor” indicated someone who primarily provided emotional support and with whom they would be expected to discuss personal and familial challenges, making them uncomfortable with the idea of mentoring relationships. By the end of the workshop, however, all of the students were willing and motivated to pursue mentoring relationships and social capital at least for the purpose of cultivating sources of informational and instrumental support.

The findings of this study underscore the importance of culturally informed interventions. Participants’ strong value on relying on themselves or family members may in part reflect contextual experiences and socialization processes among Haitian immigrant families, which place emphasis on self and familial reliance (Brooks, 2013; Colin, 2001; Menos, 2005; Schantz, Charron, & Folden, 2003), particularly in light of systemic discrimination and stigma (Doucet & Suárez-Orozco, 2006). By acknowledging these beliefs and exploring how the values of self-reliance and loyalty to family can co-exist with the cultivation of academic and career connections, the intervention allowed students to retain their values while modifying their approach to interacting with non-parental adults.

This intervention provides an alternative approach to increasing social capital and mentoring relationships among underrepresented

college students. By developing students' skills rather than simply assigning a mentor or advisor, it has the potential to lead to more enduring transformations in students' social networks. The approach builds on research suggesting that disparities in social capital may be in part due to different expectations and less help-seeking behavior among such groups (Berardi, 2012; Collier & Morgan, 2008). Of course, this approach does not address the fact that other factors may also influence whether such relationships develop. As described earlier, research indicates that professors may be less likely to respond to the emails of students with names that suggest they are from a minority ethnic or racial group (Milkman et al., 2014). It was important in the workshop to acknowledge the role of forces outside of the students' control, including discrimination, as well as to prepare them for how to manage rejection. At the same time, ideally, this student training would be accompanied by complementary training for university professors and staff on how they can most effectively support and mentor underrepresented students, including addressing their own biases, as well as larger system-wide efforts to build informal advising and support into work expectations and to reward such efforts since university professors and staff are already managing multiple obligations.

4.2. Limitations

This research calls attention to an innovative approach to college student mentoring that may have the potential to address disparities in social capital between low-income, minority, and first-generation college students and their higher income, White, and continuing-

generation peers. Although the results were promising, this study focused primarily on the processes of change and participant perceptions of the influence of the intervention; future longitudinal studies with larger sample sizes will be necessary to quantitatively evaluate the impacts of the intervention. Moreover, since this study examined changes occurring during the two months during which the workshop was delivered, it was not possible to investigate the long-term implications for students' capacity to develop and maintain relationships in college. In addition, the majority of participants in the study were Haitian; additional studies are needed to explore whether similar processes are observed among other cultural groups. Finally, since the workshop took place in the context of a college preparatory program providing a range of services, it is possible that the students involved were especially motivated or that the impacts of the workshop were influenced by the other services received (for example, the access to supportive adults that the program provided). It will be important for future research to experimentally assess the influence of the intervention as a stand-alone workshop.

Despite these limitations, this study highlights the potential of a new approach to support underrepresented college-bound students in developing academic and career connections that are crucial to college and career success. In the context of recent policy efforts to increase college access and enrollment, particularly for more vulnerable students, it will be critical to provide the structures and support to allow such students to achieve their educational goals and to benefit from the opportunity that their degrees can afford them.

Appendix A. Scope & sequence for connected scholars program

Session #	Essential questions	Activities	Assignment/practice
Session 1: What is a mentor and how can mentors help me?	What is social capital? What are different forms of social capital (e.g., mentors, advisors)? How can social capital help me achieve my goals?	Introduce workshop goals/review syllabus. Chalk talk: Characteristics of a mentor. Discussion: What is social capital and social support? When have you drawn on social capital in the past? How might you use it in the future?	Write a reflection on how mentors, social support, and social capital can help you achieve your academic and career goals.
Session 2: Who are the adults in my life?	Who are the adults in my life and what types of support can they provide?	Complete individual eco-map (graphical representation of relationships, including strong ties and weak ties). Discussion: How to identify someone to interview. Brainstorm: Interview questions for college interview. Role-play: How to ask whether someone would be willing to do an interview with you and set up a meeting.	Interview someone from your existing social network who went to college or is currently in college about mentors in their own lives as well as their college experience and their advice for you in your first year in college.
Session 3: How can I grow my social network?	What is networking and how do you do it? How can I identify and reach out to potential mentors?	Debrief interview assignment. Complete networking flow chart to identify potential sources of academic and career connections. Share templates for writing professional emails and writing emails to professors. Practice: Writing professional emails to set up a meeting. Discussion: What to do (and how to manage feelings of rejection) if someone refuses.	Use networking skills to identify individuals in a chosen career or academic interest area and set up an interview time.
Session 4: How can I use mentoring relationships to support me?	How do I maintain mentoring relationships? How can I make a good first impression? How can I use mentoring relationships to support me? How do I ask for support or guidance?	Debrief on networking assignment. Discussion: How to make a good first impression? What is professionalism (discuss cultural considerations)? How can I prepare for a professional meeting? Brainstorm: What are your goals for this interview? What do you hope to get out of it? Brainstorm interview questions based on goals. Discussion: What might in the way of asking for support or guidance in college when we need it? Role-play: Asking for support or guidance.	Interview an individual in your identified career or academic interest area.

(continued on next page)

Appendix A (continued)

Session #	Essential questions	Activities	Assignment/practice
Session 5: How is social capital influenced by power and privilege?	How is social capital influenced by power and privilege? What is code-switching? What do I do if I have a conflict with a mentor?	Debrief on interview assignment. Discuss thank you/following up strategies (share thank you email template). Discussion: How might social capital be influenced by power, privilege, and prejudice? Show video clips of code-switching. Share example of code-switching. Discuss: What can I do if I have a conflict with a mentor or faculty/staff in college?	Write a reflection on a time you had a conflict with an adult in an authority role (other than parents or guardians) and how you addressed it (or, if you did not, why not).
Session 6: How can I connect with mentors next year?	Why are mentors and other types of social capital important in college? Where can I find contexts to connect with mentors on campus? How can I develop relationships with faculty and staff in college?	Discussion: Why is social support and social capital, especially mentoring relationships with faculty and staff, important in college? Brainstorm: What are contexts on campus (e.g., clubs, services, office hours etc.) where I can connect with mentors? Discussion: How can I connect with professors and university staff? Role-play: Attending office hours.	Go to mock office hours and meet with the professor.
Session 7: Who can support me during the transition to college (from home and on campus)?	How can I maintain relationships with supportive adults and mentors from my home/high school network? How can I develop new supports on campus? How can I introduce myself when networking?	Debrief on office hours assignment. Activity: Create college social support map, including supports from home and potential supports on campus (include who you can go to for different types of support). Discussion: Identify (at least) one person to support you during transition to college: Consider the types of support you want from this person, the parameters you want to establish for the relationship, including frequency and type of contact (e.g., email, text, phone, in person). Role-play: Introducing oneself, including interests/goals, when networking.	Ask an adult from your existing social network to support you in the transition to college (and how you can reach out to them).
Session 8: Networking night	How do I put what I've learned into action? How can I start building my network of university and professional contacts?	Mix and mingle: Practice making small talk in professional settings. Speed networking: Structured 5 min conversations in which student practice introducing themselves and asking about academic and career paths.	

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