THE SEEK MENTORING PROGRAM: AN APPLICATION OF THE GOAL-SETTING THEORY

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ABSTRACT

This article describes a pilot academic mentoring program carried out over 1 semester in the SEEK Program at the College of Staten Island, CUNY. The program was utilized to provide a resource for students whose overall grade point average was below 2.5, placing them at risk for academic dismissal. A goal-setting approach was used to aid the students in identifying and overcoming the obstacles to their academic success, in an effort to enhance the students' retention. Sixty-three students participated in 1 of 3 groups; the 3 groups consisted of a mentoring program combined with tutoring, a tutoring-only group, and a control group. Data collected in both the qualitative and quantitative formats supported the effectiveness of the SEEK Mentor Program. The program motivated the students to action, thus increasing the students' grade point average and retention rates.

INTRODUCTION

This study describes a successful program offered as an alternative approach to mentoring. Our mentors served in two roles. First, they were traditional mentors, as they focused on long-term goals, allowed the mentees freedom to explore their experiences, provided advice, and shared their knowledge and experiences. Second, the mentors were coaches, as all their mentees were students at risk for dismissal who were expected to achieve a minimum grade average for that semester. Because of this expectation, certain agendas needed to be set and specific skills needed to be taught. Mentor-mentee pairs were assigned, not

self-selected, and there was an implied sense of authority. This approach qualitatively differs from counseling because the mentors had limits on what they would discuss together. If a highly charged emotional issue was identified, the mentors were instructed to recognize that this is not part of their job description and refer the mentee to the appropriate resource. Counseling, not mentoring, is designed to treat people's emotional state.

Mentoring at-risk college students is a challenge, as the motivational level of the mentees is often very low. This, in turn, often lowers the motivation of the mentors, unless properly trained. Yet, if successful, mentoring has shown to lead to many positive effects, such as increased self-efficacy, productivity, professional identity, and career satisfaction (Fagenson, 1989; Hollingsworth & Fassinger, 2002; Russell & Adams, 1997). An intervention is essential, as the students often will be dismissed from the college. One can get frustrated as they experience multiple disappointments. Mentoring has been successful with increasing teacher efficacy and burnout as well (Davis, 2004). A mentor program that heavily employs motivational strategies is essential in ensuring the retention of the students that participate. Our program is based on the empirically supported goal-setting theory (Locke, 1964; Locke & Latham, 1990). This approach has been shown to influence a person's motivation, effort, persistence, and organizational skills (Earley, Wojnaroski, & Prest, 1987). The theory has been refined using the college population (Donovan & Williams, 2003; Hollenbeck, Williams, & Klein, 1989) and is being applied in many performance settings, such as in workplaces and schools. The goal-setting theory assumes that people are motivated to complete goals when there is a discrepancy between where they would like to be and their current status, with regard to a particular state in life. For example, the mentor program is designed to highlight the discrepancy between pursuing a college degree and being at risk for dismissal. Through focusing on goals, performance is predicted to increase. The student will be better able to direct their attention to the task at hand, mobilize their efforts, increase their persistence, and replace unhelpful strategies with new ones. The theory instructs the mentors to develop goals that are specific, tailored, challenging, and attainable. Goals should be created with the mentees in a collaborative process in order to ensure the highest performance and commitment. Creating the goals together is more likely to increase acceptance of the goals. Combined with feedback from their mentors regarding their progress toward their goals, it is predicted that the mentees will increase their grade point average (GPA) and increase their probability of being retained within the college.

Institutional Context

The population used in this study were college students who are at risk for dismissal in the SEEK (Search for Education, Elevation and Knowledge)

Program. The mentor program is offered as part of the SEEK Program under the Department of Student Services. The SEEK program provides personal, academic, and financial support services to financially disadvantaged college students. It is a multi-faceted program designed to help disadvantaged students via holistic approaches, to fulfill their academic potential and reach their desired goals. SEEK's Tutorial Learning Center, equipped with a computer lab, is staffed with a tutorial coordinator and student tutors who aid students on a one-to-one basis.

METHOD

Participants

Participants in the study were 63 at-risk college undergraduates enrolled at a senior college of the City University of New York. The number of credits completed ranged from 0-99, with a mean of 26.1 ($SD = 27.8$). The sample ranged in age from 18-38 with a mean age of 20.7. Thirty-two were males and 31 were females. See Table 1 for means and standard deviations for each group's pre-GPA scores. The control group elected to receive no tutoring or mentoring. The tutor-only group received only tutoring.

The final group, the mentor group, received a combination of tutoring and mentoring. The mentee students chose from 1-5 goals to work on. Forty-one percent of the mentees identified three goals to complete. More than half of the students endorsed working on lowering their test anxiety, altering their poor study environment, and increasing their motivation. The second popular goals included developing study skills and time management strategies. A few students endorsed learning strategies to interact more effectively with professors. The mentees endorsed the following reasons for wanting a college degree: to get a job (60%), to learn (15%), for future success in general (10%), and to exceed their parent's education (5%). Two students (10%) left the question blank.

Assessment

GPAs and dismissal status were obtained from the SEEK database.

Table 1. Means and Standard Deviations of the Dependent Measure for Each Group at Pre-Test

	Treatment					
	Mentor ($n = 20$)		Tutor-alone ($n = 18$)		Control ($n = 25$)	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Pre-GPA	1.64	.84	1.89	.60	1.74	.71

Procedure

All students with an overall GPA of below 2.5 were contacted to identify those who would be mentees. One hundred-fifty-five students were mailed letters and called, inviting them into the program. Exclusions consisted of students who were not taking classes this semester due to pregnancy or internship. A few students were excluded because their GPA increased after a grade appeal. Thirty-six students initially responded to be in the program. Sixteen students did not complete it, leaving 20 regular students by the end of the program. The majority of the attrition was due to students who were late in joining the program. Eighteen students elected to receive tutoring only. The control group was selected from the pool students not participating in either program and who matched the mentor and tutoring-only group on pre-GPA and the number of credits accrued in college.

Mentor participants were selected based on their being in good academic standing (i.e., GPA of 3.00 or higher) and receiving a reference from a faculty member or supervisor. Each completed an application and was interviewed by the project coordinator. All of the nine mentors chosen had previous experience as tutors, either at the high school or college level. They were trained via workshops and supervision in using the goal-setting approach. Workshop content also included factors affecting the mentor-mentee relationship, study skills strategies, learning styles, motivation, diversity, and the stages of the mentoring relationship. Mentors were provided with a packet including the purpose and goals of the program, a goals worksheet, questions to engage their mentees and paperwork inherent to the program. Group and individual supervision was provided for by the project coordinator, a licensed clinical psychologist. Mentors were given permission to tutor in any subject area in which they had a GPA of 3.00 or better. Mentors were made aware of and expected to maintain the highest ethical standards. Mentors were paid for their time. The SEEK Mentoring program assigned each mentor with a mentee based on their available times, career goals, subject areas of competence, and in expressed language preferences from the mentee.

The goals of the mentors were:

- Engage the mentees to recall the intrinsic and extrinsic reasons that led them to pursue a college degree.
- Educate the mentees on concepts related to academic success, such as learning styles, motivation, and becoming a mastery learner.
- Investigate obstacles in the mentees' path to success (e.g., poor study environment, difficulties with professors, content of the material, motivation, test anxiety time management).
- Develop with the mentees plans to conquer each goal (e.g., for the student who endorses a poor student environment one would help the student to try alternate study areas that may be more suitable).

- Contact the mentees each week to discuss the progress on each goal. Modify as needed.
- Provide ongoing tutoring, if needed.

The mentors were instructed to refer the mentee to the Project Coordinator if highly charged emotional issues were expressed. The Project Coordinator, a Licensed Clinical Psychologist, would evaluate the situation and provide the most appropriate referral. The mentors were to provide support and guidance to their mentees, not treat their emotional state.

All mentors and mentees attended the Orientation meeting designed to educate them about the program. Consent forms were signed at this time. A minimum of four face-to-face meetings were required throughout the semester. The mentees' GPA was assessed before the program and at its completion.

Tutors in the tutoring-only group were hired by the SEEK Tutoring Center. This center is a standard resource for SEEK students to utilize. All subjects who participated in tutoring only during the time range of the mentor program, and who met for a minimum of four sessions, were included in the tutoring-only group.

RESULTS

It was predicted that the intervention of the mentor group (combined with tutoring) would result in a significantly higher post GPA, as compared to the tutoring-only group and the control group. The results supported this hypothesis.

The three groups were compared on the post-GPA grade. An analysis of variance showed that there was a statistically significant difference between the three groups on total post-GPA grades for that semester, $F(2, 60) = 3.725$, $p = .030$. Post hoc analyses using the Scheefe post hoc criterion for significance indicated that post-GPA scores were significantly higher for the mentor group than they were for the control group, $p = .032$. (See Table 2 and Figure 1).

An ANCOVA was conducted to investigate if pre-GPA affected the results. The results indicated that the covariate pre-GPA was not significant, $F(1, 2) = 2.52$, $p = .118$. Pre-GPA did not effect the treatment results. An exploratory analysis

Table 2. Means and Standard Deviations of the Dependent Measure for Each Group at Post-Test

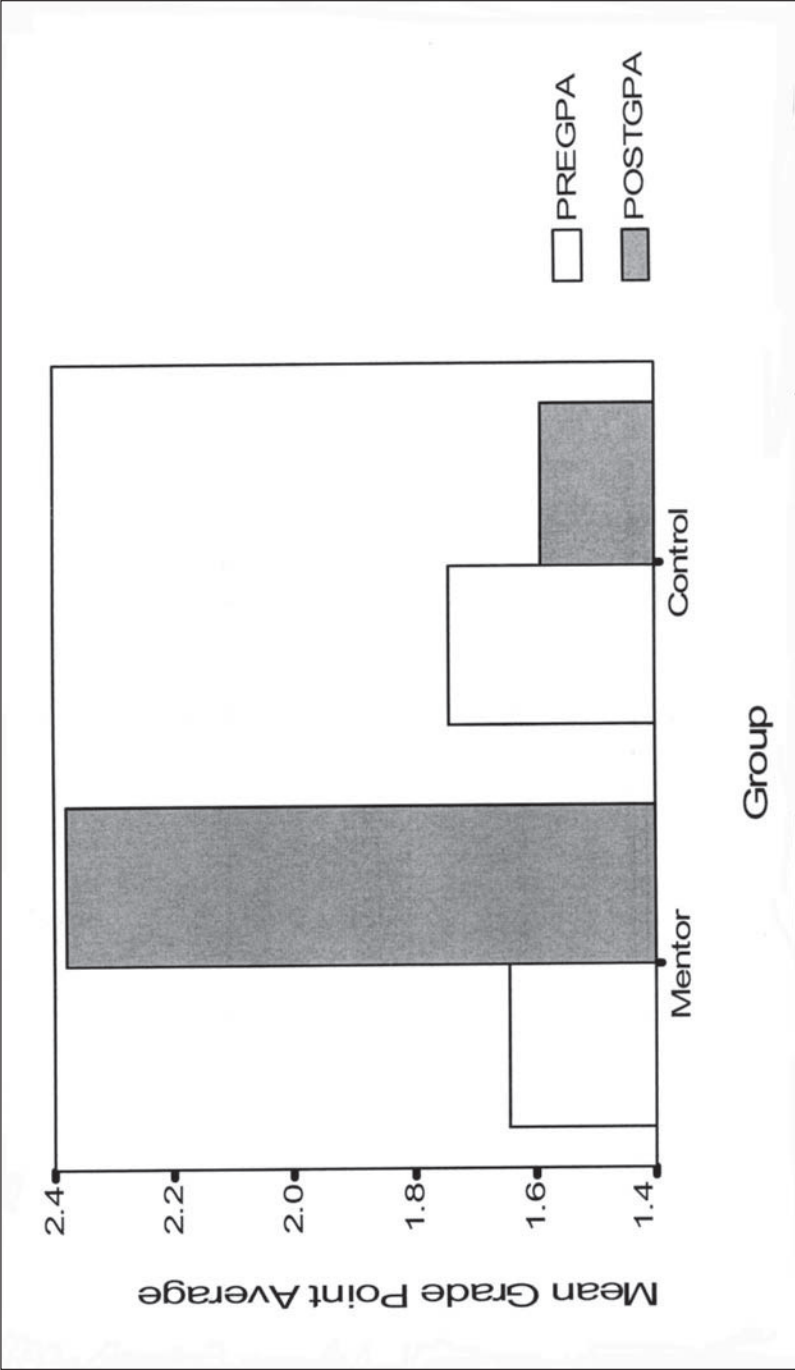| | Treatment | | | | | |
	Mentor ($n = 20$)		Tutor-alone ($n = 18$)		Control ($n = 25$)	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Post-GPA	2.37	.68	1.8	1.07	1.5	1.08

Figure 1. The grade point average of the mentor and control groups at pre- and post-test.

was conducted to investigate if performance in the mentees was impacted by the course-specific tutoring they received. Results indicated that there was no significant difference between the groups, $F(4, 15) = .904$, $p = .486$. Mentoring is shown to have an impact across the courses, speaking to the holistic nature of the program. It is important to note that there was a trend for the largest GPA increase to be exhibited by those receiving English tutoring. Perhaps with a larger n, this could be further clarified.

There was a trend for the dismissal rate to be lower for those in the mentor group, being 10%, compared to 22% in the tutor-only group and 24% in the control group. Those who did not complete the Mentor Program were removed from the analyses on the mentee students, as 63% of the non-completers never met their mentors, despite multiple attempts for contact by the mentors; 29% never returned after meeting with their mentor once; and 8% met briefly on only two occasions. Of this group of non-completers ($N = 16$), 25% decided to leave the college before the semester was completed. Of the ones that remained, the mean GPA remained the same at 1.4 GPA pre and post (consequently, 31% were academically dismissed from the college).

Qualitative reports from the mentees confirmed its' success. The mentees were asked at the end of the program to reflect upon the question, "Did I meet my goals? Why or why not?" The mentees endorsed meeting some, if not all, of their goals and benefitting from inclusion in the program. Reports of progress included increased study time and commitment, improvement in grades and study strategies, an increase in confidence, adoption of a goal-setting perspective, increased time management, and a decrease in test anxiety. With regard to study time and commitment, one mentee reported, "I have been working and studying harder. I'm confident about passing my classes. I am doing well in the class that I was originally having difficulty with." Another mentee reported, "I know now that becoming a good student takes time. I know I am on the right track. I have career goals now and am motivated to work toward these goals." With regard to improvement in grades and study strategies one mentee reported, "After I started having appointments with my mentor I started to study more in the library and began doing better in my classes." Increases in confidence were seen in many of the mentees. One mentee wrote, "Before I met my mentor I wasn't confident to pass some of my classes. But after I met with him, I regained my confidence. I am certain that I will pass my classes." Another mentee wrote, "I feel much more confident now and am doing better in my classes." Mentees commented on the goal setting perspective being helpful for them. One mentee reported, "I did meet my goals. I found ways of improving my weak points." Another mentee reported, "My mentor helped me to fix goals and now I am passing all my classes." One mentee spoke of the time management skills he learned and reported being "very satisfied with the new schedule." With regard to test anxiety, a mentee reported, "I am more confident now and my test anxiety is lowered as I feel more prepared for my tests." Finally, being motivated professionally, a mentee desired to seek an

internship in his chosen field. He reported, "The program, and my mentor, was very successful in advising me to meet my goals. I obtained an internship for this semester and my GPA went up."

Qualitative reports from the mentors included learning that everyone has different study needs. They observed that the mentees utilized avoidance to deal with their problems. A prevalent theme in supervision meetings was the mentees' need for increased motivation, accountability, guidance, and structure, and the training in goal setting.

DISCUSSION

The SEEK program was delighted with the potential value the mentor program provides the students of the College of Staten Island. The program was shown to provide significant gains as compared to those not receiving any service, as well as having greater gains than tutoring alone, regardless of what courses they were tutored in. One disappointing aspect of the program was that few students utilized the service. A possible reason was that due to financial constraints, the service began later in the semester and many students already began their study routine on their own. With the proper funding and timing of the funding, the program can blossom into a strong resource for those in need. It would be interesting to investigate the impact of program size on outcomes. The small, personal nature of this program may have unknowingly added to the positive effects on the program. What type of program best enhances the relational aspect between the mentor and mentee? In this study, many mentors verbalized generally liking their mentor as a person, as well as being a good match for them. One mentee said during the program that her mentor was a "really nice and thoughtful person." Another mentee commented on the "good fit" between them. On two occasions, the mentees and mentors chose to continue the service after the program was completed. A number of mentees asked the project leader if they can return to the program the following semester and to remain with their mentor. Goal-setting theory acknowledges that moderators, such as goal importance, self-efficacy, and feedback, affect the outcomes. Through their relationship, the mentors perhaps aided the mentees to better see the importance of their goals, conveyed their belief in the mentees' ability to achieve their goals (i.e., raising their self-efficacy), and provided the proper amount of feedback.

It appears that the mentoring relationship (utilizing a goal-setting perspective) combined with tutoring best meets the needs of the students academically and personally. The goal-setting approach aids the students to visualize, structure, and implement their short- and long-term goals and place it all into a larger perspective. They learn many strategies for success, as tutoring becomes appreciated as a potential means to serve their short-term goals. The qualitative

reports speak to the mentees' adoption of many of these strategies for success, such as increasing study time, time management, and conquering test anxiety. The success experience that was created in meeting their goals, with the aid of their mentor, appeared to increase the mentees' overall motivation, confidence, and commitment to their studies. Many continued to create their own goals independently upon completion of the program. The grade point average of the students in the mentor Program significantly increased. Most importantly, there was a lower dismissal rate for those in the Mentor Program. This alternative approach to mentoring, utilizing mentors as traditional mentors and coaches applying the goal-setting approach, was a success.

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