A college focused mentoring programme for students in socio-economically disadvantaged schools: the impact of mentoring relationship and frequency on college-going confidence, application efficacy and aspirations

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Abstract This study examined the effect college focused mentoring has on the confidence to succeed in college, the college application efficacy and the college-going aspirations of low-income students. The impact of mentor relationship quality and number of mentor sessions on the same outcomes was examined. Results (n=728) revealed a significant increase in students' confidence to succeed in college and college application efficacy from before to after the mentoring programme. Quality of mentoring relationship and the number of mentoring sessions predicted confidence to succeed in college, college application efficacy and college-going aspirations. Thematic analysis revealed that the mentoring relationship was improved when the mentor was from a similar background as the mentee and was open and fun. Inconsistent attendance at sessions had a negative impact on mentees' perception of the relationship. Findings suggest that college-focused mentoring positively impacts low-income students' confidence to succeed in college and their college application efficacy.

Key words Mentoring; College Going; Aspirations; low-income students

Introduction

A study by Carnevale, Smith, and Strohl (2010) projected that by 2018, 65% of the 47 million job openings in the United States will require some kind of post-secondary education. This is a trend seen across the world and it is estimated that there will be a shortfall of three million individuals with the appropriate level of education to fill these jobs by 2030 in Europe. Given the urgency of this 'skills gap' there has been increased focus on widening the participation rates of groups that are traditionally underrepresented in postsecondary education. This has resulted in improved efforts to increase college entry and completion rates of low-income students (Coles, 2011). Practitioners from College Access Programmes, Higher Education Institutions (HEI) and schools are the most strongly positioned to play an important role in supporting this movement as they bring a wealth of understanding of the social, cultural and academic supports that enable students at all levels to succeed in college[1] and beyond (Coles, 2011; Savitz-Romer, Jager-Hyman, & Coles, 2009).

There are several factors which influence the likelihood that a student will progress onto college, and persist to the end of their degree. For example, family income predicts educational progression, with individuals from low-income communities being less likely to progress to college, and earn degrees, than affluent students (Schneider, Broda, Judy & Burkander, 2013; Mortenson, 2009). The types of relationships that students experience prior to and during college influence their educational outcomes, with affluent graduates being more likely than low-income students to have had a significant person who helped them navigate the system (Bruce & Bridgeland, 2014) and affluent students demonstrating a broader network of supportive relationships that encourage college and career development (Erickson, McDonald & Elder, 2009; Ianni, 1989). In cases where adults are available to act as sources of information or encouragement, researchers have noted a failure of low-income students to engage in these relationships. This is often a purposive response to socio-economic disadvantage (SED) on the part of the student as some young people in stressful low-income communities tend to develop a "defiant individualist character" which limits help-seeking behaviours and can produce social isolation, which in turn may impede academic progression (Stanton-Salazar, 2001).

Further barriers to progression can relate to students' perception of how they will fit into the higher education environment and their confidence to navigate

a system of which they have no intergenerational experience. For example, low-income students who perceive higher education institutes as being made up primarily of affluent students find it hard to develop a sense of belonging (Walton & Cohen, 2007) which can result in increased stress (Lovelace & Rosen, 1996; Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch, 1995) and a reduced likelihood that students will apply to higher education. There may also be a negative family history of education which further contributes to an 'us and them' view of education; this can result in negative beliefs about the students' own ability to get in and fit in to the higher education community. Considering these barriers together, SED, networks, belonging and self-efficacy, can act as significant barriers to education progression in students from low-income backgrounds (McCoy et al, 2014).

Mentoring is a valuable way to equip students with the support needed to overcome these barriers. Providing the opportunity to develop relationships with an older, more experienced, adult can play a significant role in reducing some of the negative perceptions of higher education, while raising college-going aspirations and supporting students in how to deal with the barriers specific to socio-economic disadvantage (Levine and Nidiffer, 1996; Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2003). Mentoring can be a medium through which the educational outcomes of low-income students can be positively influenced. The aim of the current research is to explore the effectiveness of a college-going mentoring programme for students with a SED background. It attempts to address the question of whether a college-focused mentoring relationship has a significant impact upon students' confidence to navigate the college system, their college-going aspirations, and their confidence that they will succeed in college.

What is a mentor?

A mentor is defined as one person who helps another person to make a transition, often in knowledge, in work or in their thinking (Hamilton & Hamilton, 1992). Thus a mentor is a more experienced person who can act as a role model to the mentee. The common characteristics of mentoring include a learning partnership between a more experienced and less experienced person (Kram, 1985; Garvey & Alred, 2003; Karcher, 2005) and a relationship that involves emotional and/or instrumental support that becomes more impactful over time (Grossman & Rhodes, 2002). Mentoring itself can

serve different purposes. It can be skills and knowledge focused, or more supportive in nature. It can help students cope with specific challenges, like family loss or home-to-college transitions, or it can be more general. Mentoring relationships that are aimed at educational uplift generally provide career, social and emotional support in a setting that is deemed safe for self-exploration which results in positive academic outcomes in the young person (Johnson, 1998).

Youth mentoring has flourished in recent times, with evidence suggesting that disadvantaged youth in particular are likely to benefit most from these programmes (e.g. DuBois, et al, 2002; Eby, Allen, Evans, Ng, DuBois, 2008). Examples of the kinds of benefits to be obtained include fewer reports of delinquent and challenging behaviour, and improved physical and mental health (DuBois & Silverthorn, 2005). Evidence of the impact of mentoring on college-going comes from studies of formal mentoring programs. For example, in-school mentoring has been found to positively affect grades, and reduce the level of disruptive behaviour in the classroom (Eby, Allen, Evans, Ng, DuBois, 2008; Herrera, Grossman, Kauh & McMacken, 2011), while after-school mentoring has a positive impact on students' family relationships and school attendance (Thompson & Kelly-Vance, 2001). Students from families where no-one has previously attended college benefit most from having a mentor who has attended college; with these relationships generating an interest in college and increasing the likelihood of college attendance (Dubois, et al, 2002). For example, low-income students in the Sponsor-A–Scholar mentor programme had higher rates of enrolment in college compared to low-income students who did not participate, while Bos, Berman, Kane, and Tseng (2012) found that peer advisement by higher education students increased enrolment of low-income students in four-year colleges by nearly 4%. Interestingly, students in the lowest grade percentile, and with the lowest motivation, responded most to the mentoring relationship and improved the most (Johnson, 1999; Karcher, 2005).

College-going mentoring improves the likelihood that students will progress to college through the transference of important information related to college (Carrell & Sacerdote, 2013; Tierney & Garcia, 2014). Mentors provide students with information about entry requirements, college costs and college admissions, which in turn affect the confidence of the student to navigate the system (Gandara and Mejorado, 2005). Stanton-Salazar (2001) observed that the mentoring relationship is effective in transferring information about college preparation and in reducing the fears around

college costs and admissions. Mentors have also been effective in changing students' perceptions of the social norms regarding higher education progression, especially when the mentor is perceived to be similar to themselves (White, Hogg & Terry, 2002). Low-income students who have had a college mentor report less of the 'us and them' view of college and are more likely to see themselves as a part of the college community. Having a mentor during college also impacts upon college success; students are more likely to persist into second year and have higher grades after one year of faculty mentoring (Campbell and Campbell, 1997). Furthermore, peer-to-peer mentoring positively impacts upon the educational experience of low-income students, reporting that having a person with whom they can identify, especially in the critical first few weeks of college, was reassuring (McCann & Delap, 2015).

There are several key factors that influence the likelihood that mentoring will be pivotal in the young person's life. The beneficial effects are expected only to the extent that the mentor and mentee forge a strong connection that is built on mutual interest and trust (Rhodes, 2005), with evidence showing that youth who perceive high-quality relationships with their mentors having the best outcomes (Funk & Ek, 2002). A key element to the success of mentoring programmes is the type and quality of the relationship between the mentor and the mentee (Rhodes & DuBois, 2008). The development of a trusting relationship through which information can be successfully 'passed forward' is paramount (Rhodes, 2005). Related to the quality of the relationship is the perception that the mentee has of the mentor; if the mentee identifies with the mentor and they have a common interest then the relationship is more likely to be uplifting (Gandara & Mejorado, 2005).

The frequency of mentoring sessions has also proven important in terms of the quality of the mentoring relationship. For a strong connection to be forged, based on mutuality and trust, mentors and mentees need to have consistent contact over a long period of time (Spencer, 2007). For example, the Big Brothers Big Sisters of America (BBBSA) program found the positive effects on mentees became stronger the longer the relationship persisted, and the effects were greatest when relationships lasted at least one year (Grossman & Rhodes, 2002; Carrell & Sacerdote, 2013). Closer ties are also noted to emerge when the mentor adopts a flexible, mentee-centred style of interaction, which balances the mentee's interests with the overall goal of the mentoring programme (Morrow & Styles, 1995).

The emerging theory of Academic Capital Formation (ACF), reformulated by St John (2013), takes key concepts from social (Coleman, 1988), cultural (Bourdieu, 1984) and human capital (Becker, 1994), to provide an explanation for the barriers to education that low-income students often face. Social capital theory posits that the trusted networks within a student's community transmit information about college that can reinforce social stratification – such as, "college is too expensive for people like us". Bourdieu states that cultural capital is the accumulated knowledge of education in the cultural/family system that provides the basis of action and change through trusted networks of information. Based on the cultural capital model, low-income students have less likelihood of accessing post-secondary education because there is limited explicit and implicit knowledge within their family of how to navigate the system. Human capital theory refers to understanding of the economic value of education, and the overall benefit of a college education.

The reformulated theory of Academic Capital (St John, 2013) states that fundamental to educational uplift in low-income students is access to social networks that can provide trusted information on how to navigate complex college admissions systems. St John (2013) identified specific constructs that mentoring programmes should target, including but not limited to concerns about higher education costs, applications and exposure to networks through which trusted information about college can be transferred (Avery & Kane, 2004; Horn, Chen & Chapman, 2003; Grodsky & Jones, 2007; Stanton-Salazar, 2001).

According to St John, when mentoring is tailored towards higher education knowledge, it aligns with social capital formation, as it creates relationships with mentors who have degrees and/or are currently in higher education (St John et al, 2015). This type of mentoring addresses several of the constructs identified in the emergent theory of ACF and can make a range of improvements in the young person's life, not just academically, but also in their socio-emotional, cognitive and identity development (Rhodes, Spencer, Keller, Liang, & Noam, 2006). Evidence from a mentoring programme based on the model of ACF reveals a positive relationship between developing a network with a mentor who is in post-secondary education and enrolment in two and four year colleges by low-income students (St John et al 2015).

Current Study

The body of research states that low-income students face significant barriers to educational progression. These include SED, availability of trusted networks through which college knowledge can be transferred, a sense of belonging and self-efficacy in terms of the college application process. Research also shows that mentoring can be used as an effective tool to target these barriers especially when attention is paid to the type of mentoring provided and the length and quality of the mentoring relationship (Karcher & Nakkula, 2010; Grossman & Rhodes, 2002). The present study aimed to extend the current body of knowledge by investigating the impact a college-focused mentoring programme had on low-income students' college confidence, self-efficacy and aspirations. The mentoring programme extends the current body of knowledge by using "identifiable role models" as mentors. These are college graduates who have come from low-income backgrounds and successfully graduated college. Using identifiable role models is in line with the emergent theory of Academic Capital Formation insofar as the mentor provides a relationship through which trusted information could be transferred about college-going.

The specific research questions this study aimed to address were as follows:

1. Does participating in a college-focused mentoring programme, with an identifiable role model as a mentor, have a positive impact on low-income students' confidence to succeed in college?
2. Does the quality and duration of the mentoring relationship have a positive impact on low-income students' confidence to succeed college?
3. Does participating in a college-focused mentoring programme, with an identifiable role model as a mentor, have a positive impact on low-income students' college application self-efficacy?
4. Does the quality and duration of the mentoring relationship have a positive impact on low-income students' college application self-efficacy?
5. Does participating in a college-focused mentoring programme, with an identifiable role model as a mentor, have a positive impact on low-income students' college-going aspirations?
6. Does the quality and duration of the relationship have a positive impact on low-income students' college-going aspirations?

7. What are the barriers to the development of a successful college-focused mentoring relationship?

Method

Design: A repeated measures, cross-sectional, mixed methods design was employed to investigate the impact that college-focused mentoring had on the confidence to succeed in college, college application efficacy and college-going aspirations of students from low-income communities. Pre and post surveys were completed by students who had participated in a school-based mentoring programme which formed part of a larger longitudinal study aimed at increasing post-secondary education progression rates in 11 partner schools (see http://ta21.scss.tcd.ie/). Eleven focus group sessions with 6-8 participants each were held in the schools at the end of the school year. Each session was facilitated by two researchers and lasted about 30 minutes. The aim of the focus group was to explore was to establish the processes through which the mentoring impacts upon students' aspirations. Each focus group was audiotaped and transcribed. Thematic content analysis was conducted on the open-ended survey questions and the focus group data.

Participants: 1,005 students form part of the larger Trinity Access 21 (TA21) 3-year project, 2014-17. Before and after one academic year of mentoring, 728 (53.9% male, 46.1% female) second-year students (age 14) from the 11 secondary schools participating in the TA21 project completed the pre and post mentoring survey. The majority of students reported that they lived with both parents (73.8%); with 23.8% living with one parent, 0.8% living with their grandparents, 1.3% living with a legal guardian, and 0.3% answering "other". When asked about their parents' level of education, 42% of students responded with "don't know". A further 17.4% said their parents had completed the secondary school final exam (Leaving Certificate), 12.3% said their parents had a degree (e.g. BA, BSc) or higher (e.g. MSc, PhD), 11.3% said their parents completed school at age 16 (Junior Certificate), 13.3% said their parents had completed "Some College", 2.4% said their parents completed Primary School and 0.2% said "Other". Participants were deemed low-income due to the socio-economic status of the school[2] and the community where the schools were situated.

Measures: Demographic information was collected, including gender, race, parents' qualification, and with whom the students live.

Confidence to Succeed in College

A scale adapted from Wohn and colleagues (2013) was employed to measure confidence to succeed in college (α = .84). Responses were measured on a 5 point Likert-type scale that ranged from "not at all confident" to "very confident". Items were averaged to calculate an overall score. The items used included:

1. I am confident that I will "fit in" socially in (when I go to) college
2. I am confident that I will be able to make friends at college
3. I am confident that I am (will be) able to successfully graduate from college
4. I am confident in my ability to get accepted (in)to college

College Application Efficacy

Four items were adapted from Wohn and colleague's (2013) scale to measure students' college application efficacy (α = .75). Responses were measured on a 5 point Likert-type scale that ranged from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree". Items were averaged to calculate an overall score. The items included:

1. I know how to apply for financial supports or grants when I need to go to college
2. I understand how the application process works
3. I am prepared to apply to college (when the time comes)
4. I will be able to keep up-to-date with college application deadlines (when the time comes)

College-going Aspiration

One item (adapted from Markow & Pieters,, 2011) was used to measure college-going aspiration. Responses were measured on a 5 point Likert-type scale ranging from "very unlikely" to "very likely". The item was used as an indicator of aspiration:

How likely is it that you will go to college?

Mentoring Questions

An item was developed to measure the number of mentoring sessions. Response was open ended to this question. The question was:

1. How many sessions did you have with your mentor in the last year?

A further measure of contact was included with a 5 point Likert-type scale, ranging from "twice a week" to "never". The question was:

2. If you have a mentor, on average how often did you see your mentor in the last 6 months?

One item was developed to gain information about students' perception of the mentoring relationship. The mentoring relationship quality was measured on a 5 point Likert-type scale from "very poor" to "very good":

1. Please rate the quality of the relationship you have with your mentor?

In order to establish the barriers to the mentoring programme, two questions in the survey required a qualitative response; the first asked students to explain their response to the quality of the relationship question and the second asked students to describe what they discussed with the mentor. A semi-structured interview schedule was developed to guide the focus groups. This included questions which explored the mentoring relationship, quality and processes.

Procedure

21 schools linked to the university in which the research was undertaken were contacted and asked to participate in a longitudinal widening participation initiative called Trinity Access 21 and 11 of them volunteered to participate. The broader initiative involved the school implementing the college-focused mentoring as a core element of the 2nd year students' school year. The mentoring programme was run during school hours or during after-school activities. Schools were instructed to facilitate a minimum of six mentoring sessions over the course of one or two academic terms (10 weeks in each). The mentors were recruited by schools, as well as by the project coordinators, and consisted of past pupils of the school or members of the community in which the school was situated. A requirement for becoming a

mentor was (1) to have participated in college education (currently or in the past) (2) to be from a low-income background as defined by either being the first in the family to have attended college and/or to have attended a disadvantaged school. Mentors received a two-hour training about the structure and purpose of the programme. The mentoring programme was structured around a minimum of six sessions in which the mentor facilitated a group of five students in a discussion on a range of college-related issues {See Appendix A for a detailed description of the programme). Each week, mentors asked mentees to research or examine a topic which they could return to in the following session. Mentors were encouraged to take an approach that focused on building a relationship with their mentees, whilst having a goal-oriented structure to each mentoring session. In keeping with contemporary frameworks of successful mentoring (Karcher & Nakkula, 2010), this allowed a balance between the development of a meaningful relationship and success in the ultimate desired outcome of the programme, which was to impact the higher education knowledge and aspirations of the students. Mentees were surveyed in September, before the mentoring programme started, and again in May of the following year, when the mentoring programme had finished. Focus groups occurred during the May session.

Results

This section will report on the impact that participation in the mentoring programme had on students' confidence to succeed in college, on their college application efficacy and on their college-going aspirations. The effect of relationship quality and duration of the mentoring relationship on students' confidence to succeed in college, on their college application efficacy and on their college-going aspirations was established through three multiple regressions.

Quantitative Analysis

Table 1: Average ratings students gave on measure of confidence to succeed in college, application efficacy and aspirations

Variable	Pre	Post	*SD*
Confidence to Succeed in College	3.8 *(M)*	4.0 *(M)*	1.1
College Application Efficacy	3.3 *(M)*	3.6 *(M)*	1.2
College Aspirations	4.2 *(M)*	4.3 *(M)*	1.2

Table 1 reports the average ratings of students on the confidence to succeed in college scale, the college application scale and the college aspiration scale from before and after the mentoring programme. Repeated measures t-tests revealed that there was a significant increase in students' confidence to succeed in college from before the mentoring programme to after the programme; $t(728) = 5.3$, $p < .001$ (Figure 1). There was also a significant increase in students' college application efficacy from before the mentoring programme to after the programme; $t(728) = 3.3$, $p = .001$ (Figure 2). There was no significant change in students' college-going aspirations.

Figure 1: Significant increase in confidence to succeed in college from pre mentoring year to post year.
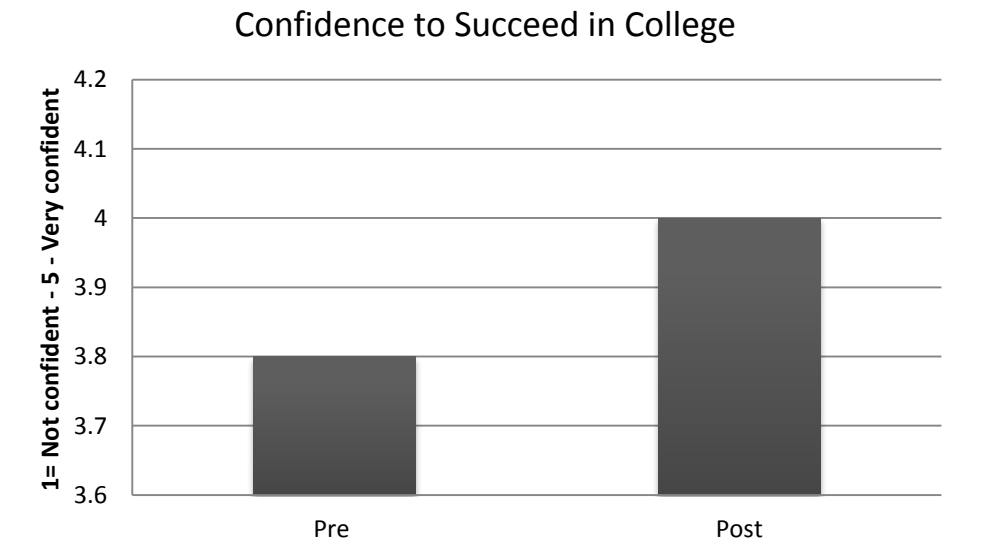
Confidence to Succeed in College

Multiple regression analysis was used to test if frequency of mentoring sessions, quality of mentoring relationship, and number of mentoring sessions

predicted how students rated their confidence to succeed in college. The results indicated that the three variables explained 41.3% of the variance in confidence to succeed in college (F (728) = 31.88, p <.001). It was found that number of sessions and quality of mentoring relationship significantly predicted confidence to succeed in college (Table 2).

Table 2: Summary of Multiple Regression analyses for variables predicting "Confidence to Succeed in College"

Variable	*B*	*SE B*	*B*	*t*	*P*
Number of sessions	.418	.091	.228	4.60	.000***
Quality of relationship	.679	.168	.275	4.04	.000***
Frequency of meeting	.101	.174	.033	.578	.563

* significant at p<.05; **significant at p<.005; ***significant at p<.001.

Multiple regression analysis was used to test if frequency of mentoring sessions, quality of mentoring relationship, and number of mentoring sessions predicted how students rated their perceived efficacy of applying to college. The results indicated that the three variables explained 38.4% of the variance in college application efficacy (F (728) = 27.057, p <. 001). It was found that number of sessions and quality of mentoring relationship significantly predicted college application efficacy (Table 3).

Table 3: Summary of Multiple Regression analyses for variables predicting College Application Efficacy

Variable	*B*	*SE B*	*β*	*t*	*P*
Number of sessions	.385	.089	.219	4.351	.000***
Quality of relationship	.681	.164	.286	4.163	.000***
Frequency of meeting	-.152	.170	-.052	-.893	.372

* significant at p<.05; **significant at p<.005; ***significant at p<.001

Multiple regression analysis was used to test if frequency of mentoring sessions, quality of mentoring relationship, and number of mentoring sessions predicted how students rated their college-going aspirations. The results indicated that the three variables explained 38.4% of the variance in

"Likelihood of Going to College" (F (728) = 26.84, $p <. 001$). It was found that number of sessions and quality of mentoring relationship significantly predicted college-going aspirations (Table 4).

Table 4: Summary of Multiple Regression analyses for variables predicting College-going Aspirations

Variable	*B*	*SE B*	*B*	*t*	*P*
Number of sessions	.0.79	.030	.134	2.661	.008**
Quality of relationship	.248	.055	.311	4.514	.000***
Frequency of meeting	-.034	.057	-.035	-.594	.553

* significant at p<.05; **significant at p<.005; ***significant at p<.001

Thematic Analysis

Thematic content analysis was carried out by two researchers. Both independently open-coded all interview transcripts. The coding was combined to develop category systems and themes which both researchers agreed were representative of the data.

The themes which emerged related to how the mentoring relationship positively impacts upon students' confidence to succeed in college and highlights the importance of the identifiable role model in that process. The following section described the key observations from the qualitative data.

Increasing self-efficacy and confidence around college-going

The flexible nature of the mentoring sessions gave students the opportunity to discuss all aspects of college-going with their mentors. The students built confidence around their ability to navigate the college system by learning from their mentor's experiences. As one student says, the mentors acted as "a guide to know what to do for college". One student's comment points to the lack of trust they have in other sources of college information and how having a mentor who they relate to seems to overcome this distrust:

> *"Yeah …it was just like good hearing from someone new that had gone through the whole experience or is in it and then just like answering questions and you know that they're going to tell the truth like because they're going through it."*

Mentors build students' confidence and self-efficacy around college-going in a variety of ways. Some students describe how their mentor made them feel good about themselves:

> *"… he explains everything really well and helps us to think about ourselves in a better way."*

Others appreciated the ease with which mentors explained the information about college. By making it easy to understand, they removed students' fears around the system and gave them more confidence to navigate it:

> *"…he is easy to understand and answers questions in an easy to understand way."*

Finally, building a good rapport with the mentees was a way to build their confidence and help them to understand the effort involved in going to college:

> *"…We got to know each other, talk about what we like. We also were told how hard we have to work to get into college."*

The mentoring sessions impacted students' aspirations around college and their futures in a variety of ways. One powerful feature was when students could relate to their mentors due to coming from the same community or background:

> *" My mentor was, she was in the school so we were just talking about the school, different things, we were just talking about [School Name] and she used to go here."*

This point of connection between mentors and students was iterated by many of the students and offers them an opportunity to envision themselves in their mentors' position in the future. The common tie of being from the same school gives the mentees a good base to work from, which can be developed to discuss college aspirations further and to discuss barriers that are specific to their community:

> *Interviewer: "Why can you relate to them?"*

> *Mentee: "I don't know it's just because the two mentors that I had, they both went to this school and they know the teachers and everything so like I can talk about this school with them and then college with them too."*

Relating to mentors is a crucial aspect of the success of the mentoring programme as they are able to interact with someone inspirational who comes from their background. By learning "all about what he did when he was in our place", they can become inspired and motivated to raise their own aspirations.

Another way in which mentors impacted students was through the activities that were structured in the sessions. Students benefitted from being able to work through college and career-related topics with someone who was not their teacher:

> *" We got 'em [mentors] to talk with and we got activities to do, say like giving us an idea of what we might like to do, what's your favourite subject and we'd put down our favourite subject and we'd go and analyse that subject we'd take bits of it, like what we like about it and stuff."*

Again, the development of a trusting relationship was a key feature of the success of mentoring in raising college-aspirations. Students appreciated when they had a mentor who listened as well as gave advice:

> *"... because he listens to each of our dreams to study the topic of our choices."*

Students' trust that their mentors "know what they are talking about" is pivotal in their acceptance of the information they are given.

Quality of the Mentoring Relationship

The quality of the mentoring relationship is a critical factor in the raising the students' college-going aspirations and success. It has the potential to build students' confidence, and aspirations when a good relationship develops. However, for several reasons, a poor mentoring relationship can occur, and this can not only produce no effect for the students, but also risks producing a negative effect that discourages the students from wanted to pursue a college education.

In terms of the quality of the mentoring relationship, when mentees felt that they got on well with their mentor this had a positive effect:

> *"Our mentor is funny and not strict and loves to make jokes and that's fun."*

When mentors created a relaxed and jovial environment, they set the stage to get to know the students they are mentoring and learn to connect with them. Students appreciate this effort, as well as respecting that they are there to focus on a structured topic:

> *"She's funny, not too serious, easy-going. But will still finish the work."*

Another reason that accounts for a positive mentoring relationship is when students can relate to their mentors. One student highlights that this works both ways, saying, *"because she can relate to us"* which shows that they appreciate when their mentor has an understanding of them.

Just as several themes strengthened the reasons why students rated their mentoring relationship highly, several patterns emerged which reinforced why a mentoring relationship didn't go so well. The first was simply not seeing the mentor. Students acknowledged that when they didn't see their mentor, a relationship didn't form:

> *"Because we rarely see her and when we see her it's kind of awkward."*

This shows that frequent contact is necessary for students to have successful mentoring relationships. One worrying aspect of infrequent or terminated mentoring is that it has a negative effect on the students. They can feel let down and even abandoned by their mentor and may be discouraged from future attempts to make mentoring work:

> *"She told us she was coming in every second week but she only came in once and never came back."*

Another reason for poor mentoring relationship quality had to do with a failure to relate to or connect with the mentor:

> *"She is very boring and I hate her job, we have nothing in common."*

Students' reports of not being interested in their mentor's career path had a strong effect on their rating of the relationship. Student comment such as, *"I'm not interested in him. . . I don't like his job"* are common, reflecting that students require an interest in their mentor's profession in order to connect with them:

> *"I don't know, I don't really. . . listen that much cause she's talking about her career in music and I'm not really into music."*

The qualitative analysis revealed that quality of the mentoring relationship seemed to be fundamental to a good experience for mentees. There was special focus placed on the mentor being relatable, outgoing and consistent in their contact with the students.

Discussion

Results from the current study indicate that students who participated in the college-focused mentoring programme had increases in their confidence to succeed in college and their college application efficacy from before to after the programme. The results show there was no significant change in the students' college-going aspirations, which remained at a high level over the course of the year. It also found that the quality of the college-focused mentoring relationship, and the number of sessions, had a positive impact on low-income students' confidence to succeed in college, in their college application efficacy and their college-going aspirations. Qualitative themes revealed that having a mentor from the same school and community, who the students could identify with, was important in the educational uplift of the mentees. The themes also revealed that lack of consistency from mentors can have a negative impact on students' experience of the mentoring programme.

The college-focused mentoring programme was designed to facilitate the transfer of college-going knowledge through a trusted relationship with an identifiable role model who has successfully navigated the college system. Previous research has shown that college-going mentoring improves the likelihood that students will progress to college through the successful transference of information related to college entrance and progression (Carrell & Sacerdote, 2013). Mentors have influenced the confidence of low-

income students to navigate the college system by providing information about entry requirements, college costs and college admissions (Gandara and Mejorado, 2005) thus reducing the fears associated with college costs (Stanton-Salazar, 2001). Furthermore, mentors have also been effective in changing students' perceptions of the social norms regarding higher education progression, especially when the mentor is perceived to be similar to themselves (White, Hogg & Terry, 2002). The current research findings are in line with these observations. Students who participated in the mentoring programme showed higher levels of confidence to succeed in college and higher levels of college application efficacy at the end of the year, compared to the start. Students also reported that the mentoring relationship was helpful in transferring important information about the college process and that the relatability of the mentors was an essential feature of this information being accrued.

Research has shown that the beneficial effects of mentoring are expected only to the extent to which the mentor and mentee can forge a strong bond (Rhodes, 2005), with youth who perceive the relationship as high-quality benefiting the most (Funk & Elk, 2002; Rhodes & DuBois, 2008). Furthermore, strong connections are dependent on consistent contact over longer periods of time (Spencer, 2007), with research showing that the positive effects of mentoring become stronger the longer the relationship persists, and the effects were greatest when relationships lasted at least one year (Grossman & Rhodes, 2002; Carrell & Sacerdote, 2013). The current research supports these observations. The quality of the mentor relationship, and the number of mentoring sessions, positively predicted the college-going aspirations of the mentees. The results show that as the quality of the relationship improved so too did the students' aspirations, it also showed that the more sessions they had, the higher their aspirations. Grossman and Rhodes (2002) made similar observations, stating that a year-long relationship is ideal for the development of positive mentoring relationship. An increase in the quality and quantity of the mentoring also predicted an increase in confidence to succeed in college and in application efficacy thus suggesting that a relationship which is perceived as good, and long lasting, is optimal for the transfer of college-going information. This observation is further supported by the reports of the students. They highlight the importance of a fun, open relationship and there was evidence to suggest that when mentors failed to meet the commitment this negatively impacted upon the students' experience of the programme.

Related to the quality of the relationship is the perception that the mentee has of the mentor; if the mentee identifies with the mentor and they have a common interest then the relationship is more likely to be uplifting (Gandara & Mejorado, 2005). Furthermore, closer ties are also noted to emerge when the mentor adopts a flexible, mentee-centred style of interaction, which balances the mentee's interests with the overall goal of the mentoring programme (Morrow & Styles, 1995). The qualitative themes identified in this research support these observations with students highlighting the importance of their mentor's background, and them being relatable in terms of coming from the same school or community. The mentees also highlighted the nature of the interaction as being important; stating that fun, open interactions were ideal for the development of a good relationship thus supporting the observations of Morrow and Styles (1995), who emphasise the importance of an open, flexible structure.

The reformulated theory of Academic Capital (St John, 2013) states that fundamental to educational uplift in low-income students is access to social networks that can provide trusted information on how to navigate complex college admissions systems, with research often showing that the educational uplift of low-income students is underpinned by the development of such networks (Avery & Kane, 2004; Horn, Chen & Chapman 2003; Grodsky & Jones, 2007; and Stanton-Salazar, 2001). The current findings provide some support for this assertion. Students who developed stronger ties and who viewed their relationship as positive were more likely to accrue information that increased their confidence to apply to and succeed in college. These positive ties also significantly predicted the students' college-going aspirations. There was qualitative evidence that the relatability of the mentors, and how mentees perceived them as 'belonging' to the same community as them, had a positive impact on the development of college-going knowledge.

According to St John (2013), when mentoring is tailored towards higher education knowledge, it aligns with social capital formation, as it creates relationships with mentors who have experience of the higher education system (St John et al, 2015). This type of mentoring addresses several of the constructs identified in the emergent theory of ACF and can make a range of improvements in the young person's life, not just academically, but also in their socio-emotional, cognitive and identity development (Rhodes, Spencer, Keller, Liang, & Noam, 2006). Evidence from the current research suggests that a college-focused mentoring programme that employs relatable role models supports the educational uplift of low-income students through the

development of confidence to navigate the system and a reduction of the 'us and them' perceptions (St John et al, 2015). These observations support the idea that college-focused mentoring impacts on the development of academic capital in low-income students.

Limitations

The current study shows that college-focused mentoring, with identifiable role models, can play an integral role in the development of confidence to navigate the college system for low-income students. It also shows that the quality and quantity of the relationship predicts the development of these constructs, as well as predicting the college-going aspirations. However, there are some limitations to the current study that should be noted. The students that participated in the mentoring programme were taken from a larger sample of students participating in a longitudinal widening participation project. Therefore, the current study cannot account for other activities that may have been running during the time that the mentoring programme was taking place. In low-income communities there are often several initiatives running that are focused on college and career readiness thus the current results must be interpreted in light of this limitation. Future research should attempt to account for other interventions and assess the cumulative impact of such initiatives. The current study assumed that recruiting mentors from within the mentees' school and communities would provide identifiable role models through which trusted information could be transferred. While the current research did establish the relatability of the mentors during the qualitative analysis, future research should seek to establish this in a more formal manner to ensure the reliability of this assumption. Finally, future research should formally establish the low-income status of the mentees, and examine any within-groups differences that may occur across the different levels of disadvantage. This would help establish different levels of support needed rather than a blanket approach to mentoring.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study established the positive impact that a college-focused mentoring programme, that employs identifiable role models as mentors, has on low-income students' confidence to succeed in college and

college application efficacy. It also established that the quality of the relationship and the frequency of contact predicted these variables, as well as the college-going aspirations of the group. Barriers to the development of the mentoring relationship included the relatability of the mentor and the mentors' commitment to the programme. Future research could explore the particular dynamics of successful relationships, as well as potential reasons for mentorship breakdown and protective factors against this.

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[1] In Ireland further education and higher education are referred to interchangeably as college, for the purpose of this paper college will be used as the term which refers to higher education and includes any post-secondary institution which offers a degree course or higher

[2] For the purposes of consistency low-income is used as a generic term which incorporates social and/or economic disadvantage. In Ireland schools that meet national criteria for disadvantage are connected to specific HEIs. In this study all schools included were designated disadvantaged based on these national criteria.

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Appendix A: Description of Mentoring Programme

Recruitment

The 11 participating schools recruited mentors through two main channels

1. **Trinity Access Programme (TAP) Undergraduate Students & Alumni**
   The Trinity Access 21 initiative recruited mentors on behalf of participating schools from the existing pool of TAP undergraduates and alumni. These access students and alumni came from SED communities and entered higher education through either the TAP foundation course programme or the HEAR (Higher Education Access Route) scheme. TAP students and alumni were contacted by email and asked to register their interest in the programme as well as their preference for which of the 11 schools they would like to mentor with. This information was then shared with mentor coordinators within each school to allow them to manage their own programmes. This was necessary due to the different timetabling approaches adopted by schools for their mentoring programme. For example, some schools chose after school programmes while others scheduled their mentoring sessions during school hours.

2. **School & Community Links**
   Schools were also encouraged to recruit mentors using their own links with past pupils, community groups and parents. Mentor recruitment through these channels was restricted to individuals who had attended college.

Training

Trinity Access 21 provided an evening training workshop for all mentors registered with a school. The mentor training presentation covered the following topics

1. Project Overview/Aims
2. Mentoring Introduction

3. Mentoring Strategies
4. Support Structures
5. Child Protection Guidelines

In addition to a presentation and introductory materials, TA21 staff facilitated role play situations and plenary discussions with small groups of mentors.

Resources

Each mentor session was scaffolded for both mentors and mentees. Mentors received instruction packs on running the session activities and tips for interacting with students specific to each session. Each mentee received instruction packs on each activity with worksheets for both during and after the session. The topics and activities chosen were adapted from materials developed by the College for Every Student Programme in the US. Session topics are listed below:

1. Get to know your Mentor/Mentee
2. Goal Setting
3. Extracurricular Activities
4. Organisational Skills
5. Study Habits
6. Revisiting Goals/Wrap up