GETTING IN

Increasing Access to College via Mentoring

Findings from 10 Years of a
High School Mentoring Program

William G. Tierney & Lisa D. Garcia
Pullias Center for Higher Education
University of Southern California

GETTING IN:
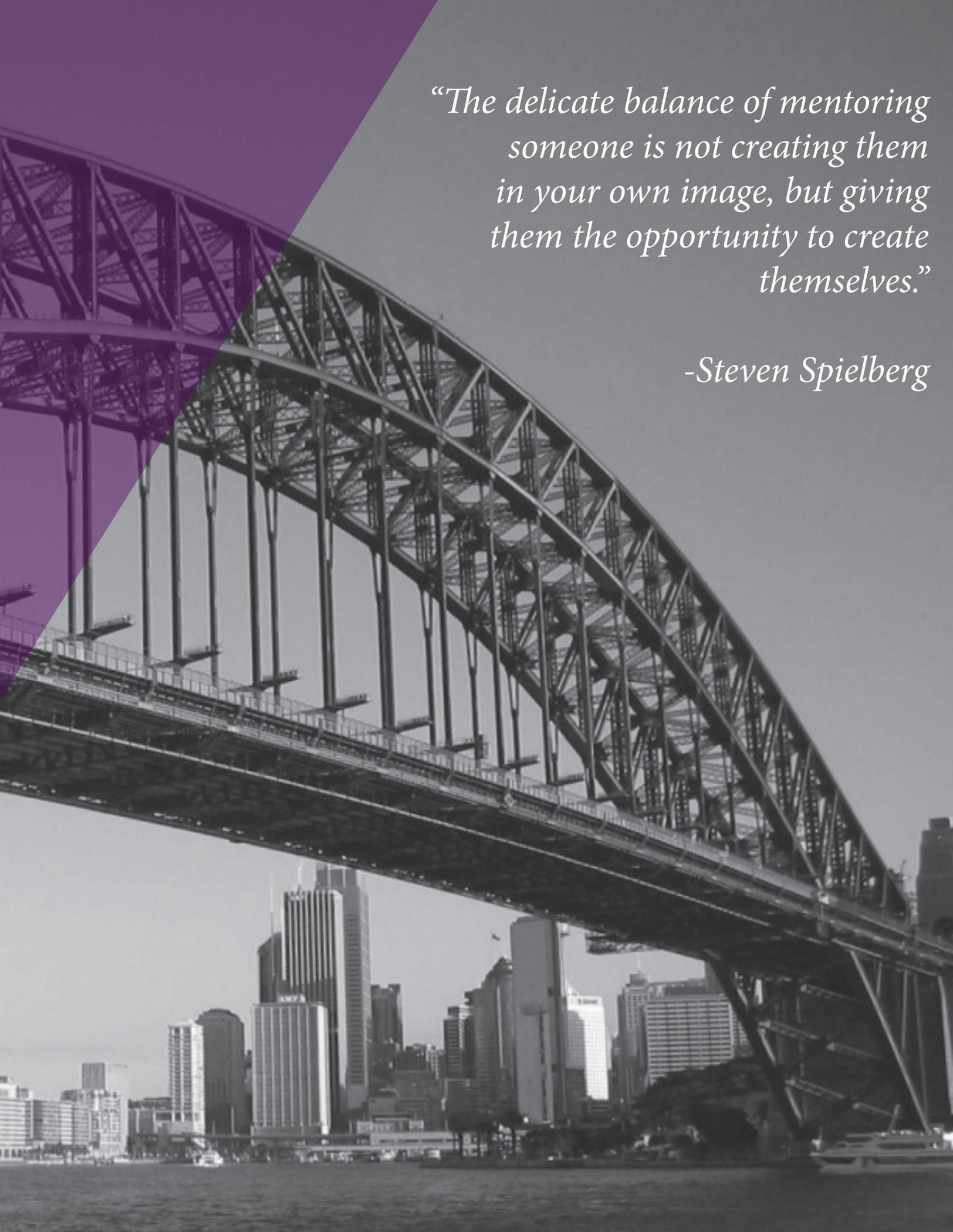## *Increasing Access to College via Mentoring*

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"The delicate balance of mentoring someone is not creating them in your own image, but giving them the opportunity to create themselves."

-Steven Spielberg

BACKGROUND

Many high school students are eligible for college but they do not go, or they attend a less demanding postsecondary institution. Their problems are twofold—either (1) they lack the counseling and support structures necessary to apply to college, or (2) they lack the counseling and support structures that enable them to apply to the kind of institution for which they should aspire. Both problems are tragic. On the one hand, we have college-eligible students who would be able to attend a four-year institution but they have not had the guidance to steer them through the application process. On the other hand, some students have been admitted to an institution but because they had little or no support, they applied to institutions that will not meet the levels that they could reach. To be sure, community colleges play a critical role in educating many students. However, many low-income students should have the same opportunities as do their wealthy counterparts to attend a four-year institution.

The reasons for these problems are relatively straightforward:

- Many schools have only one college counselor.
- Students are largely first-generation and do not have the familial support necessary to navigate through the application and financial aid process.
- Applying for college is a confusing process that takes time. Students need one-on-one support in order to navigate the application processes, visit college campuses, take the right courses, and meet deadlines.
- Teenagers in general do not have the "college knowledge" necessary to apply to college and acquire the adequate resources for financial aid.

For over a decade, the Pullias Center for Higher Education has been working on ways to solve these problems. During that time several studies have been published that support the work we have been doing.

Rigorous qualitative and quantitative research on mentoring programs remains scarce even if the popularity of such programs has gained the attention of K–20 educators.[1] Much of the published work focuses on the reasons for implementing mentoring programs and their respective programmatic goals but little, if any, published literature focuses on actual program results.

A handful of organizations and researchers have published practitioner recommendations and literature reviews on pre-college mentoring programs. Some focus on the various types of mentoring programs including their inconsistencies, gaps, and their successes.[2] Others focus on the need for more research on quality mentoring programs. One such effort is led

by *MENTOR: The National Mentoring Partnership*.[3] Their national mentoring summits gather leaders from hundreds of youth-serving programs, as well as government, research, and philanthropic organizations to exchange effective and innovative practices, discuss the implications of new research, and focus on fueling broader impact. Similar activities occur at the local and regional level through different college counseling and student affairs groups.

While there are definite gaps in the literature of effective mentoring, there are some basic, if not commonsense, observations about what makes for good college mentoring.[4] Recommendations include:

- Know what students need and develop effective strategies to meet those needs.
- Develop a theory of action for how the program will achieve desired outcomes.
- Recruit and retain key stakeholders and involve them in the planning process.
- Secure financial support to operate the program on a year-round basis.
- Develop a screening, selection, and matching process.
- Develop and implement a high-quality ongoing mentor training program.
- Provide ongoing mentor support.
- Obtain parent support for the mentor/mentee relationship.
- Evaluate the effectiveness of the mentoring program including costs.

Researchers are quick to remind that all of these suggestions need to be taken within a context of the unique pre-college mentoring relationship—namely the power and age differentials between mentors and mentees.[5] This dynamic, while opportune for developing rich and meaningful connections between mentor and mentee, complicates the work of mentoring program staff and funders.

The need for formal mentoring programs continues, especially in communities with limited resources. School-age children residing in low-income neighborhoods can particularly benefit from the experiences and know-how of mentors from other socioeconomic backgrounds.

For educational researchers studying college access issues for first-generation college students, pairing mentors with high school mentees makes sense. Those individuals who have successfully completed college are in a position to help mentees complete small, time-sensitive tasks (e.g., applying to college and financial aid, submitting a state of intent to register) while

Mentoring, **however useful,** unfortunately is in great demand **but** short supply:

18M
young people could benefit from having a mentor; only 3 million are in formal one-to-one mentoring relationships[6]

38%
mentoring relationships that last one year[11]

9 MONTHS
average mentoring relationship[11]

$200-$6,000
average cost of program per student per year[8]

1:3
average mentor-to-student ratio[7]

$1,114
average cost of student per year[9]

investments in quality mentoring programs provide nearly

$3 for every $1 [10]

providing overarching context to the entire college experience (i.e., scheduling one's classes each term, securing housing and transportation each school year, paying off student loans). Mentors substitute for a parent or older sibling/relative who has not experienced college, passing on information about the day-to-day tasks and expectations that all college students are expected to master.

The research on mentoring is far from definitive in part because there are so many different kinds of mentoring. Formal mentoring programs, for example, could be:

- Peer-based
- School staff- and faculty-based
- Community volunteers
- Corporate/professional volunteers
- One-on-one programs
- One mentor working with a small group

And to complicate the matter, the objectives of mentoring vary from program to program:

- To provide general guidance for college and career planning.
- To offer support to marginalized youth by affirming self-worth.
- To encourage college-going aspirations.
- To affect behavioral outcomes (e.g., truancy, drugs use, fighting).
- To improve grades and test scores.

Thus, there is no definitive work that attests to "mentoring" generically defined as inherently successful. How a program gets constructed, what its goals and objectives are, and how the program measures success are essential in determining program quality. While such an observation may seem self-evident, the research we have done over the last generation has shown many more programs with unclear goals and objectives than those that are clear and defined in scope.

Working with first-generation college students presents a particular set of sobering statistics. Nationally, 89% of low-income, first-generation college students leave college within six years without earning a degree.[12] One half of the college population consists of first-generation students. Further, 45% of Black college students and 48.5% of Latino college students have parents who completed a high school diploma or less.[13] Thus, in large urban metropolitan centers like Los Angeles, the impact that college-educated mentors can make in guiding first-generation college students through the college transition process is sizeable.

PROJECT OVERVIEW

To overcome the problems discussed above, the Pullias Center for Higher Education (PCHE) at the University of Southern California created a mentoring program—Increasing Access via Mentoring (I AM)—to provide one-on-one support to 12th graders. The students with whom we work are eligible to apply to a four-year institution but may not due to the lack of a supportive environment. I AM is an action-based intensive mentoring model where USC faculty, staff, and graduate students guide college-bound high school seniors through the college and financial aid application processes. The program's goals are specific and targeted toward 12th graders in high poverty, low college-going high schools.

The goals of the program are straightforward:

1. To assist high school seniors in applying to, and being accepted in, a four-year institution; and
2. To ensure that students successfully transition to college with an adequate understanding of what is involved in succeeding in college.

From these goals have flowed the program objectives:

1. To increase students' awareness of the postsecondary options that they have;
2. To improve student college application essays;
3. To enable students to understand their financial situation and the difference between a grant and a loan; and
4. To equip students with the skills necessary to enter college.

The schools where we work have a college-going rate of frequently less than 30%. For the last decade we have worked with students with a 3.0 GPA and above. The mentoring program trains volunteer mentors to work with high school students about the ins and outs of applying to college. Mentors meet with students at least once a month beginning in August of their senior year and extending through high school graduation. Mentors work with students on writing college essays, determining which college to attend, applying for financial aid, and discussing the myriad questions any high school senior has about going to college. All of the students we have mentored have applied to four-year institutions and over 90% have attended a four-year institution.

The I AM program works with nine high schools in low-income communities located in central, east, and south Los Angeles where the Pullias Center has long-standing relationships. The overarching goal is to increase college-going for UC- and CSU-eligible high school

seniors in these schools with historically low college-going rates. Approximately 50% of the students end up attending a University of California campus and another one-third go to the California State University campus with the remaining attending in-state and out-of-state private institutions.

Percentage of 2013 Graduates who Completed CSU/UC Coursework in Participating I AM Schools

School	Percentage
#1	33.7%
#2	32.5%
#3	60.2%
#4	33.9%
#5	23.5%
#6	40.5%
#7	34.5%
#8	45.9%
#9	24.9%
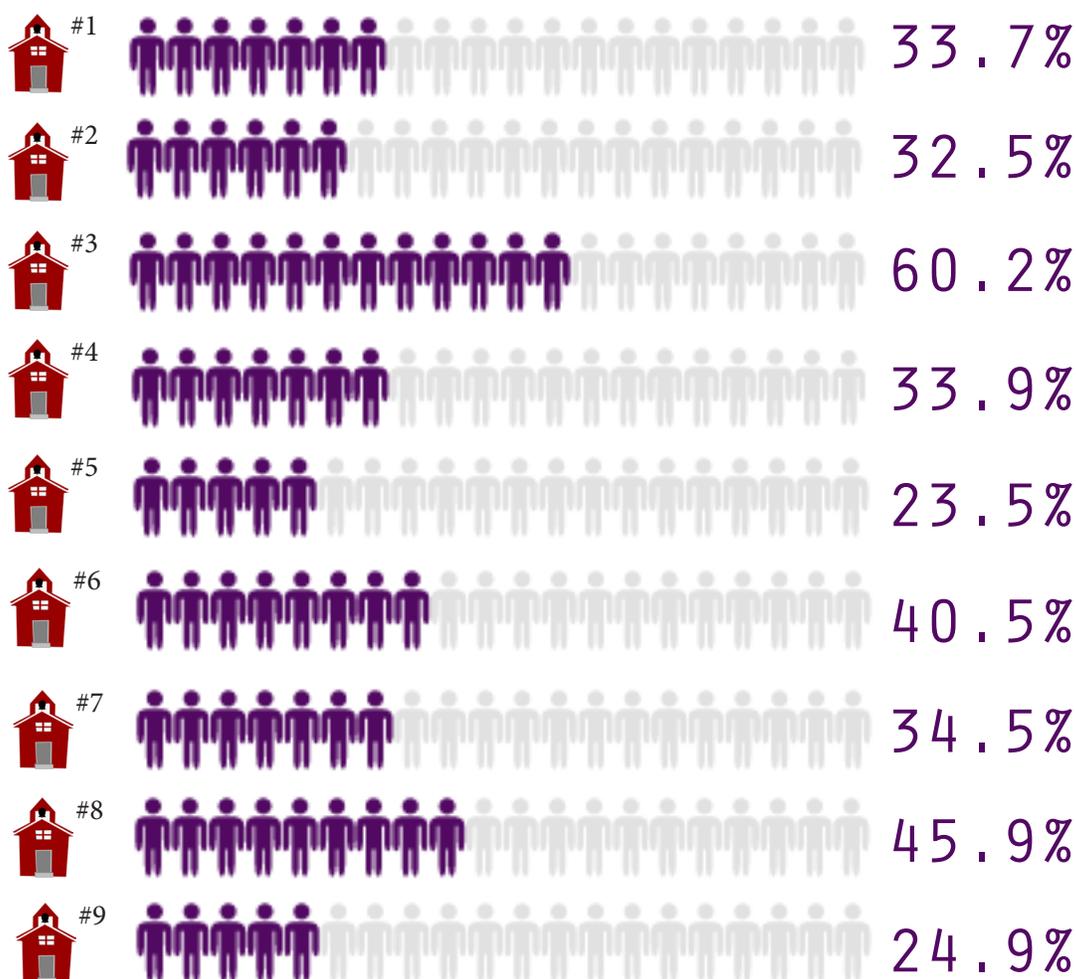
AUGUST

I AM Mentor/Mentee application & recruitment

OCTOBER

CSU applications begin

DECEMBER

Private college applications are submitted

SEPTEMBER

Mentor training and "kick-off" events; mentors and mentees are matched

NOVEMBER

UC applications begin and CSU/UC college applications are submitted

TEMPORAL FRAMEWORK

August–October: 175 mentees are selected at 9 LAUSD high schools; USC students, staff, and faculty volunteer mentors are recruited. Training for mentors begins and "kick-off events" are hosted at the high schools for mentees. Applications to CSU campuses begin.

November–December: Mentees work with mentors as personal statements are drafted and finalized and students apply to UC campuses. Mentees attend the local *Cash for College* convention. Private college applications are submitted.

January–February: Mentors receive financial aid training. Mentees begin FAFSA, California DREAM applications, and scholarship applications; mentors continue with monthly visits and follow-up. *Cash for College* workshops are attended in January and February.

March: FAFSA, California DREAM applications, and Cal Grant applications are due.

April–June: Admissions letters are reviewed and final campus choices are determined. High school graduations take place.

MARCH

FAFSA, California DREAM application, and Cal Grant applications are due

JUNE

High school graduations

JANUARY–FEBRUARY

Financial aid training; mentees begin applying for FAFSA, scholarships, etc.

APRIL–MAY

Mentees receive admissions letters and final choices are determined

THEORY OF ACTION

The concept of a "mentor" derives from Ancient Greek. The individual was considered to be a wise and trusted counselor to a protégé. Mentor was a friend of Odysseus. When Odysseus left for the Trojan War he left Mentor in charge of his son, Telemachus, and his palace. Thus, the mentor has played an important role in guiding youth and helping them succeed.

The theory of action for the mentoring program is based on the intellectual framework employed in the Pullias Center for all of our work. The scaffolding of the theory of action for the program is twofold. We assume that students need to develop learning strategies for college success that are framed by *self-regulated learning*.[14] The assumption here is that learners need to have a sense of self-efficacy and control over their work. They are reflective learners who come to believe that their work may improve through the tasks they undertake. Our assumption is that, although in many of the schools that the students have attended they may not have had opportunities for these sorts of activities, self-regulated learning is essential for success in four-year colleges and universities. Accordingly, the process of writing the college essay, developing strategies for applying to college, and making decisions about which institution to attend is informed by our theory of action.

We have coupled the idea of self-regulated learning with the idea of *cultural integrity*.[15] The students with whom we work have frequently been described by way of a deficit model—they lack one or another trait or skill that will enable them to succeed and get into college. Their neighborhoods frequently get described in antiquated terms that mirror a "culture of poverty" approach.

However, all of our students bring to the task of applying to college an enormous wealth of informal cultural capital. One youth worked 20 hours a week every week during high school to help his mother make ends meet. Another student attended daily mass and led the church youth group. Other students joined after-school clubs because they realized they needed to augment their learning. The parents of one student had been saving a few dollars a week throughout high school for their son; a daughter in another family knew that she needed to help her father understand the importance of college and took him on campus visits. To approach students from the perspective of cultural integrity does not heroicize one or another individual. However, it also does not assume that because an individual is a member of a particular ethnicity that he or she is by definition "at-risk" and missing some key cultural attribute. Our assumption is that it is the structural conditions in which children live that create risk, and it is the cultural wealth of the individual that will enable him or her to overcome these obstacles. The job of I AM is to create those conditions in order to enable students to succeed.

The dynamics of the program, then, move in two manners in consort with one another. Students learn that their backgrounds are topics to be explored and written about as they apply for college. The project's activities work around the idea that students need to be in charge of their work and gain responsibility for what they create in order to be accepted into the institutions that they have determined will be optimal for their learning.

FINDINGS

Over the last 10 years we have been able to distill our ideas about mentoring into six principles:

1. **Be clear**: Specify mentoring objectives and clarify mentors' roles. Provide mentor training attuned to specific program goals.

2. **Develop long-term relationships**: As students grow, they have different needs; an established and trusted relationship provides the opportunity for consistent support.

3. **Tailor mentoring to meet students' needs**: Take into account cultural and gender considerations. Aim for a relationship that is focused, supportive, and deliberate. Develop one-on-one individual mentoring plans as each student needs different types and levels of help and support.

4. **Evaluate progress**: Systematically assess the mentoring components of your program. Evaluate progress on a weekly, semi-annual, and annual basis and consistently fine-tune the program.

5. **Consider cost effectiveness**: Evaluate the effectiveness of individual mentors. Determine if group activities (e.g., application and financial aid training workshops, college field trips) are more effective in delivering content than via the individual mentor.

6. **Look to the community**: Business leaders, community groups, teachers, and college students can provide valuable formal and informal mentorship. Use neighborhood resources to diversify and expand the population of mentors.

OBSTACLES TO SUSTAINABILITY AND SCALING UP

A conundrum exists. I AM works. The Pullias Center is able to demonstrate not only the outcomes of a successful program but also the components that make it successful. A model also exists for the structure of the program that presumably could be scaled up in the same location or exported to other locations. Unlike many other programs that have neither a discernible model nor an evaluative component, I AM has both. What, then, prevents the program from expansion? Four hurdles exist.

INSTABILITY OF FUNDING

The program has existed through grants from local and national foundations, state agencies, and the federal government. Although we have been able to provide the necessary services every year and even grow and expand in some areas (such as financial aid counseling), the instability of funding makes the program unsustainable over a long-time horizon. The purpose here is not to enter into a discourse about how foundation and governmental agencies' priorities shift often on a whim, but the result is that programs such as I AM suffer due to an unstable funding base. Further, funders frequently have a particular priority which makes the development, sustainability, and expansion of a program difficult, if not impossible. A foundation provides programmatic support one year, for example, and its board decides to shift to financial aid the next. Such shifts make planning haphazard and expansion impossible.

THE COST OF THE PROGRAM

The cost of the program is roughly $1,000 per student. One of the ironies of such a cost is that program officers often have commented that the cost is higher than other programs where programmatic activities may be as low as $500/student. The irony, of course, is that any middle- or upper-class parent would spend much more than $500 for a month's worth of college counseling activities for their son or daughter. When the Educational Testing Service (ETS) did a comparative analysis of our program with other similar programs, they found ours to be the most cost-effective with the greatest learning outcomes.[16] The program also requires constant attention throughout the year which necessitates a staff. The simple point is that mentoring for first-generation, low-income students who largely attend low college-going high schools requires a program that will cost what we have created.

EDUCATION BUREAUCRACY

Coordinating a mentoring program at nine high schools in one school district necessitates mentoring staff and volunteer mentors to continually negotiate complicated school and district bureaucracies. If a principal suddenly decides to require all school visitors to be listed on preapproved daily visitors list, then a mentor who drops by to talk with his mentee about his FAFSA submission is denied access to his mentee. All of the college counselors at the nine schools may be on board with the program but if the volunteer mentors cannot schedule and complete the background check at the district level, then the I AM program gets off to a late start. These types of issues arise on a weekly (if not daily) basis, requiring staff and mentors to be creative in how they approach school and district stakeholders who can best facilitate and foster the student/mentor relationship.

RETAINING MENTORS

Working with teenagers can be demanding, time-consuming, and frustrating. Our staff members and mentors regularly share their frustrations about working with students who are over-committed, unfocused, or just unmotivated. Providing a meaningful mentoring experience for volunteer mentors who sometimes encounter disengaged students can be challenging for I AM staff who try to keep them motivated, satisfied, and inspired to return year after year. While volunteer mentors are the backbone of a successful mentoring program, their care and satisfaction can sometimes dishearten devoted staff members who go out of their way to solve problems and overcome challenges.

CONCLUSION

The nation needs more individuals attending college. The obvious location where to find substantial numbers of students who are available, willing, and eager is in low-income neighborhoods where high poverty schools have had historic low-college going rates. In many of these schools the college-going rates have registered meager increases over the last decade, and when students do go to college they overwhelmingly attend community colleges. Many of these students could go to a four-year institution but need mentoring in terms of figuring where they want to go and how to apply.

Although a variety of different options exist to address this problem such as whole scale reform or the creation of charter schools and the like, the Pullias Center has been focused on a very specific problem—increasing access to college. We have developed a very specific solution whose costs are marginal compared to the outcomes that the students and society will incur if students move toward attaining a college degree. What we have learned offers a model that might be implemented in other cities and scaled up in our own city of Los Angeles. The rubrics of the model are clear, simple, and straightforward.

The challenges we have outlined are equally clear and straightforward which is why this year's program may be our last. We learned a great deal and mentored nearly 1,400 students who transitioned to college, and are on track to graduate or have graduated—nearly 98% since 2007.[17]

The challenge for the future is for others to take what we have learned and see if they are able to overcome the obstacles for enabling America's youth to gain access to college. We appreciate the research that has been done that supports our work, but the time has passed for armchair studies that validate what we already know. The next step is to sustain and scale up models that enable more students to gain a foothold onto academic campuses.

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[1]Gandara & Mejorado, 2005; IHEP, 2011; Wheeler, Keller, & DuBois, 2010
[2]Crisp & Cruz, 2009; Institute for Higher Education Policy, 2011
[3]MENTOR, 2014
[4]Gandara & Mejorado, 2005; Hoover, 2014; IHEP, 2011
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[6]MENTOR, 2006
[7]MENTOR, 2006
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[9]Foster, 2010
[10]MENTOR, 2014
[11]MENTOR, 2006
[12]Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education, 2011
[13]Table 3.11 in NCES, 2010
[14]Tierney, 2013
[15]Tierney & Jun, 2001
[16]Millett & Nettles, 2009
[17] The percentage is based on the students whom we have formally tracked since 2007.

ABOUT THE PULLIAS CENTER

With a generous bequest from the Pullias Family estate, the Earl and Pauline Pullias Center for Higher Education at the USC Rossier School of Education was established in 2012 (the center was previously known as the Center for Higher Education Policy Analysis). The gift allows one of the world's leading research centers on higher education to continue its tradition of focusing on research, policy, and practice to improve the field.

The mission of the Pullias Center for Higher Education is to bring a multidisciplinary perspective to complex social, political, and economic issues in higher education. Since 1996 the center has engaged in action-oriented research projects regarding successful college outreach programs, financial aid and access for low- to moderate-income students of color, use of technology to supplement college counseling services, effective postsecondary governance, emerging organizational forms such as for-profit institutions, and the retention of doctoral students of color.

ABOUT WILLIAM G. TIERNEY

William G. Tierney is University Professor and Wilbur-Kieffer Professor of Higher Education at the Rossier School of Education and the Co-Director of the Pullias Center for Higher Education at University of Southern California (USC). Former President of the USC Academic Senate, he has chaired both the Ph.D. program for the USC Rossier School of Education and the University Committee on Academic Review. He serves on the International Advisory Board of King Abdulaziz University (Saudi Arabia) and is an Interdisciplinary Research Fellow at the University of Hong Kong. Dr. Tierney is committed to informing policies and practices related to educational equity. He is involved in projects pertaining to the problems of remediation to ensure that high school students are college-ready, interactive web-enhanced computer games for preparing low-income youth for college, and a project investigating how to improve strategic decision-making in higher education. His recent publications include: *The Impact of Culture on Organizational Decision-making*, *Trust and the Public Good: Examining the Cultural Conditions of Academic Work*, and *Understanding the Rise of For-profit Colleges and Universities*. Tierney earned a master's from Harvard University and holds a Ph.D. from Stanford University in administration and policy analysis. Tierney has been president of ASHE, president and vice president of AERA, and is a Fellow of AERA. He was recently elected to the National Academy of Education.
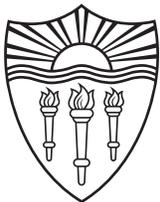
ABOUT LISA D. GARCIA

Lisa D. Garcia is the Assistant Director of the Pullias Center for Higher Education. Lisa currently oversees Pullias's two outreach programs—Increasing Access via Mentoring (I AM) and SummerTIME (Tools, Information, Motivation, Education)—that serve first-generation, low-income students living in Los Angeles. She was a Pullias postdoctoral scholar and research assistant whose dissertation chronicled the experiences of undocumented students attending a four-year comprehensive university. She has also published on issues of equity, access, and diversity specifically pertaining to first-generation college students in *American Behavioral Scientist* and *Teachers College Record* respectively. Before starting her graduate studies in education policy at USC, she worked in the UCLA undergraduate admissions office. Garcia holds a Ph.D. from USC in education.

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