

iMentor College: Mapping Text-Prompt Response Rate and Pair Connection Executive Summary

Havisha Khurana, PhD Candidate, University of Oregon
Society for Research in Educational Effectiveness
2025 Summer Research Fellow
havishak@uoregon.edu

Problem Statement and Project Scope: Students from low-income families, racial or ethnic minorities, and first-generation college-goers encounter a web of financial and non-financial barriers in U.S. post-secondary education – akin to runners or mountaineers beginning an adventure without adequate gear. Interventions that ease college navigation, such as advising and information-based programs, are popular approaches to boost college persistence and completion rates. This project combines a brief literature synthesis with original empirical analysis to assess program use and inform improvements to the iMentor College program.

About the program: The iMentor program is a four-year advising initiative aimed at improving college persistence (continuing into the sophomore year) and completion (earning a degree) among historically underserved students. Each year it serves roughly 5,000 participants across schools in New York, Baltimore, Chicago, and the Bay Area. Pair mentoring begins in 11th grade through community volunteers and can extend through the second year of college. During the high-school phase, mentees attend weekly sessions led by a program manager at their schools and meet their mentors monthly in a facilitated session at their schools. Once students transition to college, the mentorship becomes more pair-driven: mentors and mentees communicate on their own and iMentor supplements the advising with supportive text messages campaigns across four themes: logistics, academic, basic needs, and social-emotional learning. This project focuses on evaluating the college-phase component of the program.

Method: I drew on literature synthesis to map the evidence base of pair-advising models and text-prompt information programs for college students and compared it with iMentor College. Through descriptive and inferential analyses, I examined trends and relationships with text-prompt response rate and mentor-mentee connection. For a subset of mentees enrolled at the City University of New York (CUNY), I examined how participation in text-prompts and mentor-mentee connection relates with cumulative GPA and credit earned.

Program population: The dataset includes 1458 mentees with 63% Year 1 and 37% Year 2 mentees. Mentees were predominantly from the New York and Chicago sites, and 54% identified as female. Racial/ethnic composition shows roughly one-quarter African-American and half Latinx students. Forty percent are first-generation college students, though this variable has a substantial missing rate (30%). Over 70% qualify for free or reduced-price lunch (FRPL), with 22% missing data on that indicator. Seventy percent of mentees were matched with a mentor during the academic year, and 58 mentees (4%) received the Alice Griffin Scholarship

(financial award). Mentor demographics are evenly split by gender; 60% are under 40 years old, and 85% hold at least a bachelor's degree.

Comparing iMentor College to other pair-advising models: I reviewed 11 programs across 13 studies. Most advising initiatives span a single semester to one academic year—shorter than iMentor's four-year program that starts in high school; however they serve similar demographic student populations. Mentor types vary (faculty, staff, peers, or paid employees), but peer mentors selected through a competitive process are especially common, often receiving modest compensation and tasked with tracking communications. A notable distinction is that, in every other program, mentors possess institutional knowledge of the college, whereas iMentor College mentors do not. Interaction formats range from loosely pair-driven to highly scripted schedules. The iMentor advising program begins with a highly-structure high school program that transitions into more pair-driven. The evidence is mixed: five of the thirteen studies reported statistically significant improvements in academic outcomes such as GPA or credit accumulation for participants compared with the control group that received no pair-advising.

Comparison iMentor to other text-prompt programs: I examined five studies of text-prompt interventions. These programs are relatively brief—lasting one semester to a full academic year—and typically send 2–4 messages per month, covering content that closely aligns with iMentor's campaign themes. Across the studies, response rates were inconsistently reported but generally low, and the messages were mostly closed-ended. A notable difference is that, in the other programs, texts are sent directly by the institution with two-way texting and are accompanied by a formal follow-up process for unanswered queries. Automation of message delivery and response handling also varied. Empirically, none of the programs found a measurable impact on academic outcomes relative to the control that received no texts. However, one study found that students were most responsive to time-sensitive, administrative messages with clear outcomes and concrete next steps.

Empirical Analyses: The empirical analysis of iMentor College data from the 2024-25 academic year revealed several important patterns:

1. *Text-Prompt Engagement:* 47% of mentees responded to at least one campaign and only 2% opted out of receiving messages. On average, students responded to 1.5 campaigns with response rate declining over the academic year. Twenty percent of mentees responded to 3 or more campaigns.
2. *Survey Participation:* Survey response rates were low, with only 13% of mentees and 25% of mentors completing any survey. Among mentees, those who completed surveys were more likely to be female, in their second year of college, matched with a mentor during the academic year, and recipients of the Alice Griffin Scholarship. Mentors who filled any survey were more likely to be female, older in age (age 50 or above), held a master's degree, and were mentors of year 1 mentees. Both mentees and mentors who responded to surveys were more likely to be part of dyads where the mentee had responded to three or more text campaigns and the other member filled any survey.
3. *Mentor Connection:* Surveys proved unreliable for tracking mentor-mentee connection due to low response rates and inconsistent question framing. For 67% matched pairs,

there was no information on connection. Among pairs who responded to any survey, 80% connected in the past year.

4. *Text-Prompt and Mentor-Connection Matrix*: A significant portion of mentees (38%) neither responded to any campaign nor completed a survey. Among the mentees with data on either text-response and survey response, between 55% and 65% of mentees are either responded to both text-prompts and connected with their mentor or neither, suggesting that the activities are complements and students are less likely to engage with just one of them.
5. *Variation by College Year*: Engagement patterns differ by college year with second year mentees more likely to respond to text campaigns and first-year mentees more likely to connect with their mentors.
6. *Correlates of Engagement*: Higher text-prompt response rate and mentee-mentor connection was associated with demographic and program characteristics. Mentees who were female, recipients of the Alice Griffin Scholarship, or had missing FRPL data were more likely to respond to text-prompts or connect with mentors. Among mentors, those who were female, over age 50, and held a master's degree had higher rates of survey response and mentee-mentor connection.
7. *Association with Outcomes*: Among CUNY students, both text-prompt response rates and mentor connection were positively associated with cumulative GPA and credits earned. However, these associations should not be interpreted as causal due to the non-random nature of engagement.

Recommendations: Several distinctive features set iMentor College apart from comparable programs, opening avenues for future program improvements. First, studies should incorporate a genuine control condition—a group that receives no treatment—to differentiate “non-responders” from truly untreated participants. For example, a randomized controlled trial could compare three arms: (1) peer mentors, (2) community or professional mentors, and (3) a group that accesses all iMentor services except pair-mentoring, to examine the effect of the pair-mentors and the difference in having a peer vs professional mentor. When randomization is infeasible, quasi-experimental techniques (e.g., propensity-score matching) can approximate a true control. Second, reliance on surveys to monitor mentor-mentee connections proved problematic because response rates were low and the instruments varied. More reliable approaches include incentivized reporting/survey filling and standardizing questionnaire items to better track mentee-mentor connections. Third, the evaluation could capture finer-grained, short- and medium-term outcomes (e.g., FAFSA completion, registration timeliness) in addition to long-term metrics such as GPA and graduation, allowing a more nuanced picture of program impact. Fourth, improvements in data collection and record-keeping practices can further enhance learnings. For instance, for a small number of cases, the demographic and match-status were different across sources, participants who filled the surveys anonymously were hard to combine with other sources, and mentor match-status reflected the current state without indicating prior history of matches.

Acknowledgement: I want to thank SREE and iMentor for inviting me for the fellowship, especially Jenn Kush, Shanan Chappell, and Kallen Tsikalas. I would also like to

thank the various people at iMentor who helped me curate the datasets used and answered all my questions, including, Miguel Colon, Keti Banasiak, Parade Stone, Gloria Segovia, and Vinessa Grant.