



# Closing the Achievement Gap: An Investigation into the Efficacy of the Blugold Beginnings College Access Program

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## Background

Mentoring programs have grown steadily in number over the past few years, and currently more than 5,000 such programs serve approximately three million youth nationwide (National Mentoring Partnership, 2006). College access programs are one form of mentoring, and have been developed over the past 20 years to create an atmosphere in the classroom where students can become more familiar with what a college education entails (Klopott & Martinez, 2004; Krashen, 2005). College readiness is defined as possessing the skills to stay organized, understanding the course requirements needed to enter college, and maintaining a GPA above 3.0 to meet the requirements for being accepted (Conley, 2009).

The Blugold Beginnings College and Career Readiness Program works with local schools to provide a comprehensive college connection for 5th graders through high school seniors. When a student enters the program, they are assigned a mentor who provides them with tutoring and mentoring services. The mentor also walks them through the Blugold Beginnings college knowledge binder that guides them, step-by-step, through the processes involved in attaining a post-secondary education.

Some of the research used to develop the Elementary Blugold Beginnings College and Career Readiness Program include:

- Youth from families with few assets are likely to see college as too expensive, potentially inhibiting current aspirations and effort (Orfield, Losen, Wald, & Swanson, 2004).
- Students who are informed about the availability of financial aid report significantly higher expected grades, with girls reporting a significantly higher number of anticipated hours of studying (Dean & Oyserman, 2009).
- Parents with a higher education tend to be more involved in their child's education and are more likely to enroll their child in honors programs. On the other hand, things such as work schedules, resource limitations and living in underprivileged areas are barriers for lower socioeconomic parents (Hill & Taylor, 2004).
- Students with parents involved in their academic lives report striving for significantly higher academic achievement than students with less parental involvement, regardless of ethnicity or gender (Jeynes, 2005).
- Students with white parents are more likely to experience academic success than students with parents of other demographics (Lee & Bowen, 2006).

The purpose of the current research is to investigate whether students in the program significantly increase their knowledge about post-secondary education over the course of being in the Blugold Beginnings College and Career Readiness Program, and to assess whether this increased awareness coincides with increased feelings of comfort and confidence regarding higher education.

## Method

### Mentoring Sessions

Mentors meet independently with students twice a week after school. During this time, they assist their mentees with homework and spend approximately one half-hour discussing the contents in the Blugold Beginnings College and Career Readiness Binder. During this time, the mentor and mentee cover one of seventeen topics every other week (including study skills, organizational skills, becoming familiar with post-secondary education, and how to set goals). Mentees then complete a worksheet that encourages students to incorporate the skill for that week into their own lives.

### Instruments

The surveys consist of 17 multiple choice questions to gauge students' retention of key concepts from the content of the binder. One example of the multiple choice questions on the survey used to assess college knowledge includes:

"One source of getting money for college that you don't have to pay back is:"

- Asking your tuition to be waived
- Federal student loans
- Local scholarships
- Private loans from a bank

Students are also asked to respond to several Likert scale questions to assess changes in students' self-reported levels of comfort regarding post-secondary education. Examples of these items include:

"I can afford to get an education after college."

### Blugold Beginnings Elementary Participants

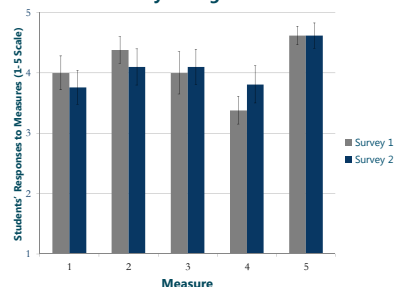
A total of 67 students are currently enrolled in the Blugold Beginnings College and Career Readiness Program, with 21 of the students completing both surveys. While all students from schools in the Eau Claire Area and outreach districts were invited to participate in the program upon the completion of a parental consent form, students who identify as low-income, first-generation, and minority were highly encouraged to participate.

### Weekly Binder Feedback

Every two weeks, students were given a survey to assess the section of the binder that they had gone through with their mentor. Students reported on a scale of 1 to 5 how they felt about their interactions with their mentors (e.g., "I felt comfortable talking with my mentor this week"), and whether they believed the information they learned would help them in the future (e.g., "This week's lesson will help me get to college").

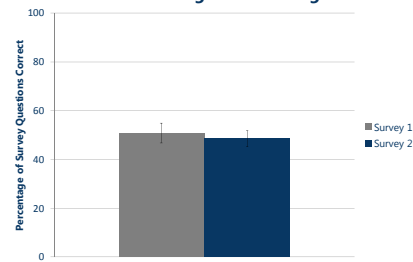
## Results

### Elementary Change in Attitudes



Among 5<sup>th</sup> grade students in the program ( $N = 21$ ), there was no statistically significant difference between students' responses on questions inquiring whether 1. They felt they had someone they could talk to about college, 2. Their reported certainty that they will obtain a post-secondary education, 3. Their self-reported level of comfort talking about college, 4. That they can afford an education after high school, or 5. That they are in charge of where they end up in the future (all  $p$ s > .05).

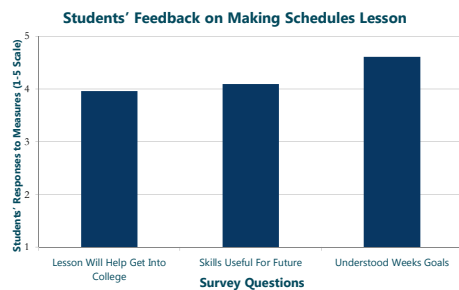
### Overall change in Knowledge



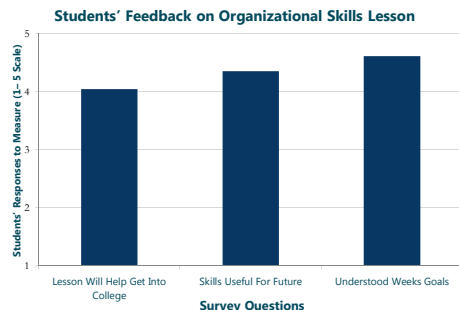
Among 5<sup>th</sup> grade students in the program ( $N = 21$ ), there were no statistically significant differences in retention of information pertaining to higher education between surveys taken at the beginning of the year ( $M = 50.76$ ,  $SD = 18.60$ ) and the midway surveys ( $M = 48.52$ ,  $SD = 15.00$ ,  $t(20) = 0.648$ ,  $p \geq .05$ ).

## Development

### Binder Feedback

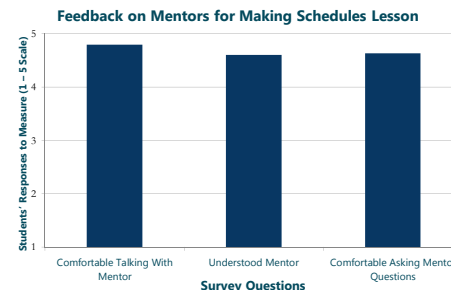


Among 5<sup>th</sup> grade students in the program ( $N = 59$ ), students reported their overall feeling of whether the lesson was helpful for getting into college ( $M = 3.96$ ), whether the skills would be useful in the future ( $M = 4.09$ ), and whether they understood the main goals of that weeks lesson ( $M = 4.63$ ).



Among 5<sup>th</sup> grade students in the program ( $N = 67$ ), students reported their overall feeling of whether the lesson was helpful for getting into college in the future ( $M = 4.04$ ), whether the skills would be useful in future ( $M = 4.35$ ), and whether they understood the main goals of that weeks lesson ( $M = 4.63$ ).

### Mentor Feedback



Among 5<sup>th</sup> grade students in the program ( $N = 59$ ), students reported their overall feeling of whether they felt comfortable talking to their mentor ( $M = 4.78$ ), whether they understood their mentor ( $M = 4.59$ ), and whether they felt comfortable asking their mentor questions ( $M = 4.64$ ).



Among 5<sup>th</sup> grade students in the program ( $N = 67$ ), students reported their overall feeling of whether they felt comfortable talking to their mentor ( $M = 4.72$ ), whether they understood their mentor ( $M = 4.64$ ), and whether they felt comfortable asking their mentor questions ( $M = 4.68$ ).

## Discussion

Researchers on this project failed to find overall significant results for the group of students who had taken both the pre-assessment and the midway assessment. These findings were reflected in both the students' retention of key concepts, and in their self-reported levels of comfort and confidence regarding post-secondary education.

Researchers conclude that the results found after surveying students in the elementary program were not in the anticipated direction, which merits the further development of programming materials using the feedback gathered from both mentors and mentees throughout the past academic year.

One limitation in this study is that students self-selected into participating in the program. The sample size of the elementary cohort also made it difficult to determine whether there were any significant changes in students' feelings towards higher education or their overall retention of content from the materials, regardless of the direction of this change. Another limitation was the inconsistent attendance of students to mentoring sessions, which made it difficult to determine the amount of content covered over each two-week period. Furthermore, many of the elementary mentors received less training than mentors working in the middle school and high school programs. Most of the elementary mentors are volunteers and not AmeriCorps members, and were therefore not required to attend 25 hours of training sessions.

To address the lack of significant findings and increase the effectiveness of the program, researchers will be further developing the program materials using feedback collected throughout the year, and creating a training specific to volunteers. One of these changes will include communicating more effectively to students how the skills they learn in the program will help them in the future.

Though the findings in this study were not significant, the Blugold Beginnings Elementary Program still serves as a means of recruiting students into the middle school program that has shown to have significant results. Since this program is staffed mostly by volunteers, the elementary program appears to still be a cost-effective recruitment technique for students' future participation in the program.

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