



Middle School Blugold Beginnings Program: An Assessment of Growth and Outcomes of Students Enrolled in the Program

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Background

Mentoring programs have grown steadily in number over the past few years with more than 5,000 such programs currently serving approximately three million youth (National Mentoring Partnership, 2006). Over the past 20 years, college access programs have been developed with the intent of creating an atmosphere which allows students to become more familiar with what a college education entails. These programs also inform students on how to stay on track throughout high school in order to get accepted into college (Klopoff & 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 middle school program, they are assigned a mentor who provides them with tutoring and mentoring services. The mentor 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 Middle School Blugold Beginnings College and Career Readiness Program includes:

- Parents of low-income, first generation, and minority students often lack a background in formal education, making it difficult for them to prepare their children for college within the home (Park, 2007).
 - 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).
 - Low-income families typically lack the economic resources necessary to pursue post-secondary education, a constraint that may impact students' expectations and behavior and cause low-income students to perform worse academically in middle and high school (Charles, Roseigno, & Torres, 2007).
 - Several recent reports suggest that most adults, parents, and students are uninformed or poorly informed about the costs of attending college and the availability of financial aid. Even families who report that they expect college attendance after graduation lack awareness and understanding about college prices and financial aid (Perna, 2006).
 - To help students overcome financial access barriers, schools have started adopting aspects of college culture within their daily functions (McClafferty et al., 2002).
 - Achievement is maximized when students feel competent about their abilities, have personal goals to achieve, feel they have control over successes and failures, and are motivated intrinsically to learn (Eccles & Wigfield, 1985; Wentzel, 1991).
- Since its inception, Blugold Beginnings Middle School Program has been preparing 6th through 8th graders for future collegiate education. 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 met independently with students twice a week during study halls and resource hours; during this time, they assisted their mentees with homework and spent approximately one half-hour discussing the contents in the Blugold Beginnings College and Career Readiness Binder. The mentor and mentee covered one of twenty-seven topics per week (including study skills, test taking tips, building a resume, organizational skills, requirements for post-secondary education, and standardized tests). Mentees then completed a worksheet that encouraged students to incorporate the skill for that week into their own lives.

Instruments

The "college knowledge" surveys consisted of twenty-seven multiple choice questions to gauge students' retention of key concepts from the content of the binder. Two examples of the multiple-choice questions on the survey used to assess college knowledge included:

• "When setting a goal, it is important to first make sure the goal is:"

- Specific
- Ambitious
- Going to take a lot of time
- Broad

• "The end of filling out the FAFSA online form is:"

- \$20
- \$59
- \$45
- \$0

Students were 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 included:

- "I'm sure that I will complete an education program after high school."
- "I can afford to continue my education after high school."
- "My parents support me continuing my education after high school."

Control Pilot

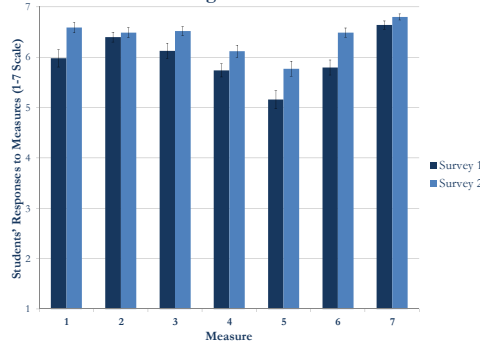
Students from the Eau Claire Area were recruited to establish a control comparison. A mailing of 600 recruitment letters were sent out to students not enrolled in the program, and students who returned consent forms were matched to students in the Blugold Beginnings Program based on ethnicity, socio-economic status, first-generation status, GPA, grade-level, and gender.

Blugold Beginnings Participants

A total of 113 middle school students currently enrolled in the Blugold Beginnings College and Career Readiness Program were used in this research. The inclusion criteria was that the students must have completed the "college knowledge" pre-assessment and midyear assessment.

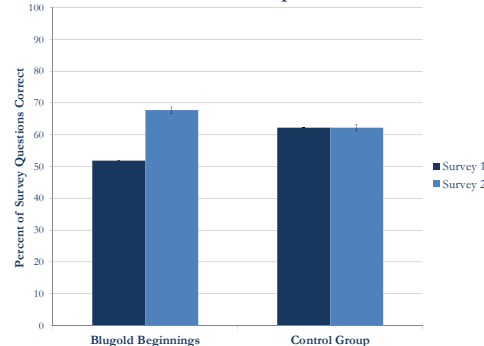
Results

Middle School Change in Attitudes



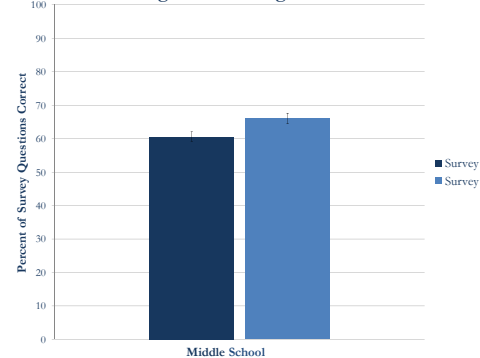
Among middle school students in the program (N = 113), students reported higher levels of 1 They had someone they could talk to about college (M=5.98, SD=1.81) to the midyear survey (M=6.59, SD=1.05), t(112)=-3.54 p=.001; 3 Their self-reported level of comfort talking about college from the first survey (M=6.13, SD=1.56) to the midyear survey (M=6.52, SD=0.93), t(112)=-3.03 p=.003; 4 That they can be successful in college from the first survey (M=5.74, SD=1.35) to the midyear survey (M=6.12, SD=1.25), t(112)=-2.88 p=.005; 5 That they can afford an education after high school from the first survey (M=5.16, SD=1.88) to the midyear survey (M=5.77, SD=1.64), t(112)=-3.39 p=.001; and 6 That they know what they need to do to get into a post-secondary program from the first survey (M=5.80, SD=1.63) to the midyear survey (M=6.49, SD=.96), t(112)=4.31 p<.001. However, students in the program did not report significantly higher levels of 2 That they were certain they will get an education after high school, or 7 That they feel in charge over where they end up in the future (p > .05).

Middle School Control Comparison



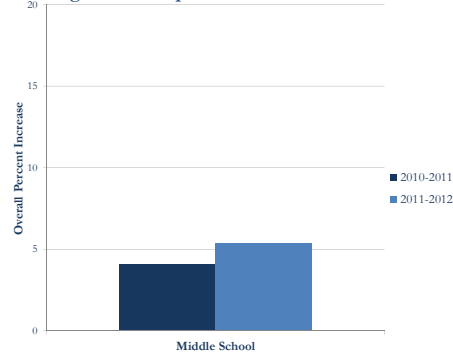
Students in the Blugold Beginnings cohort were matched to students in the control group on factors including socioeconomic status, first-generation status, ethnicity, gender, and grade level. Among students in the Blugold Beginnings cohort (N = 114), there was a statistically significant difference between students beginning of the year survey (M = .52, SD = .14) and midyear survey (M=.68, SD = .11), t(13) = -3.37 p=.002. Students in the Control group (N=14) however, did not change significantly from the first survey (M=.62, SD=.16) to the midyear survey (M=.62, SD=.21), t(13)=.000 p>.05.

Overall Change in Knowledge



Middle school students participating in the program (N=113) showed significant improvement in knowledge of post-secondary requirements, the application process, financial literacy, and knowledge of skills associated with academic success from the beginning of the year survey (M=60.57, SD=15.31) and the midyear survey (M=65.92, SD=16.58), t(112)=-4.31 p<.001.

Program Development



Over the past two years, the Blugold Beginnings program has been steadily improving by increasing the use of evidence-based practices and assessing programming outcomes to target areas within the program that could be improved. The above graph shows the average increase in survey scores from the previous academic year (2010-2011) to the current year (2011-2012). The average increase between beginning of the year survey scores for the previous year was 4.1%, while the average increase from the beginning of the current year to midyear surveys is 5.55%.

Discussion

The overall findings suggested that students in Middle School Blugold Beginnings College and Career Readiness Program tend to report higher levels of comfort and confidence regarding their ability to obtain a post-secondary education in the future, that they know the steps required to get there, and that they have someone they can talk to about post-secondary education.

Two areas where students did not show significant improvement were their self-reported levels of confidence that they would continue their education and get a degree after high school, and how much control they felt in determining where they will end up in the future.

Students in the middle school program also tend to significantly increase in their overall knowledge of college requirements, financial literacy, and the application process for entering a post-secondary program after having participated in the Blugold Beginnings College and Career Readiness Program.

After controlling for students' socioeconomic status, first-generation status, ethnicity, gender, and grade level, students in the program gained significantly more knowledge about post-secondary education than students in the control group did in their daily lives. This suggests that the Blugold Beginnings program is indeed having the desired impact on students and effectively communicating the key concepts through the use of the program materials.

One limitation in this study is that students self-selected into participating in the program and into the control group. Another limitation was that students started the program reporting relatively high levels of confidence on some of the attitudes subscales. This created a low ceiling for changes in responses from the first survey to the midyear survey.

Researchers on this project plan to implement a larger control comparison to continue the investigation of the long-term impact of this program, and will continue to follow students through high school graduation to determine whether individuals participating in the Blugold Beginnings College and Career Readiness Program are more likely to attend and complete post-secondary education programs.

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Acknowledgements

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