Examining College Student Engagement with a Peer Support App: Implications for Student Wellbeing

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College Student Mental Health & Academic Challenges

- College students are experiencing high rates of mental health, academic, and social challenges (Healthy Minds, 2020; Son et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2020; Lee et al., 2021).
- 60% of college students meet criteria for at least one mental health challenge (Lipson et al., 2022).
- 40% of college students dropout of college without finishing their degree; first-generational students have a 23.5% higher chance of dropping out and Black students have a 33.8% higher chance of dropping out (Hanson, 2022).
- Unfortunately, many students do not receive needed support from their university due to logistical and attitudinal barriers.

Navigating University Resources

Finding the right resource is challenging…
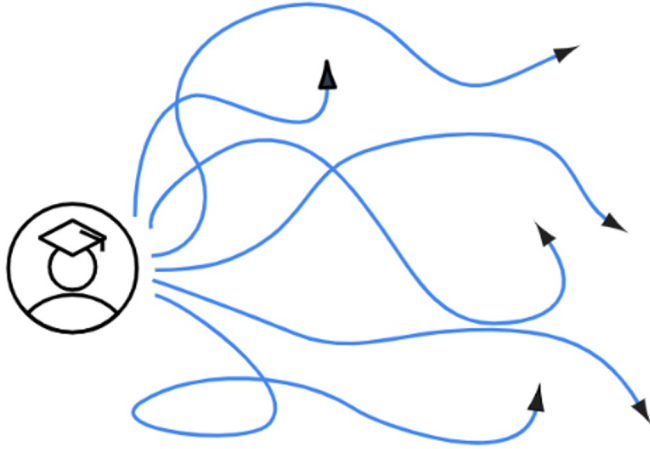
→ Office of Global Programs
→ Center for Academic Excellence
→ Subject Tutoring Program
→ Career Services & Internships
→ Student Success Fellowships
→ University Health Services
→ Counseling Center
→ Office of National and International Fellowships
→ Student Equity, Access, and Success (SEAS)
→ Asian American Resource Office
→ Student Employment
→ University Advising Center
→ Student Success Center
→ Financial Counseling Staff
→ Career Resource Library
→ Office of Research and Sponsored Programs (ORSP)
→ Office of Student Activities
→ Fitness & Wellness
→ Office of Urban and Off-Campus Support Services

Barriers for Marginalized Students

Unequal access to school resources and preparation (Mickelson et al., 2008)

Implicit and explicit discrimination (Hope et al., 2015)

Financial, household, and/or childcare responsibilities (Engle & Tinto, 2008)

The "hidden curriculum" (Stanton-Salazar, 2011; Yee, 2016)

Sense of alienation & lack of belonging in academic settings (Stebleton et al., 2014; Yee, 2016).

Lower college-related self-efficacy (Ramos-Sánchez & Nichols, 2007; Wang & Castañeda-Sound, 2008)

Higher rates of anxiety & stress (Noel et al., 2021; Stebleton et al., 2014)

Negative beliefs about help-seeking & lower rates of service utilization (Stanton-Salazar, 2011; Yee, 2016)

Peer Support & Online Tools Can Help Fill the Gap!

Peer Support:

- Normalize the challenges around transitioning to college (Hagler et al., 2021).
- Help students identify and access campus resources, staff, and faculty (Hynes, 2015).
- Increases feelings of university connectedness (Wilson & Gore, 2013; Werntz et al., 2022).

Online Tools:

- Accessible and scalable way to connect students to academic and mental health resources.
- Online programs are often more engaging and effective when they are paired with human support (supportive accountability) (Mohr et al., 2011; Werntz et al., 2023).

MentorPRO

- Peer mentoring and student success mobile application for college students

MentorPRO Pilot Study

Check for updates
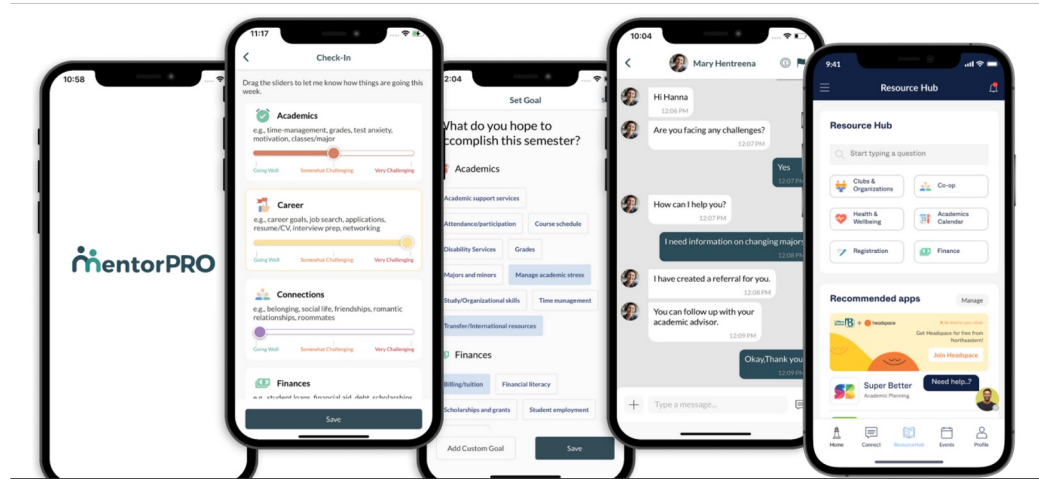
Implementation of a Technology-Enhanced Peer Mentor Referral System for First-Year University Students

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- First year students at a large private university in the northeastern United States were paired with a peer mentor and were enrolled in MentorPRO during the 2021-2022 academic year
- 92% of incoming students used MentorPRO with less than 5% attrition
- Higher engagement with MentorPRO was associated with stronger GPA, greater academic self-efficacy, and greater overall well-being at the end of students' first semester (Werntz et al., under review)

Current Study
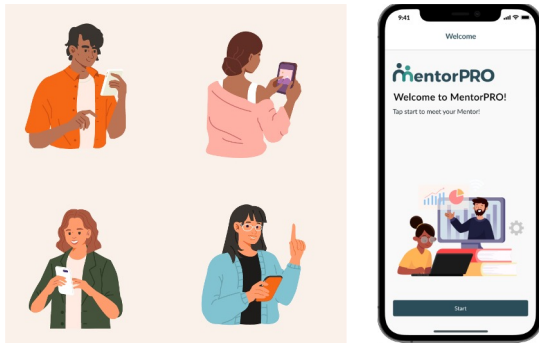
Aims:

- Understand whether engagement with MentorPRO differs among racial groups.
- Understand whether engagement with MentorPRO differs based on first-generation or international student status.
- Explore whether engagement with MentorPRO is associated with students' end of semester GPA.

Methods:

- First and second-year university students were paired with a trained, paid peer-mentor as part of an existing university mentoring program and enrolled in MentorPRO.
- We examined students' engagement with the app during Fall of 2022. Engagement was defined by:
  - Number of "Check-Ins" (students could check in every 24 hours) and number of messages students sent to their peer mentor.

Results

Demographics
- 6,270 students (M_{age}=18.9 years, 62.5% female, 53.1% non-White) used MentorPRO to Check-In (M = 6.70) or message their mentor (M = 6.49) during Fall of 2022.

App Engagement by Race/Ethnicity
- Kruskal-Wallis tests revealed that median Check-Ins ($X^2[4]$ = 11.78, p < .05) and median number of messages sent ($X^2[4]$ = 41.18, p < .001) significantly differed between racial groups.
- Significant differences were found between the number of Check-Ins among White (Mdn = 4) and Asian (Mdn = 5; p < .05) students.
- The number of messages sent by multiracial students (Mdn = 1) differed from Hispanic (Mdn = 2; p < .05), Asian (Mdn = 2; p < .01), and Black students (Mdn = 2; p < .05).
- The number of messages sent by White students (Mdn = 1) differed from Hispanic (Mdn = 2, p <.01), Asian (Mdn = 2, p <.001), and Black students (Mdn = 2, p < .01).

First-Generation and International Student Engagement
- First-generation students sent significantly more messages than continuing generation students (p <.001).
- International students had a significantly higher number of Check-Ins (p <.01) and number of messages sent to their peer mentors than non-international students (p <.001).

App Engagement & GPA
- The number of Check-Ins was positively correlated with students' end of semester GPA ($r(6242)$ = .06, p < .001).

Discussion
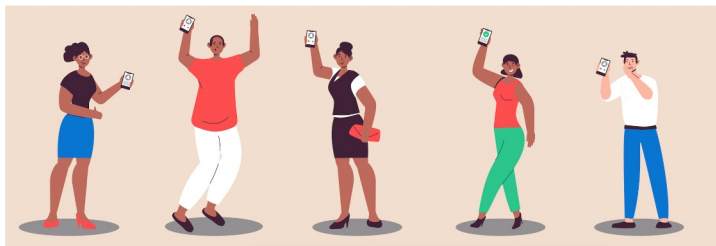
Conclusions:

- MentorPRO may be an acceptable resource for traditionally underserved students.
- Greater engagement with MentorPRO was associated with higher GPA and previous work has shown an association between increased MentorPRO use and academic performance, feelings of belonging in the university community, academic self-efficacy, and well-being.
- MentorPRO has the potential to increase the accessibility of academic and mental health resources for underserved students and reduce disparities in students' service utilization.

Limitations and Future Directions:

- We did not conduct a randomized controlled trial.
- We did not test whether students use of MentorPRO was associated with increased academic service-utilization.
- We only examined a subset of MentorPRO students who had used the app to Check-In or message their mentor.
- We will conduct RCTs to test the effects of MentorPRO on students' academic and mental health outcomes and use of mental health apps, and will conduct focus groups with marginalized students to better understand how we can improve MentorPRO to best meet students' needs

Thank You!

Please feel free to email me with any questions or comments!
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