Can I Help With That? Understanding First-Year College Students' Goal Setting within a Peer Mentoring App

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Introduction

- College students are experiencing high rates of mental health and academic challenges, and often face barriers to accessing support on college campuses (Cohen et al., 2020; Eisenberg et al., 2012; Lipson et al., 2022).
- Students from marginalized backgrounds experience greater difficulty seeking help and navigating university resources, resulting in higher rates of attrition and poorer mental health and academic outcomes (Hagler et al., 2021).
- While peer mentoring programs can help bridge this support gap, they can be difficult to scale and are often not goal-focused, which may limit their effectiveness (Christensen et al., 2020).
- Leveraging technology can enable peer mentors to provide targeted, timely support at scale and facilitate goal-setting among mentee-mentor pairs, potentially enhancing these programs' effectiveness (Lyons et al., 2019).
- Additionally, technology-enhanced interventions that combine human support and accountability for achieving goals may be more effective than self-guided approaches (Mohr et al., 2011; Werntz et al., 2023).
- To date, no study has examined the effects of goal-setting within a college peer mentoring application, highlighting the need for further research.

Methods

- Developed MentorPRO, a novel online mentoring platform that connects college students with paid, trained peer mentors, which includes several features:
  - Mentees can message their mentors
  - Rate and track top challenges
  - Access university resources
  - Select and track goals across five categories (academics, career, health & well-being, connections, and finances) or create their own

Current Study

- Fall 2022, all first-year undergraduates at a university were paired with a peer mentor and given access to MentorPRO
- Assessed if goal-setting predicts students' MentorPRO usage, GPA, sense of belonging, academic self-efficacy, and well-being and explored demographic differences between students who set goals and those who did not.
- Data was collected through MentorPRO surveys and academic records. OLS regressions used to test the hypothesis that goal-setting is significantly associated with students' app usage, GPA, and well-being outcomes.

Setting goals within a peer mentoring app **predicts college students' well-being** and **confidence in being a successful student**.

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Results

- 62.3% (n = 3,601) of MentorPRO users set at least one goal and our analysis of messaging data showed that about 9% of students explicitly talked about goals with their mentor.
- Female and first-generation students were more likely to set goals than male or continuing generation students, $p < 0.05$.
- After controlling for demographic factors, **students who set goals had significantly greater app engagement (# of check-ins, # of messages), higher first-semester GPA, and life satisfaction compared to students who did not set goals,** $p < 0.05$.
- After also controlling for app usage, goal-setting was significantly associated with students' academic self-efficacy and life satisfaction, $p < 0.05$.

Top Goals

Goal Selected	Goal Category
Join clubs/orgs	Connections
Plan course schedule	Academics
Build time management skills	Academics
Prepare for and find an internship	Career
Improve grades	Academics
Improve study/organization skills	Academics
Learn about internships	Career
Choose major/minor	Academics
Improve well-being	Health & Well-being
Build professional network	Career
Manage stress	Academics
Improve health and fitness	Health & Well-being

Discussion

- Aided by technology and a supportive relationship, goal-setting can serve as a brief, scalable intervention that promotes positive academic outcomes, greater self-efficacy, and greater well-being.
- The goal feature was frequently used by a diverse sample of first-year college students, indicating its potential acceptability and utility within the context of supportive mentoring relationships.
- This feature not only provides mentors with information about students' priorities and current challenges, but also helps colleges allocate resources to best support students' well-being and success.
- Online mentoring platforms could reduce disparities in access to support and empower students to reach their goals.
- In future work, researchers could conduct an RCT to better understand the effects of online goal-setting on college students' academic performance and well-being.

References available upon request.