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How a Community Engagement Model of Near-Peer Counseling Impacts Student Mentors' College Outcomes

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Abstract

This study examines how a community engagement model of near-peer counseling impacts counselors' own college success as underrepresented students in higher education, here defined as one-year persistence in college. Near-peer mentors participated in a program provided by College Access: Research and Action (CARA), which trains young people to support peers in their home communities at New York City public high schools and City University of New York (CUNY) 2-year colleges through critical college application, enrollment, and retention milestones. Aggregated across 4 years of data, our results indicate CARA near-peer counselors are nearly twice as likely to persist in college ($p < .001$) as peers with similar demographic and academic characteristics not participating in CARA. Findings are replicated for students of color (2.09 times higher, $p < .001$) and economically disadvantaged students (1.78 times higher, $p = .003$). Implications for peer mentor program development through public university–community partnerships are discussed.

Keywords: peer mentoring, college success, social capital, cultural capital, community engagement

In fall 2019, roughly 20 million students enrolled in the postsecondary system (NCES, 2019a), yet only 59.7% of those at 4-year colleges (NCES, 2019b) and 31.6% of those at 2-year colleges (NCES, 2019c) graduated "on time" (defined as up to 150% of the normal time to completion). There are also notable racial and socioeconomic disparities in degree attainment. By age 25, 22.5% percent of African Americans and 15.5% of Latinos in the United States have earned a bachelor's degree or higher, compared to 36.2% of Whites and 53.9% of Asian Americans (Ryan & Bauman, 2016). There are similar income-based disparities in degree attainment: By age 24, only 13% of people from low-income backgrounds have earned a bachelor's degree, compared to 62% of their high-income peers (Cahalan et al., 2019). Given the relationship between degree attainment, economic well-being (Abel & Deitz, 2014), and psychosocial adjustment (Hout, 2012), it is crucial that program and policy interventions address these attainment gaps by supporting students of color and economically disadvantaged students through the path to degree attainment.

In the current study, we quantitatively track the impact of a college access and success program housed at the City University of New York (CUNY), focused on training largely low-income first-generation college students of color in a community engagement experience in which they serve as near-peer college counselors (mentors) to students from similar backgrounds in New York City public high schools or CUNY 2-year colleges. This near-peer mentorship program, developed by College Access: Research and Action (CARA), honors the wisdom, experience, and impact of near-peer mentors, and functions as a culturally responsive model of community–campus civic engagement by, and for, underrepresented students pursuing public higher

education in New York City. The analysis we present in this article focuses on the impact of a community engagement model of near-peer mentoring on mentors' own college outcomes.

Social and Cultural Capital in Higher Education

One explanation for the low rates of degree attainment are disparities in access to people and opportunities that build students' social and cultural capital, particularly within institutions that uphold dominant cultural norms, such as schools (Stanton-Salazar, 1997). Social capital theory (Bourdieu, 1986) posits that people have varying levels of social capital stemming from their access to resources (both actual and potential) that are linked to membership in a group. It is well known that students of privilege enjoy significant support in their college application process, ranging from tutoring to personal essay coaches. Some also enjoy legacy status or, as more recently demonstrated, parents donating substantially to colleges in exchange for admittance (Thelin, 2019).

Cultural capital has similarly been found to contribute to inequalities in access to higher education. The term "cultural capital" refers to individuals' skills, knowledge, and competencies acquired from their environment (e.g., parents, schools) that promote education and social mobility (Bourdieu, 1984; Lareau & Weininger, 2003), thus providing advantages to those who possess this resource. Cultural capital has been found to contribute to both first-generation and non-first-generation students' enrollment in 4-year colleges (Dumais & Ward, 2010) and first-to-second-year persistence of all college students (Wells, 2008a).

Social and cultural capital are shared resources in some families and not in others, and lower levels of these forms of privilege can impede college success. Students with lower social and cultural capital may struggle with tasks related to the application or enrollment process or may encounter obstacles that they cannot navigate alone on the path to college graduation. We know that first-generation students, students of color, students from poverty, and immigrant youth have fewer college-going supports within their families than more privileged peers, and are therefore more reliant on their schools to provide college-going resources (Farmer-Hinton, 2008). Within marginalized communities, Yosso (2005) argued, forms of cultural capital are nurtured that promote social mobility, such as aspirational capital (the capacity to maintain optimism and motivation in the face of real and perceived barriers), navigational capital (skills of moving through and coping with social institutions), and resistant capital (the attitudes developed through oppositional behavior to challenge inequality). Therefore, social interventions aimed at increasing the mobility of underrepresented students must draw on the resources of communities to address gaps in accessing dominant cultural and social capital within institutions.

Benefits of Mentoring

Mentoring is one way to share social and cultural capital to support the development of skills related to postsecondary access and success. Within schools, adults who have mentoring relationships with underrepresented students are theorized by Stanton-Salazar (1997) as institutional agents: adults who transmit, or negotiate the transmission of, specific forms of cultural and social capital called institutional support. Institutional support includes the ways institutional agents influence the students they have relationships with, such as through role modeling, providing guidance and advice, and helping students gain access to societal gatekeepers. Institutional agents also help students understand specialized funds of knowledge, such as knowledge about college choices, majors, and financial aid. These supports, in turn, enable underrepresented young people to successfully navigate mainstream spheres and the stresses of this navigation process in ways that advance their economic and political position (Stanton-Salazar, 1997).

Nonparental adult mentoring of young people has become a widespread social intervention in the United States, and research has documented the positive effects of mentoring relationships for youth, particularly when relationship development is a key component of the program model (Rhodes & DuBois, 2008). Research has also looked more specifically at the effect of mentor and mentee social or racial background on mentee outcomes, with mixed results. In a study with a small sample and correlational design, Thompson et al. (2013) found that adolescents (aged 13–18) from lower income families in a school-based mentoring program benefited more than peers from

higher income families. However, in a meta-analysis of adult–youth mentoring program effects reported across 70 outcome studies, Raposa et al. (2019) found overall modest effects for the effectiveness of mentoring programs, but no effects as a function of youth race/ethnicity and adult mentor race/ethnicity.

Although adult–youth mentoring remains the most common program model and area of research inquiry, an increasingly popular approach is near-peer mentoring, which provides students with the opportunity to be "mentored while mentoring" (Anderson et al., 2015, p. 117). Near-peer mentors are typically slightly older students who are matched with younger students and serve as mentors for these students. Near-peer mentors also receive mentoring from adult professionals in the form of training, supervision, and professional development. In this way, near-peer mentoring allows students to experience the benefits of being mentored as well as the benefits of mentoring. Near-peer mentoring within marginalized communities has the additional benefit of enabling intergenerational transmission of forms of capital developed in opposition to social and institutional norms (Stanton-Salazar, 1997; Yosso, 2005). Such capital may be especially valuable in the context of student community engagement models of mentoring in educational settings, where older students supporting younger students while simultaneously being mentored themselves by community role models ensures knowledge and skills necessary for navigating the processes of social mobility flow through the institutions in ways that ensure students have access to these resources.

Enhancement of Learning

As near-peer mentors work closely with mentees and support them in developing necessary skills, one of the indirect benefits they experience is an enhancement of their knowledge regarding a topic. Mentors often report that the experience of mentoring provided them with an opportunity to further develop their knowledge and practice the skills they are teaching (Dennison, 2010; Eby & Lockwood, 2005; Naeger et al., 2013). The mentoring process may also encourage mentors to learn material at a deeper level (Gilles & Wilson, 2004) and foster the development of problem-solving skills (Singh et al., 2014). Thus, near-peer mentoring may be effective in supporting both mentors and mentees in succeeding academically.

Emotional Benefits

In addition to academic benefits, peer mentors also experience emotional benefits. For example, near-peer mentors in medical school settings reported that mentoring fostered their sense of confidence and responsibility (Dennison, 2010; Singh et al., 2014). This effect is widespread: A nationally representative study of high school students reported that students who participated in service activities, regardless of the type of activity, showed 15% fewer behavioral problems compared to peers who did not participate in service activities (Schmidt et al., 2007). Peer mentors also report they experience emotional rewards associated with helping others (Dennison, 2010) and find the experience of mentoring personally gratifying (Eby & Lockwood, 2005). The emotional benefits of near-peer mentoring may be attributed to the development of close, personal relationships (Eby & Lockwood, 2005) that, in turn, foster the development of social–emotional skills that positively contribute to students' academic outcomes (Oscar & Ross, 2016).

Professional Development

The process of mentoring is in itself a form of professional development, as mentoring requires familiarity with a topic as well as an understanding of the larger context of one's work (Gilles & Wilson, 2004), both of which require mentors to reflect on their knowledge and role responsibilities. As a result, mentors often report that the experience of mentoring contributes to their own professional development. Given that mentors often work with younger or less experienced mentees, they take on a leadership role within this relationship. This role contributes to mentors' reports of increases in their confidence in their leadership ability as well as new opportunities for leadership within and outside the organization (Gilles & Wilson, 2004). Acting as a mentor may also help mentors hone existing skills by providing opportunities to practice these skills. For example, near-peer mentors report improvement in their teaching skills resulting from their role as mentors (Naeger et al., 2013; Singh et al., 2014).

Community Engagement

Another approach to supporting students on the path to degree completion is involvement in community engagement activities through campus–community partnerships,

"based on the belief that engagement with the community, a practice that had long been viewed as a supplement to the academy's core work, flourishes and succeeds when it is integrated into the academic fabric of the institution" (Furco, 2010, p. 380). These campus–community engagements may take the form of, for example, community-based learning through internships, academic service-learning, and community-based or participatory action research (Furco, 2010).

Participation in community engagement activities in academic settings has been demonstrated to benefit students' academic development such that students enrolled in a service-learning course perform better on assessments of learning than peers enrolled in the same course without a service-learning component (Strage, 2000). The academic benefits of community engagement may extend beyond courses with service-learning embedded: Participation in civic activities such as community service positively influenced students' grades, writing skills, and critical thinking skills (Vogelgesang & Astin, 2000). In addition to academic development, community engagement plays an important role in students' psychosocial development. Zeldin (2004) summarized the research on civic engagement and antisocial behavior, which has found that more civically engaged youth are less likely to display violent or delinquent behaviors. Students who participate in community service and/or service-learning courses also demonstrate enhanced interpersonal skills, leadership ability, and civic self-efficacy (Vogelgesang & Astin, 2000). A meta-analysis of 62 studies examining service-learning effects on student outcomes confirms the positive impact of this model on academic performance and social domains such as attitudes toward self, attitudes toward school and learning, civic engagement, and social skills (Celio et al., 2011). The authors' analysis further indicates that incorporating specific service-learning program practices, such as voice and community involvement, increases the magnitude of effects on student outcomes.

The Current Study

A growing body of literature highlights the positive contributions of community-engaged mentoring for social–emotional, cognitive, and identity development in mentees (for a review, see Rhodes et al., 2006). Less work, however, examines how mentoring influences mentors' own development, especially in the case of near-peer mentoring where the mentor is a young adult. The current study aims to address this gap by examining the impact of serving as a near-peer mentor on college students' academic development. Specifically, we examine the effect of participating in a near-peer community engagement counseling program delivered by College Access: Research and Action (CARA) that (1) provides college students with culturally responsive training to build their college knowledge, counseling competencies, and higher order college readiness skills and (2) creates the opportunity to transmit this social and cultural capital through working with the high school seniors, first-year community college students, and school staff in the underserved communities where they attended high school or currently attend college.

We consider near-peer mentoring to be an opportunity for community engagement, "giving back" to one's community, as well as an opportunity to strengthen one's academic skills and acquire university-specific cultural knowledge (Lareau, 2015). Our hypothesis is that near-peer counselors trained and supported by CARA, who are largely underrepresented students themselves, experience benefits through receiving formal college counseling training and serving as near-peer mentors that make them more college ready, particularly in terms of building the capital necessary to successfully navigate the college environment.

Our study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. How does serving as a near-peer counselor through CARA's College Bridge or College Allies program impact mentors' own college success outcomes at CUNY as compared to propensity-matched comparison groups of students?
2. In what ways do these effects differ for subgroups of students who are at higher risk for poor college outcomes, specifically Black and Latino/a students and low-income students?

Near-Peer Mentoring: CARA's Community Engagement Model

CARA is an organization based at the City University of New York (CUNY) Graduate Center that conducts programs, engages

in research, and advocates for policies to ensure equitable postsecondary access and success in New York City. CARA's peer leadership program model supports near-peer counselors, who are predominantly low-income first-generation college students of color, to work within their communities in New York City public high schools or on campuses at CUNY 2-year colleges to bolster the college access and success of a student population that also consists primarily of low-income first-generation college students of color.

CARA provides near-peer counselors with over 70 hours of training where they develop the skills and knowledge to support students through critical application, enrollment, and retention milestones. Near-peer counselors work directly with students to provide college counseling to develop postsecondary navigation skills and ensure students enroll in college and integrate into their campus. Near-peer counselors are also positioned to serve as credible messengers who deliver resources most adults in the school or university communities where they work cannot provide, such as sharing students' background characteristics in terms of race/ethnicity, social class, or native language; being able to communicate in ways that are familiar to young people (i.e., social media, text message); and having up-to-date information twinned with knowledge of how to navigate college application, transition, and enrollment through their firsthand experience of doing so as current college students (Bloom & Chajet, 2020).

CARA's College Bridge program specifically addresses the gap in college guidance by training current college students, called Bridge Coaches, to support high school students, particularly during their senior year and the summer before they matriculate into college. Each participating high school embeds a Bridge Coach, usually an alumnus of their school, into their college office under the supervision of the college counselor. With comprehensive training, Bridge Coaches develop a range of skills and content knowledge that they then use, alongside their unique near-to-peer perspective, to provide 400 hours of individualized support to students over the course of their senior year and the summer before college.

CARA's College Allies program specifically addresses college retention by training college students to support their peers through the obstacles to graduation. CARA provides Peer Leaders training where they develop the skills and knowledge to support students through critical retention tasks (such as financial aid renewal), help them to develop campus navigation skills, and ensure that they integrate into their campus community. Peer Leaders provide over 320 hours of one-on-one support to students over the course of the academic year, in addition to working in partnership with campus-based staff to establish the structures and culture needed to make a peer-to-peer community engagement program effective and sustainable.

Institutional Context

CUNY is the primary institutional context for our study, as the near-peer counselors included in our sample are current CUNY 2-year or 4-year college students. CUNY is also the most common postsecondary destination for the high school students served by College Bridge near-peer counselors (78% attended an NYC public high school; CUNY Office of Institutional Research and Assessment, 2016), and all of the students served by College Allies near-peer counselors are current 2-year CUNY college students.

CUNY is a public university comprising 24 colleges and graduate schools spanning New York City's five boroughs: Manhattan, Queens, Brooklyn, Staten Island, and the Bronx. It is the largest urban university in the United States, enrolling over 200,000 undergraduates each year. CUNY's mission centers on being responsive to the needs of its urban setting and promoting upward mobility of its diverse population of students. More than 40% of CUNY undergraduates are born outside the United States (with family heritage linked to over 205 countries), 44% are first-generation Americans, 44.8% are first generation in college, 31.9% identify as Latino/a, and 26% are Black (CUNY Office of Institutional Research and Assessment, 2019).

CUNY reflects the national landscape of higher education institutions that serve the "new majority" of students who are first generation in college, low income, and/or students of color. At the CUNY 4-year colleges, the one-year retention rate is 86.9%, and the 6-year completion rate averages 54.8% (CUNY Office of Institutional Research and Assessment, 2016), with approximate national figures showing an 83% one-year retention rate at 4-year public institutions

(National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2018) and a 59% 6-year completion rate (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). At the 2-year colleges, the one-year retention rate is 66%, and the 3-year completion rate averages 17.7% (CUNY Office of Institutional Research and Assessment, 2016), whereas national figures show a 62% one-year retention rate at 2-year public institutions (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2018) and a 29% 3-year completion rate (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017).

Method

Data Source

Administrative records from CUNY were the data source for our study. To protect confidential student data, only staff in the CUNY Office of Research, Evaluation, and Program Support (REPS) had access to data with student identifiers present. For purposes of the study, REPS assigned a study identification number to each student in the intervention and comparison groups, and only REPS and CARA researchers had access to the list that linked study identification numbers, student names, and university student identification numbers. REPS used students' identifying information to match students with their academic records in a university-wide database maintained by the CUNY Office of Research and Assessment. Student identifying information was removed from the data sets CARA research staff managed for the purposes of analysis. Prior to commencing data collection procedures, CUNY institutional review board (IRB) approval for conducting research with human subjects was obtained.

Our study includes four waves of administrative data, following intervention and comparison groups in the 2014–2015, 2015–2016, 2016–2017, and 2017–2018 academic years. All students who enrolled at CUNY colleges and participated in CARA's College Bridge or College Allies programs as near-peer counselors were eligible to participate in the study. The intervention group was therefore composed of CUNY college students who were trained and conducted community engagement as near-peer counselors at a CUNY 2-year college or at their NYC alumni public high school between 2014–2015 and 2017–2018. All members of the intervention groups (mentors) consented to participate. However, not all participants' identifying information (on average, 10% across all waves of data) was successfully matched to their CUNY academic record, and therefore these consenting intervention participants do not appear in the study sample.

Measures

One-Year Persistence

Students were considered as persisting if they were enrolled at any CUNY college during two consecutive fall semesters and had not yet earned a degree. One-year persistence was a binary variable indicating whether a student persisted (1) or did not (0).

Covariates

Students' self-reported gender, race/ethnicity, and age at point of entry into CUNY were included as covariates. Socioeconomic status was measured as a binary variable indicating Pell/TAP/APTS eligibility (1) and not eligible for Pell/TAP/APTS (0). Variables representing the students' term of entry into CUNY, college of enrollment, degree pursued, participation in SEEK/CD/ASAP (higher education opportunity programs), cumulative credits earned prior to the start of the intervention, the College Admission Average (a standardized high school GPA), and initial remedial status upon entry to CUNY were also drawn from the administrative data and used as covariates. Covariates were selected to account for student-level sociodemographic characteristics and academic achievement prior to community engagement as a near-peer mentor.

Analytic Method

Propensity Score Matching (PSM)

The comparison group was determined using quasi-experimental PSM methods and consisted of CUNY students who shared background characteristics similar to those of the intervention group but did not participate in the intervention through training and working as near-peer counselors in the CARA College Bridge or College Allies programs. Student-level characteristics were used in the PSM procedure to estimate a propensity score for each case that represented students' probability of one-year persistence. Specifically, the following covariates were used to estimate propensity scores for both students who participated in CARA and those who did not: gender, race/ethnicity, term of entry into CUNY, college

of enrollment, degree pursued, participation in SEEK/CD/ASAP, age at point of entry into CUNY, socioeconomic status (as indicated by Pell/TAP/APTS eligibility), cumulative credits earned prior to the start of the intervention, the College Admission Average (a standardized high school GPA), and initial remedial status upon entry to CUNY.

Next, we simulated a natural experiment by individually matching CARA-trained near-peer counselors to six students from the pool of nonparticipating students based on their propensity scores using a nearest neighbor matching method with replacement. The matching process was conducted separately for each wave of near-peer counselors, based on their student record from the fall semester they participated in the program. Post-PSM examination of balancing diagnostics indicated that CARA near-peer leaders and the comparison group were well-matched. Standardized mean differences were examined between groups on all matching variables, with standardized mean differences <.10 indicating insignificant difference between groups (Austin, 2011). Standardized mean differences between the CARA sample and comparison group ranged from .05 to .09, indicating that the groups were sufficiently matched.

Estimation of Treatment Effects

Since administrative records were used for the data sample, approximately 20% of data were missing. Only participants with nonmissing data were included in analyses. After PSM was used to construct the intervention and comparison groups, chi-square and odds ratio analyses were conducted to compare the persistence outcomes within each wave of near-peer counselors and their matched counterparts, as well as aggregated across all waves of participants. Subgroup analyses were also conducted for Pell/TAP recipients and for Black and Latino/a participants.

Results

Population Descriptives

We analyzed outcomes for CARA peer leaders and their propensity-matched comparisons aggregated across the four waves of participants (N = 1,534). Table 1 displays participants' and comparisons' demographic and academic characteristics for the full sample and each of the four waves of data collection. Population characteristics described here reflect the full sample.

Approximately two thirds of CARA community engagement near-peer counselors in the sample are pursuing associate's degrees at CUNY 2-year colleges and one third are pursuing bachelor's degrees at CUNY 4-year colleges. Half the sample is Hispanic or Latino/a and approximately a third identifies as Black. Almost 70% of the full sample of CARA participants are women, and the majority are low-income based on receipt of financial aid (82% Pell grant recipients and 76% TAP recipients). Almost half have taken at least one remedial course (in any subject), and 14% participated in a federal opportunity program (SEEK/CD participant). The mean age of CARA participants is 20.6, the mean GPA is 3.1, and the average number of credits earned when participants began their near-peer counselor position was 27.8. Given that propensity matching procedures ensure the comparison group is similar to the intervention group, the comparison demographics and academic characteristics are similar for the full sample as well as for each wave of data collection.

Intervention Effects

Aggregated across 4 years of data collected, one-year persistence rates at CUNY among near-peer counselors (Table 2) was 10.96 percentage points higher than matched comparisons (p < .001), and these students were 1.94 times more likely to persist. Findings are replicated for aggregate results for subgroups as well. Among Black and Latino/a CARA participants (Table 3), one-year persistence was 12.01 percentage points higher than matched comparisons (p < .001), which corresponds to a 2.09 times higher likelihood of persisting. For Pell/TAP recipients who participated in CARA (Table 4), one-year persistence was 8.94 percentage points higher than matched comparisons (p < .01), reflecting a 1.78 times higher likelihood of persisting.

Discussion

In describing a university campus engaged with community, Furco (2010) wrote that it

> not only serves the public and provides outreach to the community by honouring the assets, skills and expertise of the community partners, but it incorporates the partnership work in ways that advance the institution's teaching and research

Table 1. Intervention and Comparison Group Characteristics

	Full Sample		2014-2015 Wave		2015-2016 Wave		2016-2017 Wave		2017-2018 Wave	
	CARA	Comparison	CARA	Comparison	CARA	Comparison	CARA	Comparison	CARA	Comparison
	n (%)	*n* (%)	*n* (%)	*n* (%)	*n* (%)	*n* (%)	*n* (%)	*n* (%)	*n* (%)	*n* (%)
2-year CUNY college	140 (73)	946 (71)	32 (78)	189 (77)	51 (72)	291 (70)	36 (69)	221 (71)	41 (66)	250 (67)
4-year CUNY college	54 (28)	394 (29)	9 (22)	57 (23)	21 (30)	124 (30)	16 (31)	91 (29)	21 (34)	122 (33)
White	13 (7)	82 (6)	2 (5)	7 (3)	4 (6)	29 (7)	3 (6)	15 (5)	5 (8)	31 (8)
Black	61 (32)	400 (30)	18 (44)	123 (50)	18 (25)	95 (23)	18 (35)	95 (30)	14 (23)	88 (24)
Hispanic/Latino	97 (50)	711 (53)	19 (46)	99 (40)	41 (58)	239 (57)	25 (48)	172 (55)	33 (53)	205 (55)
Asian or Pacific Islander	22 (11)	148 (11)	2 (5)	17 (7)	8 (11)	53 (13)	6 (12)	30 (10)	10 (16)	48 (13)
Female	132 (68)	956 (71)	32 (78)	192 (78)	45 (63)	266 (64)	37 (71)	225 (72)	43 (69)	276 (74)
Pell recipient	159 (82)	1,081 (81)	29 (71)	167 (68)	61 (86)	352 (85)	43 (83)	253 (81)	52 (84)	313 (84)
TAP recipient	146 (76)	976 (73)	26 (63)	163 (66)	58 (82)	339 (81)	37 (71)	210 (67)	46 (74)	268 (72)
SEEK/CD	27 (14)	175 (13)	6 (15)	31 (13)	8 (11)	47 (11)	11 (21)	52 (17)	8 (13)	46 (12)
Remedial enrollment	86 (45)	616 (46)	19 (46)	102 (41)	37 (52)	236 (57)	18 (35)	112 (36)	31 (50)	167 (45)
	M (SD)	*M (SD)*	*M (SD)*	*M (SD)*	*M (SD)*	*M (SD)*	*M (SD)*	*M (SD)*	*M (SD)*	*M (SD)*
Age	20.6 (3.6)	20.8 (2.8)	20.4 (2.0)	20.6 (2.3)	20.3 (2.5)	20.4 (2.3)	20.8 (3.2)	20.7 (2.7)	21.0 (4.8)	21.1 (3.6)
GPA at start of term	3.1 (0.6)	2.8 (0.7)	3.2 (0.6)	2.7 (0.8)	3.1 (0.6)	2.8 (0.7)	3.0 (0.6)	2.9 (0.6)	3.1 (0.6)	2.8 (0.7)
Credits earned before start of term	27.8 (25.6)	30.2 (29.7)	24.7 (23.0)	24.9 (24.5)	30 (27.2)	30.6 (27.4)	28.0 (21.8)	29.0 (31.6)	35.1 (27.1)	34.3 (33)
Total *N*	193	1,341	41	246	71	416	52	312	62	372

Note. Some percentages do not total 100 due to rounding.

Table 2. Cross-Tabulation and Odds Ratios for One-Year Persistence of Intervention Participants and Comparisons

Persistence	CARA Peer Leaders *N* (%)	Propensity-Matched Group *N* (%)	Difference %	X^2	*p*	Odds Ratio (95% CI)
2014-2015 Wave						
Retained Fall 2015	36 (87.7)	168 (68.29)	+19.51	3.18	.074	3.34 (1.24, 11.30)
Not retained Fall 2015	5 (12.20)	78 (31.71)				
Total	41	246				
2015-2016 Wave						
Retained Fall 2016	60 (84.51)	326 (78.37)	+6.14	1.39	.238	1.51 (0.74, 3.31)
Not retained Fall 2016	11 (15.49)	90 (21.63)				
Total	71	416				
2016-2017 Wave						
Retained Fall 2017	45 (86.54)	228 (73.08)	+13.46	4.31	.038	2.37 (1.01, 6.45)
Not retained Fall 2017	7 (13.46)	84 (26.92)				
Total	52	312				
2017-2018 Wave						
Retained Fall 2018	49 (79.03)	262 (70.43)	+8.60	1.94	.164	1.58 (0.80, 3.31)
Not retained Fall 2018	13 (20.97)	110 (29.57)				
Total	62	372				
All Waves						
Retained	190 (84.07)	984 (73.11)	+10.96	12.31	<.001	1.94 (1.32, 2.91)
Not retained	36 (15.93)	362 (26.89)				
Total	226	1,346				

> goals . . . it sees its direct engagement with the public as a vehicle for conducting more significant research, more effective teaching and more impactful outreach and service. (p. 388)

Through this lens, we argue near-peer mentoring has a double impact. First, near-peer mentoring provides an opportunity for community engagement through community-based peer counseling in an institutional setting; by doing this, it creates an opening to involve young people in the solutions to unequal college access and success within their communities. Second, near-peer mentoring has the potential to promote one's own social and cultural capital in ways that lead to successful navigation of processes that encourage college-going, while simultaneously enabling the sharing of these resources with near-peers in ways that are distinct from adults.

The near-peer counselors in our study exemplify the opportunities that are created through campus–community partnership, and their success contributes to the field's knowledge of how the benefits of this type of partnership can accrue to the university through positive effects on student near-peer counselors themselves. Aggregated across 4 years of CUNY administrative data collected, our results indicate CARA near-peer counselors are nearly twice as likely to persist in college as peers who do not participate in CARA but have similar demographic and academic characteristics, with subgroup analyses replicating these effects for students of color and economically disadvantaged students.

Our findings are consistent with previous research reporting that students possessing higher levels of social and cultural capital are more likely to persist at both 2-year and 4-year colleges (Wells, 2008a, 2008b), suggesting that serving as a near-peer counselor contributes to students' development of these forms of capital. Our results also

Table 3. Cross-Tabulation and Odds Ratios for One-Year Persistence of Intervention Participants and Comparisons

Persistence	Black and Latino/a *N* (%)	Propensity-Matched Group *N* (%)	Difference %	X^2	*p*	Odds Ratio (95% CI)
2014–2015 Wave						
Retained Fall 2015	34 (91.89)	154 (69.37)	+22.52	8.08	.005	5.00 (1.49, 26.21)
Not retained Fall 2015	3 (8.11)	68 (30.63)				
Total	37	222				
2015–2016 Wave						
Retained Fall 2016	52 (88.14)	258 (77.25)	+10.89	3.57	.059	2.19 (0.93, 5.94)
Not retained Fall 2016	7 (11.86)	76 (22.75)				
Total	59	334				
2016–2017 Wave						
Retained Fall 2017	36 (83.72)	195 (73.03)	+10.69	2.23	.136	1.90 (0.79, 5.28)
Not retained Fall 2017	7 (16.28)	72 (26.97)				
Total	43	267				
2017–2018 Wave						
Retained Fall 2018	36 (76.60)	207 (70.65)	+5.95	0.70	.402	1.36 (0.64, 3.10)
Not retained Fall 2018	11 (23.40)	86 (29.35)				
Total	47	293				
All Waves						
Retained	158 (84.95)	814 (72.94)	+12.01	12.15	<.001	2.09 (1.36, 3.32)
Not Retained	28 (15.05)	302 (27.06)				
Total	186	1,116				

reflect findings that participation in community engagement activities in academic settings promotes students' academic development (Celio et al., 2011; Strage, 2000) and further indicate that serving as a near-peer mentor increases students' likelihood of persisting in college after controlling for relevant academic variables.

We posit the model of near-peer mentoring provided through CARA is distinct in how it positions near-peer counselors to combine their role as an institutional agent (who transmits specialized social and cultural knowledge about college access) with their role as a protective agent, an individual located in family- or community-based networks who provides emotional support and other resources specific to coping with social marginalization (Stanton-Salazar, 1997). By being protective agents trained to deliver institutional supports typically available only through adults, near-peer counselors occupy a unique role in broadening postsecondary access and success.

A primary way near-peer counselors contribute to an institution's capacity to promote equity is that near-peer counselors often more easily build trust with vulnerable students, especially those who may not see themselves as college-goers. For example, an undocumented near-peer counselor may become their school's expert on how to apply for college scholarships as an undocumented student, how to seek out "docu-friendly" campuses, or how to navigate the application to receive financial aid that recently became available to undocumented students in New York State. The near-peer counselor may also serve as a college role model for undocumented students and others who face financial, legal, or identity-related challenges to accessing college, and simultaneously provide students with direct emotional support and tailored guidance to address these challenges.

Table 4. Cross-Tabulation and Odds Ratios for One-Year Persistence of Pell/TAP Recipient Intervention Participants and Comparisons

Persistence	Pell/TAP N (%)	Propensity-Matched Group *N* (%)	Difference %	X^2	*p*	Odds Ratio (95% CI)
2014–2015 Wave						
Retained Fall 2015	27 (87.1)	139 (72.77)	+14.33	2.90	.089	2.53 (0.82, 10.37)
Not retained Fall 2015	4 (12.9)	52 (27.23)				
Total	31	191				
2015–2016 Wave						
Retained Fall 2016	56 (87.5)	302 (80.53)	+19.52	1.76	.184	1.69 (0.76, 4.29)
Not retained Fall 2016	8 (12.5)	73 (19.47)				
Total	64	375				
2016–2017 Wave						
Retained Fall 2017	39 (86.67)	209 (76.56)	+10.11	2.30	.129	1.99 (0.79, 6.00)
Not retained Fall 2017	6 (13.33)	64 (23.44)				
Total	45	273				
2017–2018 Wave						
Retained Fall 2018	42 (79.25)	238 (72.34)	+6.91	1.11	.292	1.46 (0.70, 3.28)
Not retained Fall 2018	11 (20.75)	91 (27.66)				
Total	53	329				
All Waves						
Retained	164 (84.97)	888 (76.03)	+8.94	7.55	.006	1.78 (1.16, 2.81)
Not Retained	29 (15.03)	280 (23.97)				
Total	193	1,168				

As this example demonstrates, near-peer counselors trained by CARA engage deeply with specialized knowledge and continuously enact this knowledge in a professional capacity through working with near-peers. We believe near-peer counselors' experience of authentic mentoring relationships within institutional settings located in the underrepresented communities to which they belong is central to explaining the positive program effects discussed in this article. Near-peer counselors amass the skills and knowledge necessary to be successful in college, but they also solidify a college-going identity for themselves and learn how to be advocates for their own success and that of their community in dominant educational institutions.

Limitations

These findings should be considered in the context of this study's limitations. First, it is important to note that institutional factors may influence students' persistence in college. CUNY is an institution with a mission of being responsive to the needs of its urban setting and promoting upward mobility of its diverse population of students; thus CUNY may be particularly well-positioned to support low-income students, first-generation college students, and students of color on the path to graduation. Effects of serving as a near-peer mentor may differ at institutions operating in different contexts.

From a methodological perspective, our analyses included only participants with

complete data and did not include any indicators of students' first-generation status or participation in other community engagement programs because these variables were not available in the data set, thus we were not able to examine the effects of serving as a near-peer mentor on first-generation students or to ensure that the propensity-matched comparison students had not participated in other types of community engagement experiences. Finally, the data used in this study did not include direct measures of students' social and cultural capital; rather, participating in CARA programming was considered a source of social and cultural capital for all near-peer mentors based on our understanding of the content and skills delivered through the program.

Implications and Future Directions

Our study provides evidence that underrepresented college students' participation in community engagement in the form of near-peer mentoring may be one way to increase social and cultural capital among students served by near-peer counselors while simultaneously enhancing college success among mentors themselves. Further, we show how a community engagement model of near-peer mentoring amplifies navigational, aspirational, and oppositional forms of cultural capital (Yosso, 2005) in ways that can position these resources as assets to underserved students and the higher education institutions they attend. The potential double impact of near-peer mentoring discussed in this article may be useful for making the case to invest institutional resources in designing and implementing near-peer mentoring programs through campus–community partnerships at the secondary and postsecondary levels. It may also encourage programs focused on college access and success to consider how involving and training underrepresented college students in the design and delivery of program interventions can enhance positive outcomes in both underserved communities served and among the student–mentors themselves.

In future research, we plan to build on this study by (1) examining later college success outcomes of near-peer counselors at CUNY, including vertical transfer and degree attainment, and (2) conducting inquiry into qualitative data collected with near-peer counselors from the College Bridge program to further examine the specific forms of institutional support near-peer counselors provide and the potential differential impact of this support on high school seniors' postsecondary pathways.

Author Note

This manuscript was written during the 2018–2019 academic year and uses data collected from 2014 to 2018. Recent trends in college enrollment and emerging research about higher education are not accounted for in this article.

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