

## **Introducing Student Services in the Classroom**

**Tags:** Basic skills, developmental/remedial education, mentoring, part-time students, retention, data collection/use, student services

### **Description of Strategy**

In 2008, South Texas College implemented an advising program called “Beacon Mentoring.” The program was a “light-touch” intervention that used resources and staff already available on campus to help lower-level math students, who often struggle to navigate the college environment. In this program, college employees, called “Beacon mentors,” volunteered to visit both developmental classes and low-level college algebra classes several times throughout the semester. They provided information about available academic support services, served as a personal contact for students, and worked with the instructors to identify struggling students and offer timely help.

The Beacon Mentoring Program was based on three simple ideas: that students who need services often do not access them even when they are available and free; that a mechanism is needed to alert student services staff when students start to fail in class; and that students need a “go to” person on campus to whom they can turn for advice, support, and information. The hope was that, given the support provided by the program, students would be more likely to access campus services like tutoring and advising, pass their math courses, and persist from semester to semester.

In the Beacon Mentoring program, these services were provided by college employee volunteers, each assigned to a class of 20-35 students enrolled in either developmental math or a college-level algebra course. While the program was named Beacon Mentoring, the college volunteers were not “mentors” in the traditional sense of the word. For example, the college intentionally did not include features such as intensive, one-on-one contact, which tends to be a core feature of traditional mentoring programs. The Beacon mentors were volunteers from a wide range of positions on campus, from advisors to Information Technology staff to high-level administrators. They received a few hours of training before the semester began, were expected to fit their responsibilities as mentors into their normal workday, and received no extra pay. Mentors visited their designated math class three or four times throughout the semester to spend five or ten minutes sharing information about campus services such as the tutoring center, financial aid advisors and early registration. Outside of these visits, their contact with students was primarily conducted by phone or email.

### *Evaluation Findings*

MDRC evaluated the program using a random assignment design. All 83 sections of developmental or college-level math courses at South Texas College were randomly assigned to either a program group that was assigned a Beacon mentor or a control group that was not. Random assignment ensures that students in both the program and the control groups are similar in terms of observable characteristics like age, gender, or race, as well as harder-to-observe characteristics like academic experiences before college or personal motivation. By tracking student performance and comparing outcomes between the two groups, the evaluation provides strong

evidence of the “value added” or *effect* of the program on student achievement. Over 2,100 students were enrolled in the 83 sections that took part in the evaluation, and 41 sections were assigned mentors for the semester. MDRC tracked students in the study following random assignment, to learn whether the program had an impact on a number of predetermined outcomes.

At the end of the program semester, it was determined that while the program did not improve students’ math class pass rates or persistence in college, it did have effects on other outcomes for the full sample:

- Students in mentored classes were roughly 30% more likely to use the Center for Learning Excellence, a campus resource that provided tutoring and other forms of academic support and that was emphasized by many mentors;
- Slightly fewer students in mentored classes withdrew from their courses during the semester than students in nonmentored classes (15% versus 18%); and
- Students in mentored classes attempted slightly fewer overall credits than students in non-mentored classes, but also earned slightly more developmental credits;

What was particularly interesting was that the program proved to be more helpful for the two subgroups that were likely to be at the highest risk of failure — part-time students and those enrolled in developmental math. The mentors acted as “information brokers,” bringing valuable information to students to help them access the support and services they needed to succeed. Programs that connect such students with services, especially when they are integrated into classroom instruction, are promising and worthy of further investigation.

Part-time students were less likely to withdraw from their math classes than their control group counterparts (approximately 20% of part-time control group students withdrew, while only 14% of part-time program group students did so), and these students were also more likely to pass these classes. In addition, they earned about a third of a credit more overall and were more likely to pass their developmental math final exams. It makes sense that part-time students would particularly benefit from the program, as they are less likely than full-time students to be familiar with campus services or know other students, staff, or faculty. The other subgroup that appeared to benefit from the program was students enrolled in developmental math courses (as opposed to students enrolled in college-level math courses). These students were less likely to withdraw from their math courses than their counterparts in the control group (12% compared with 18%, respectively), and they earned more credits in their other developmental subjects.

### **Important Factors for Successful Implementation**

While this type of evaluation design is not intended to disentangle the effects of individual components of the program, there were some factors that seemed particularly important for the successful implementation of the Beacon Mentoring program. As mentioned above, the staff who volunteered as mentors attended a training to learn the skills they would need to offer this type of support to students, and they were also given a “Beacon Mentoring Handbook” to guide them throughout the semester. According to a survey of mentors, most staff who participated in the program found both the training and the handbook to be useful tools to help them perform their roles. Secondly, the program enjoyed the strong support of the college

leadership. Mentors “got the message” that their work was valued, which may have motivated them to do their best despite not being compensated for their time. Finally, the math department chair and dean were supportive and worked to earn the buy-in of faculty.

### **Implementation Challenges**

There were some challenges during implementation that could be avoided or improved upon in the future. First, although the mentors volunteered for the program, and most reported enjoying helping students, some felt overwhelmed by the responsibilities. Beyond the initial training and a few voluntary brown-bag lunch meetings, the mentors were not given much formal support and were also not closely monitored. The program design could be strengthened by an increased emphasis on training and support for the mentors. With a more structured process for professional development throughout the semester, mentors would have a chance to address questions and issues that arose, and the overall program administration could be monitored more carefully.

Similarly, there was considerable variation in the number and length of interactions between mentor and faculty pairs. Some mentors and faculty stayed in close touch with each other, while others communicated only minimally. Part of this variation in how much communication occurred between the faculty and mentors stemmed from problems implementing the electronic tracking system designed for the program. Beacon mentors were asked to use an automated system to track the interactions they had with students and math faculty, as well as any issues that came up during the semester. While this system was supposed to facilitate communication between the mentors and the students and instructors in the math courses, it was used inconsistently and became more of a burden than a tool to ensure effective collaboration. A more efficient system might go a long way toward ensuring consistency of implementation of key components of the program.

### **Suggestions for Replication**

The Beacon Mentoring program may be replicated relatively easily. The training needed for mentors can be minimal: at South Texas College, an off-the-shelf product was used. Mentors perform their tasks alongside their regular duties, without any additional compensation or release time. While the evaluation did not include a cost study, because this program relied on campus employees to volunteer for the program, and because the amount of time they needed to perform the work was limited, the overall cost of the program was likely to be minimal.

South Texas College found that recruiting volunteer employees to serve as mentors was not an issue: many staff members were eager to engage directly with students to try to make a difference in their lives. In addition, the majority of out-of-class contact was conducted by phone or email, so mentors had a limited time commitment outside of their three or four classroom visits per semester. Finally, the introduction of a user-friendly online information management system would help colleges run the program at scale. Mentors and faculty members could track services provided, contact with students, issues that arose, and student progress throughout the semester, as well as communicate with each other about classroom visits and students who might be at-risk.

**For more information**, see Visher, Mary G., Kristin F. Butcher, and Oscar S. Cerna, with Dan Cullinan and Emily Schneider. 2010. *Guiding Developmental Math Students to Campus Services: An Impact Evaluation of the Beacon Program at South Texas College*. New York: MDRC. <http://www.mdrc.org/publications/540/full.pdf>

**Program Contact:** Mary Visher [mary.visher@mdrc.org]