



## PATHWAYS TO POSTSECONDARY SUCCESS

Maximizing Opportunities  
for Youth in Poverty

*PATHWAYS to Postsecondary Success* is a series of mixed-methods studies of the educational pathways of California's lower income youth. Through a series of research briefs and reports, the project aims to advance research on poverty, produce useful tools that improve educational practice, and inform the U.S. policy agenda on the relationship between poverty and education.

*Mentorship and the Postsecondary Educational Attainment of Low-Income Youth* underscores the important role that mentors can play in helping low-income students enroll in and complete college, and reveals that not all types of mentorship are equally effective for all students.

# RESEARCH BRIEF

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## Mentorship and the Postsecondary Educational Attainment of Low-Income Youth

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The relatively low educational attainment of youth from low-income backgrounds has been a long-standing social problem in the United States. For decades, researchers and policymakers have been concerned with reconciling the ideal of an American educational system that allows ample opportunities for upward mobility with the reality that educational outcomes are strongly linked to other factors, including family income (Davis-Kean, 2005; Duncan, Yeung, Brooks-Gunn, & Smith, 1998; Duncan, Featherman, & Duncan, 1972; Mare, 1980; Teachman, Paasch, Day, & Carver, 1997). In an era that has witnessed staggering increases in class inequality, the importance of earning a college degree has never been greater, and yet the availability of resources that facilitate college access and completion for students who grow up in poverty is steadily declining (Duncan & Murnane, 2011; Kahlenberg, 2010).

Mentors, who can serve as role models or spark a sense of possibility for the future, offer one important avenue for low-income youth to gain access to important information and tools necessary for academic success. This brief explores the significance of mentorship in the college entry and completion of low-income youth. Drawing from a nationally representative longitudinal study of American adolescents, we address three main questions:

1. Does being mentored affect the college entry and completion rates of low-income youth?
2. Are certain types of mentorship more beneficial to low-income youth than others?
3. Are certain types of mentorship more beneficial to low-income youth than to middle/high-income youth?

### Sample and Analyses

Our data source, the National Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent Health, consisted of four waves of data collection. We use data from three of these waves in order to understand respondents when they were in seventh through twelfth grade; seven years later, when they were between 18 and 26 years old; and six years after that, when they were ages 24 to 32.<sup>1</sup> We focus particularly on the postsecondary experiences of low-income youth.<sup>2</sup>

Our descriptive analyses reveal the existence of any *associations* between mentorship and college entry and completion, but they are not able to distinguish the *actual effects* of these associations. For this, it is necessary to isolate mentorship from other factors associated with college entry and completion through logistic regression analysis. This allows us to determine what factors in adolescence predict the postsecondary educational outcomes of youth from low-income backgrounds. More specifically, we are able to present the effect sizes of several factors that are important for college entry and completion, including mentorship, and rank them in order of predictive importance. We can then determine which factors and which specific types of mentors matter most for both college entry and persistence among youth who grow up in poverty.

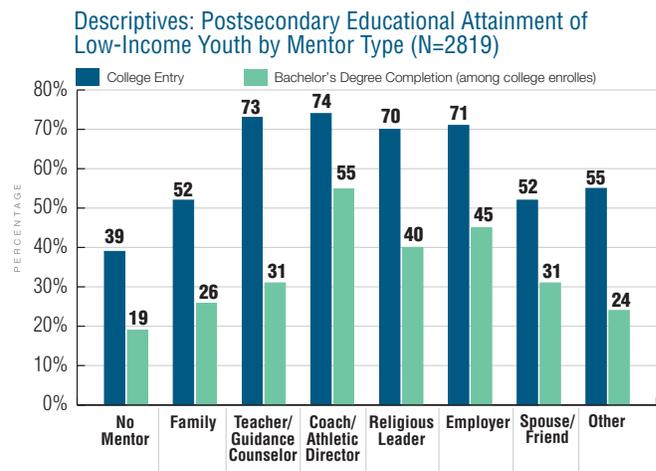
## Findings

### ***Mentors of all types are helpful to low-income youth as they navigate their postsecondary pathways.***

It is clear from Figure 1 that, in terms of both college entry and degree completion, having *any* type of mentor in adolescence is more beneficial to low-income youth than having no mentor at all. Nevertheless, there are some important differences by type of mentor.

- Over 74% of low-income youth who reported being mentored by a coach or athletic director went on to enroll in college—surprisingly the highest enrollment percentage of all factors analyzed in this study.<sup>3</sup> This is nearly double the percentage of college entry for low-income youth without mentors (39%).

Figure 1



- Among low-income youth who enrolled in college, bachelor's degree attainment differences are similarly striking: While 55% of low-income youth mentored by a coach or athletic director went on to earn a bachelor's degree, only 19% of youth reporting no mentor went on to do the same.
- Low-income youth who reported being mentored by a teacher or guidance counselor, religious leader, or employer had exceptionally high college enrollment percentages (all over 70%). Their college completion rates were also high (between 31% and 45%), well above the completion rate for students without mentors (19%).

### ***Students from low-income backgrounds benefit from different types of mentorship at different points in their postsecondary pathways.***

The descriptive analyses presented in Figure 1 allowed us to confirm an association between

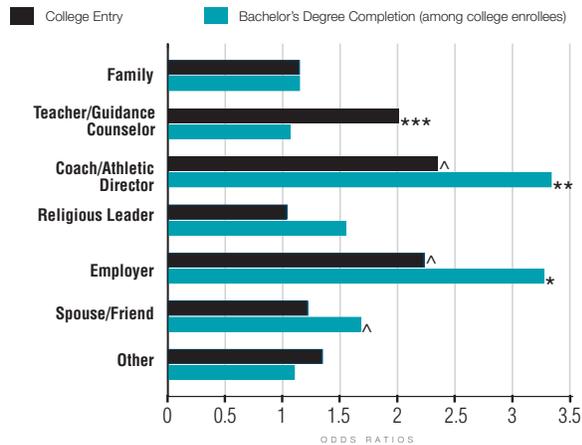
## What is mentorship?

Mentorship can mean many things, but it typically refers to “a one-to-one relationship between a pair of unrelated individuals.” Most often, a mentor is “an older, more experienced person who seeks to develop the character and competence of a younger person” (Freedman, 1999, p. 31). Mentors may be natural—occurring through friendship, teaching, coaching, or counseling—or planned, as through structured programs.

Our respondents answered a series of questions when they were between 18 and 26 years old about their relationships with any adults (other than their parents) who had an “important positive influence” on their lives since the age of 14.

Figure 2

**Odds Ratios from the Logistic Regressions of Postsecondary Entry and Attainment for Low-Income Youth**



\*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ , ^  $p < 0.10$

Note: Taken from full model, which controls for demographics, early achievement and expectations, family and school factors, and postsecondary life experience variables. These odds ratios are relative to having no mentor (reference group).

mentorship and college attendance and persistence. In order to learn more about the actual effects of being mentored, we employed logistic regression analyses to control for demographics, early achievement and expectations, family and school factors, and postsecondary life experience variables. In other words, the full model allowed us to determine whether mentoring has an effect when all of these other factors are held constant. Again we saw strong effects of mentorship on low-income youth’s college entry and completion (Figure 2).

- Low-income youth who are mentored by teachers/guidance counselors, coaches/athletic directors, or employers are more than twice as likely to attend some postsecondary education than students who have had no mentoring relationship.
- Having a mentor who is a coach/athletic director, employer, or (to a lesser degree) a spouse/friend is associated with a higher likelihood of completing college for low-income youth.<sup>4</sup>
- Respondents who named a family member or religious leader as a mentor are not significantly more likely to enter or graduate from college than those who did not have a mentor at all, net of other factors.

**Coaches, athletic directors and employers are more effective mentors for students from low-income backgrounds than for students from middle/high-income backgrounds.**

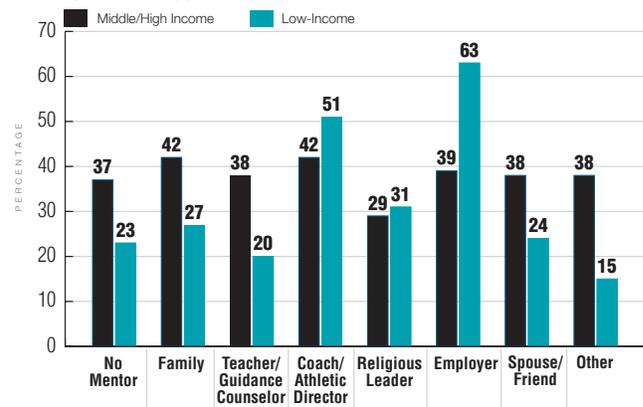
Mentorship is the only factor in our study with significantly different effects for youth from low-income and middle/high-income backgrounds. For college completion (bachelor’s degree or higher), we found that certain mentors are more beneficial for low-income youth than for middle/high-income youth (Figure 3).

- Having a coach/athletic director or employer as a mentor affects the likelihood of earning a bachelor’s degree for adolescents from low-income backgrounds much more than it does for middle/high-income youth.
- Being mentored by a family member, teacher/guidance counselor, a spouse or friend, or other type of mentor affects bachelor’s degree completion more for middle/high-income youth than for low-income youth.

We conducted analyses to determine the variables that most strongly predict college enrollment and completion among students who have grown up in poverty. Mentorship fell at the top of both lists, indicating its importance in the postsecondary educational attainment of low-income youth.

Figure 3

**Predicted Percentages of College Completion (BA Degree+) by Mentor Type**



Note: From separate regression analyses comparing low-income and middle/high-income youth. The full model includes interaction terms for mentorship and class status, demographics, early achievement and expectations, family and school factors, and postsecondary life experience variables.

- Three of the top four predictors of college enrollment among low-income youth are related to mentors. More specifically, having an employer, coach/athletic director, or teacher/guidance counselor serve as a mentor all strongly predict that a student who has grown up in poverty will enroll in postsecondary education.
- Likewise, being mentored by a coach/athletic director or being mentored by an employer serve as the two most important predictors of college completion for students who grew up in poverty.
- For both outcomes—enrollment and degree completion—the effect of mentorship on the postsecondary experiences of low-income youth is surprisingly more pronounced than the effects of high school GPA, expectations of attending college, and even parents’ level of education.

may, at least in part, be a result of the opportunities that mentors can provide for youth who come from disadvantaged backgrounds, where resources for educational success at home, in schools, or in the immediate community may be more limited.

Perhaps the most important conclusion we can derive from our findings is that the type of mentorship matters. Although the effect of some mentors (e.g., a family member or religious leader) is equivalent to the effect of having no mentor at all, others appear to be highly influential. In particular, athletic coaches and employers have the greatest effect on both college entry and completion, and they are especially effective for low-income youth. Moreover, mentorship from teachers or guidance counselors is more beneficial to low-income students as they prepare for college entry, but having a spouse or friend as a mentor is more beneficial for these students as they work toward college completion.

## Conclusions and Implications

Our findings underscore the importance of mentorship to the educational success of low-income youth. While this relationship has been identified in other research (Erickson, McDonald, & Elder, 2009), we find that mentorship is the only factor with a strong independent association with both college entry and degree attainment among youth who have grown up in poverty. Moreover, it serves as the most important predictor of both of these outcomes. This

But why do certain forms of mentorship only affect college entry and not degree attainment? It is likely that the resources that low-income adolescents gain through relationships with their teachers and guidance counselors can facilitate getting *to* college, but successfully navigating *through* college requires social capital from different sources—namely relationships rooted in the college or university context. And this may help to explain why mentorship from employers and coaches is especially important for both college

### Mentorship in Secondary and Postsecondary Education

Traditionally, certain types of institutions (e.g., families, churches, neighborhoods, schools) have provided opportunities for youth to connect with “natural” mentors. With the increase of single-parent households, racial and class segregation, and higher teacher/student ratios in schools, opportunities for these types of relationships have decreased.

Due in large part to this decline, planned mentorship programs have burgeoned in the last two decades and the research suggests that these programs are successful in helping low-income youth succeed academically. There are still not nearly enough of these programs, however, especially at the college level (Thompson & Kelly-Vance, 2001; Tierney, Grossman, & Resch, 1995). Despite their proven success, mentorship programs for low-income youth are largely seen as “nice” rather than “necessary” and are therefore given little priority and inadequate funding (Sipe, 2002).

entry *and* degree attainment among low-income youth. These types of mentors may be especially important to lower-income students who are more likely to be part of work/study and athletics programs (Jacobi, 1991). Mentorship of these types may facilitate important college-based relationships, which can in turn increase institutional attachment—an important predictor of college student retention (Tinto, 1987).

With these findings in mind, and with the goal of diminishing gaps between lower- and higher-income students in college entry and completion, we offer the following policy recommendations:

- **Mentorship programs geared toward facilitating positive relationships in adolescence should be expanded and made accessible to more youth in poverty.** Numerous mentoring and early intervention programs provide supportive settings where low-income youth can find caring mentors (e.g., Big Brothers Big Sisters, Girl Scouts, Boy Scouts, YMCA, YWCA, etc.), but not enough of these programs exist for K–12 youth, and even fewer exist for low-income college students (Sipe, 2002). It is essential to expand these programs to a much larger scale, both within and outside of schools, if the goal of diminishing the college entry gap is to be reached.
- **Mentorship opportunities must be tailored to specific contexts, taking into account students' family backgrounds and their locations in the educational pipeline.** It is not enough to reach low-income youth early in their educational careers; it is equally important to provide sustained support to those who have enrolled in college, so that they can persist and complete their degrees. But the varied effects of different types of mentors on college entry and completion makes clear that no one-size-fits-all approach will effectively improve the educational outcomes of students who grow up in lower-income households. Instead, programs must take into account the specific needs of students at particular points in their educational journeys.
- **New social resources rooted in the college/university context must be developed and made accessible to lower-income youth.** Our findings suggest the types of mentorship found through sports and in work/study or employment settings can help low-income youth succeed in college. However, these avenues for mentorship may not be widely accessible—those that are derived from participation in athletics programs or the workplace are inextricably tied to experiences that go beyond the traditional goals of higher education. Furthermore, because both represent time away from studying, involvement in athletics and employment may at times detract from academic success. The specific characteristics that make these forms of mentorship so important to the educational success of low-income students must be identified and incorporated into mentorship programs that are available to a wider group of students. We must develop new social resources at the postsecondary level that are geared toward helping *all* low-income youth persist.

The staggering increases in inequality over the last few decades and the increasing importance of obtaining a college degree make the availability of resources for postsecondary academic success among low-income youth especially vital. These findings underscore the importance of mentorship in general as well as the value of specific types of mentors in providing opportunities for low-income youth to enter and succeed in college.

## Notes

- 1 The first wave of the study was conducted in 1994–1995; the second wave, which is not used here, was conducted in 1996; the third wave was conducted in 2001–2002; and the fourth wave was conducted in 2007–2008.
- 2 A respondent was classified as low-income if his or her family income and household size at the first wave of the study was at or below 185% of the federal poverty line. These households qualify for a number of means-tested benefits such as Medicaid, food stamps, and reduced-price school lunch programs. Although somewhat crude, this measure has been used in multiple studies and provides an adequate approximation of economic disadvantage. See, for example, Entwisle & Alexander (1995) and Heflin & Pattillo (2006).

- 3 Not all analyses are included in this brief. Please contact the authors at [mashtian@uci.edu](mailto:mashtian@uci.edu) for additional data tables.
- 4 Respondents who named a spouse or a friend as their mentor were grouped together because of low sample sizes in each category. Although there are important distinctions to be made between the two, spouses and friends both serve as “natural” mentors who can provide informal mentoring outside of structured organizations.

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