

Service-Based Fellowship Program to Support First-Generation College Students

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Abstract

It is well-known that first-generation and low-income students are less likely to succeed and persist in college than their more affluent peers. To help address this, a non-profit was founded to provide support to these students. The organization houses the Tutor Training Fellowship Program where Tutor Fellows receive three-fold support in the form of tutor training, work experience, and scholarship. The work experience comes in the form of free tutoring to low-income middle and high school students. Additional support is provided through free mental health counseling and professional development workshops. Through this program, students also find a community of similar students who support each other through graduation and beyond.

The training received focuses on pedagogy and is specifically tailored for mentors and tutors that will be working with under-resourced youth. The magic of this program is the fact that the tutors and the tutees they work with can see themselves in each other. This allows tutors to build a rapport much faster than would normally be possible.

To date, over the past decade, 200 tutors have joined the program and earned over \$700,000 in scholarships and delivered over 20,000 hours of free STEM tutoring. Over the past three years, a record number of community college students have joined the program. Over 90% of the students in the program graduate and over 70% have gone on to obtain a strong job commensurate with their degree – well above their counterparts.

This paper will present the details of the program, funding sources, specific training material, how tutors are found, how tutoring partners are found, and more.

Introduction

A major barrier for first-generation college students (FGCS) is in place long before they step foot in a college classroom. In addition to lacking the first-hand perspective that benefits students whose parents went to college, these students are also often low-income and from an ethnic demographic that is under-represented. Previous research has noted these differences between first-generation and low-income college students – specifically in Engineering [1]. Others have found that first-generation college students less academically prepared, lack “basic knowledge concerning college”, and often struggle to create education plans [2]. Others, still, have shared the negative impacts that first-generation college students face based on having lower income, being under-represented, and lesser prepared [3]. While attending middle and high school, many potential future first-generation college students lack an awareness that college is a viable path. For those that are aware of higher education, it is often seen as an expensive option or one that isn’t possible based on current academic success since low-income and under-represented students are also statistically more likely to be below grade-level standards.

Once in college, low-income students spend additional time and resources seeking scholarships and/or working in what are usually low-paying or even minimum wage jobs. Under-represented students are also less inclined to have a sense of belonging which can lead to high dropout rates. Mental health struggles are also prominent among this population as academic and financial pressures can accumulate and feelings of imposterism can be overwhelming.

When considering the daunting task of attending – and succeeding – in college, a multi-dimensional approach is needed to increase success and retention among current and future first-generation college students. This paper aims to share the relevant details and corresponding successes of the Elevate Tutoring Tutor Training Fellowship Program whose design organically addresses many of the barriers previously mentioned. In the program, first-generation college students are recruited to serve as Tutor Fellows who receive tutor training and then provide free STEM tutoring to socioeconomically disadvantaged middle, high, and early college students. The Tutor Fellows also receive a scholarship for their time in the program. This simultaneously supports two different populations as the college students are gaining work experience, training, and financial support while their younger counterparts are receiving tutoring that they would not otherwise be able to afford from mentors who can act as a role model as someone who has found their way to college despite having similar barriers. The Tutor Fellows and the students receiving tutoring often see themselves in each other and can feel understood and seen.

While starting a non-profit is not necessarily realistic for most readers of this paper, the primary goal is to provide an overview for the major components of the program and help describe scalable alternatives that may be possible in many different scenarios. Primarily, details about tutor recruitment, partner selection, training, and funding will be discussed. The hope is for readers to determine the appropriate scope that fits their needs and find advice to help with the implementation of a similar program.

Background

In March 2011, Elevate Tutoring was founded as a non-profit organization with the mission to reduce, as it was called then, the achievement gap for socioeconomically disadvantaged students. While many of the benefits and nuances of the program would not be fully understood until after tutoring began, the goal to simply provide scholarships to low-income college students who provided free tutoring for others in-need was a sufficient goal to catch the eye of some early funders. With about a third of the money needed to cover the entirety of the corresponding scholarships, a cohort of eight tutors was sought to launch the Elevate program. Advertising to local campuses in the Fall of 2012, led to fifty applications from students interested in joining the first class of Tutor Fellows. Half of those fifty qualified as full-time, low-income undergraduate students and were interviewed to guide the daunting task of selecting eight finalists to join Elevate. Heartbreaking stories were the norm as each application represented a human who had already endured – and overcome - so much just to get to where they were. Sending 17 rejection emails – to students who were every much as in-need as the eight finalists – was motivation enough to drive the program to success.

For the past twelve years, Elevate has continued with the same fundamental model. Application numbers and acceptance percentages have varied, but what has remained consistent is an unwavering effort to provide as much support as possible to a group of hard-working and truly deserving students. To date, Elevate has brought on over 200 Tutor Fellows (40 in the last year) who have provided over 20,000 hours of free STEM tutoring and who have received cumulatively over \$700,000 of scholarship money for their time in the program. Statistically, Elevate Tutor Fellows dramatically outperform their low-income and under-represented

counterparts with over 90% obtaining their undergraduate degree and over 70% have gone on to obtain a strong job commensurate with their degree or attend graduate school.

While the focus was initially four-year college students, Elevate has recently prioritized not only recruiting and accepting Community College students as Tutor Fellows, but also providing free tutoring for Community College students in their early STEM courses. These early STEM courses are often designed to “weed-out” students and free tutoring can go a long way to improving a student’s chances of success.

Program Details

The design of the Elevate Tutor Training Fellowship Program could be modified but is presented in its entirety to allow the reader to determine for themselves which characteristics and details they are able to emulate. The Program relies on recruiting first-generation and low-income college students to join cohorts with whom they will receive high-quality training that focuses on the specific barriers to education that their students are likely to face.

As a whole, Tutor Fellows are asked to serve for 210 hours in the program. 55 hours are set aside for training and 155 hours are spent providing free STEM tutoring to other low-income students. Students who complete the program receive the entirety of what is now a \$7500 scholarship. The target duration in the program is an academic year and a half with the goal of having some overlap with the newer cohorts to join after them. With breaks given for exam weeks and other extenuating circumstances, tutors are generally asked to give about six hours per week during the academic year.

As a cohort, Tutor Fellows receive 18 hours of initial training which constitutes their “bootcamp training”. At six hours per week, this is usually completed within the first three weeks in the program. Tutor Fellows then spend a short week shadowing an ‘experienced’ Elevate Tutor before being added to the regular schedule. Once Tutors reach this point, their six hours are divided between about 1.5 hours of ongoing training and 4.5 hours of tutoring.

Each aspect of this model – being a cohort, the bootcamp training, the shadowing, the delivery of free tutoring, and the ongoing training are discussed further within this paper as each has obvious and some subtle benefits that are worth highlighting.

Cohort Model

One of the most important features of the program is that it is a cohort model where tutors are selected in groups of 6-10 tutors. The exact number has varied based on some situational factors, but the target is generally 8 tutors per cohort.

	New Tutors Added	Number of Cohorts
2012-2013	8	1
2013-2014	7	1

2014-2015	8	1
2015-2016	12	2
2016-2017	20	3
2017-2018	20	3
2018-2019	13	2
2019-2020	20	3
2020-2021	24	3
2021-2022	28	4
2022-2023	40	5

The cohort model and size has many advantages. First and foremost, this provides a group of students that can rely on each other for support. With belonging being a primary barrier to their academic success and retention, the Elevate program gives an opportunity for Tutor Fellows to have a team of undergraduates in similar circumstances to commiserate and bond with and to have for support. From a training standpoint, there are benefits in creating a team that is comfortable with each other. As tutors progress through the program, their ongoing training benefits from them feeling comfortable sharing their successes and their struggles. Have a group that can “productively fail” together is one of the key elements of this program.

Bootcamp Training

If there was a cornerstone to the Elevate Tutoring philosophy, it is growth mindset. Many of the conversations had during the bootcamp training are centered around the philosophy that one can improve with appropriate effort. The idea of, and exact phrase, “growth mindset” has become far more commonplace since the Elevate program started in 2012, but the ideas presented in training go deeper than just promoting the idea that well placed effort breeds success.

While STEM exercises are the foundation for the mock tutoring and tutoring examples, the majority of the bootcamp training are focused on pedagogy. Tutor fellows read papers, watch videos, and engage in discussions that center around the main ideas of growth mindset, productive failure, rapport, belief, learned helplessness, stereotypes, stereotype threat, imposter syndrome, empathy, confidence, math anxiety, inquiry-based teaching, and more.

The focus of the training is to prepare Tutor Fellows to work with students that are suffering from the barriers presented; however, the reality is that the Tutor Fellows have often experienced and seen the exact topics being discussed. While the Elevate Trainer introduces new vocabulary and facilitates the discussion, the lived experiences of the Tutor Fellows promotes rich discussions and real-world strategies for supporting their younger counterparts. A strong ulterior motive of this training is to equally support the Tutor Fellows who are, themselves, still students that are facing the same barriers in their college classroom.

A fun, but instrumental, element to the bootcamp training are the improvisational (improv) exercises that are used to begin each training session. Improv serves many purposes. First, it builds teamwork among the Tutor Fellows which, as mentioned earlier, is paramount to them feeling comfort with the idea of productively failing in front of each other. After each improv game, the Tutor Fellows have overcome a challenge together. Improv also promotes active listening which is absolutely vital when tutoring ‘properly’. A struggling student is not going to tell you where they are having difficulties – especially if defensive walls are up. Quick thinking is also exercised during improv. Finally, improv also promotes a “yes and” mentality that is a fundamentally positive quality to maintain when tutoring. This is a fundamental 'rule' of improv. You welcome what is being said. "No" is not part of an improv actor's vocabulary. With that, the training promotes "Yes... and" instead of "No". A struggling student hears "No" too much, this training encourages the positive.

Another key message that is presented through this training is the idea that it is OK to not know something that a student asks. The motto highlighted is “I don't know is OK”. For one, this helps give comfort to the Tutor Fellows and demotivating strategies that would lead to breaking trust. Practically speaking, not knowing also provides an opportunity to model good study habits. The student can see how the Tutor Fellow operates when they are struggling. Emotionally, Elevate strives to train Tutor Fellows to be vulnerable and share when they don't know. This humanizes the Tutor Fellow and can foster an even stronger rapport. This narrows the gap between the student and the Tutor Fellow... between the student and the idea of going to college. While a Tutor Fellow should never manufacture this, when it occurs it is worth embracing.

Tutor Fellows are encouraged to, themselves, productively fail as tutors. They are encouraged to try things and to reflect regularly to guide their own improvement. While focusing on one area at a time – be it asking ‘better’ questions, building rapport, identifying signs of a fixed mindset, or any other aspect of tutoring – tutors are able to incrementally improve – and share their progress with their Elevate cohort.

Finally, Elevate trains Tutor Fellows to try to “work themselves out of a job.” This is what differentiates them from many other tutors. Often, tutors will answer questions directly. They will explain things as magic... out of thin air. Elevate attempts to minimize the distribution of “magic beans” because each time they are gifted, the student becomes more dependent on the tutor – which is the opposite of what should be sought. In reality, the student may be able to answer questions that will guide them to an answer. By leaning on questions over answers, confidence can be fostered. Those same questions can linger in a student's mind long after the Tutor Fellow is gone. Making a difference in the two hours that a Tutor Fellow is with a student is great, but if one can make a difference in the other 166 hours in the week – that’s golden. That is how the tutors can make themselves obsolete – by helping create an independent, autonomous learner.

In terms of advice for any group looking to model their training after this, it is best to consider the educator who will provide the training. Any educator is going to come with their own experiences, their own personality, their own set of vulnerabilities, their own strengths, and their own weaknesses. If they are truly open to the training process, they will be able to convey their own stories that hit home with many of the facets of the training.

If done well, this training not only helps Tutor Fellows become better tutors, but it also helps them become better students.

Tutor Shadowing

Once bootcamp training is completed, Tutor Fellows will join seasoned Tutor Fellows who have been in the program for six or more months. New Tutor Fellows are asked to observe for at least three tutoring sessions in as diverse a way as possible. Tutors are asked to vary their selection of subject, teacher, tutor, and school as much as possible to get a flavor for different opportunities, scenarios, and expectations. The senior Tutor Fellow is there to not only provide comfort with the logistics of getting to the tutoring site, finding the classroom, and meeting students in the class, but to also provide a model for what the Tutor Fellow does in the classroom and how they navigate various challenges. The mentorship generally carries over outside of this one-time shadowing opportunity.

Tutoring and Ongoing Training

Once the shadowing week is complete, Tutor Fellows are put onto the regular tutoring schedule. The realities of being college students means that availability varies each semester or quarter. But, while the exact schedule varies, Tutor Fellows are in a pattern of delivering 4-5 hours of tutoring and receiving 1.5 hours of ongoing training per week.

It is worth noting that Tutor Fellows are asked to complete a tutor summary form after each session. The form collects logistics and reflections on what went well, what didn't go as well, and what they'd like to potentially discuss during training. The contents of these forms gives the Tutor Fellows a chance to reflect on their session while also helping inform trainers of what to focus on each week. From a logistics standpoint, Tutor Fellows earn 5 minutes of reflective training time for completing each summary. These details are also important to capture when attempting to collect statistics about our program. Having this data is also useful when seeking funding.

Within the Elevate Program, Tutor Fellows work with a number of outside partners. These partners are typically schools in low-income communities or non-profits that support students from these communities. The exact nature of each partnership varies, however, tutors generally visit classrooms during the school day and are deployed in the nature that best serves that particular teacher. Sometimes Tutor Fellows are asked to work with one student or a small group and, in other cases, they will circulate and support groups intermittently across the entire classroom.

Elevate also has an avenue where students or family members can sign up for tutoring online. They are put onto our list for private tutoring and this can be delivered in-person or online based on the availability and preference of both the requesting student/family and the available Tutor Fellow. This tutoring is generally capped at two hours per week with an option to extend beyond that in cases where more is deemed urgent.

Overall, the delivery of tutoring provides Tutor Fellows experience in communicating that serves them in their future careers – whether it is specifically in education or not. It is often touted in letters of recommendation that, while seemingly different from the exact job they seek, Tutor Fellows have experience creating a safe environment, building a rapport, understanding the stigmas and inequalities that a person may be experiencing, and being empathetic. These are characteristics that go across boundaries of discipline.

Another detail to share is that while the tutoring is specifically in STEM, the Tutor Fellows accepted in to the program span STEM and non-STEM disciplines. To date, approximately half of all Tutor Fellows have been in STEM majors and half have been in other fields.

Scheduling is a particular challenge – however, if a Community College decided to keep tutoring in-house and have tutors that only delivered tutoring within their particular college, that may simplify part of the program development. That would, however, also limit the tutors that could be accepted into the program as the subjects that they could tutor in would likely be limited to college level courses.

Needs and Funding

A tutoring program can take many forms that can each require different levels of funding. Elevate started as a grassroots organization where almost all (86%) of the funding brought in went directly to the Tutor Fellows in the form of scholarship money. As Elevate grew, an employee was eventually hired in year 6. Within the last three years, Elevate has gone from one employee to eight, the budget has tripled, and we have over sixty active tutors. The organization is separated into three main areas with Programs/Partners, Operations/Management, and Development/Fundraising/Communications.

Programs/Partners is focused on most of the things that have already been mentioned throughout this paper. That team announces applications, runs interviews, selects Tutor Fellows, determines schedules, performs tutor check-ins, coordinates with partners, schedules training, develops and modifies training, runs training, and handles the collection of paperwork from all Tutor Fellows. This, or a scaled down version of this, would be the suggested requirements for a program looking to start off. Operations/Management is necessary as a program grows – but, is likely not necessary at the start. Development/Fundraising/Communications would be the next most important aspect if funding is sought. At Elevate, funding started with mostly individual donations and only spawned into grant success after year 3. Today, most of Elevate’s funding comes from grants.

Successes

In terms of the program, Elevate has been very successful. Lifetime, Elevate has supported 200 Tutor Fellows and delivered over 20,000 hours of free tutoring and distributed over \$700,000 in scholarship funds to these hard-working and deserving first-generation and low-income college students. Within the past three years, the number of Community College students getting support has increased dramatically. Initial fears that a Community College student wouldn’t be

able to finish the program before potentially transferring have been alleviated based on an ability to have the Tutor Fellow continue tutoring online.

A recent focus within Elevate has been to collect and share the post-secondary success data for our Tutor Fellows. Over 90% of our Tutor Fellows graduate with a Bachelor's degree and over 70% either get a job commensurate with their degree or attend graduate school. These numbers are well ahead of their low-income counterparts. Transcripts are also collected for Tutor Fellows and it has been discovered that Tutor Fellows often improve their own grades after joining the Elevate program. Tutors shared that because of the training content, they were able to observe their own learning in a new way and be more metacognitive.

The students receiving tutoring are an obvious population to measure impact for; however, because of the structure where most classrooms are visited as a whole, a notable challenge has been to collect and measure impact on this group. Based on efforts associated with a recent grant, a number of new evaluation methods are being deployed including student surveys, teacher surveys, parent surveys, tutor surveys, pre-post assessments, grades, and coding survey responses. These tools will be used to measure improvements in not only course content and academic success, but also social-emotional learning, confidence, growth mindset, and more.

Challenges

The biggest challenges for Elevate was obtaining initial and consistent funding and collecting evaluation metrics. Elevate has been focused on process metrics: number of tutors served, number of students receiving tutoring, number of tutoring hours delivered and has, until recently, struggled with impact metrics, which are more focused on grades and specific growth of the Tutor Fellows and students. This is mostly based on what was described in the previous section where Tutor Fellows are often asked to circulate around a classroom and, while there is an improvement for all in the room, it is harder to measure. Anecdotally, teachers beg for Elevate Tutor Fellows to be in their classroom as they have shared that not only do the recipients of the tutoring improve, but they also have more time and everyone else improves as well.

Implementation Tips and Conclusion

The main goal of this paper is to provide a framework for a similar program if the reader decides that it is worth pursuing. There are many factors to consider. Finding someone to champion a program like this is likely the most important step to getting started. From there, one should be determining how to advertise, how to obtain funding, what to include in the training, where to have the tutors provide the tutoring, what is the total duration of the program, what is the amount of the scholarship, and how scalable is the program going to be.

A program like this could exist from within a college; however, there would be additional factors to consider that make things more challenging. Funding could be pursued from within, from a foundation (if the college has one attached), from local industries, or from individual donors.

If the reader decides that creating a full-fledged non-profit, they should be aware of all of the official requirements and paperwork involved. The author invites collaboration if anyone seeks to create a similar program!