

## *The ISU CONNECT Mentorship Program: Identifying Critical “Soft Skill” Outcomes*

Gary Creasey, Department of Psychology

***What are they learning?*** The development of content knowledge is a highly prized skill in the classroom context. However, in a survey of Fortune 1000 executives, it was determined that career-readiness and trainability are not well predicted via “hard skills” acquisition. Rather, the development of “soft skills”—such as relationship building, self-efficacy and self-direction—were the most diagnostic of a trainable, retainable, well-rounded new employee (Wilson-Ahlstrom et al., 2011). Whereas such skills may be attainable in traditional classroom environments, youth development programs with a civic engagement component may hold considerable promise in the development of these critical dispositions (Larson, 2006). However, the acquisition of “soft skills” in civic engagement work has not been well documented via SoTL professionals (Connor, 2010).

To address this gap, the ontogeny of soft skill acquisition in college student mentors in the CONNECT Program was assessed. CONNECT (*Civic Opportunities to Network Needs for Educational and Community Transformation*) involves pairing ISU students with middle school youth attending high-need public schools. The program involves face-to-face and weekly SKYPE interactions, with a focus on connecting the middle school youth to the collegiate experience. A capstone activity involves a community enhancement project developed by the mentees and mentors over the course of the year. CONNECT is currently located at three Chicago schools and Bloomington Junior High School (45 total mentor/mentee pairings).

Over the course of the program, the college student mentors completed assessments of mentor-mentee relationship development, intentions to assume employment in high need

communities, civic commitment, and expressed confidence in working in urban communities. As almost all of the mentors were pre-service teachers, they were queried about their confidence in reaching high need students, enlisting the help of parents and community members, and the ability to create community engaged classrooms.

The study results indicated that the college student mentors displayed little growth in civic commitment, and intentions to work in high need communities. However, they did indicate that their mentees had established close, trusting relationships with them and expressed significant gains in urban teaching self-efficacy. The mentors felt that they could more effectively work with youth in high need communities, enlist parent involvement and create community-engaged classrooms.

At first glance, the nonsignificant results indicate that certain aspects of the program failed to make a difference in core soft skill areas. However, CONNECT mentors undergo an intensive interview process and are questioned about their intentions to work in high need communities. Applicants who express little enthusiasm to do so are not admitted into the program. Thus, as CONNECT mentors scored very high on these measures at intake—one could argue that a ceiling effect was in place.

Whereas the mentors indicated a high degree of civic commitment and intentions to work in underserved communities at the start of the program, they did experience growth in relationship building and urban teaching self-efficacy over time. The latter skills are important, because there is a difference in an expressed desire to do something and whether or not you have the confidence to be an effective, change agent. In many regards, this was the most powerful outcome of this research.