

ISU CONNECT PROGRAM—SoTL Final Report

The ISU CONNECT Program (*Civic Opportunities to Network Needs for Educational and Community Transformation*) represents a mentorship experience in which ISU teacher education majors are paired with middle school students residing in high need communities. The program was developed to enhance developmental outcomes in both the mentors and mentees, as ISU students are encouraged to better connect their mentee to the college experience and their counterparts are asked to better connect mentors to these schools and communities. Interactions are sustained over a 9-month period (via in person and weekly SKYPE interactions) and the program culminates in a sustainable community enhancement project that is developed by the mentors and mentees within each school cohort. These community enhancement projects have ranged from the creation of community murals to the beautification of a public park, and from tree plantings to the revitalization of a neglected school athletic facility.

CONNECT Sites:

Chicago, Westcott Elementary, Auburn Gresham Community (99% African American)
Chicago, Madero Middle School, Little Village Community (99% Latino)
Chicago, North River Elementary, Albany Park Community (Ethnically diverse)
Bloomington, Bloomington Junior High School (Ethnically diverse)

Note: 11 mentors/mentee pairs per site; middle school students all on free lunch programs

SoTL Program Evaluation

Does the CONNECT experience add to important skill sets in college student mentors?

Due to an intensive screening process, the mentors who are selected for CONNECT **already have** a strong commitment to teach in underserved schools and are screened on important mentor dispositions such as empathy, tolerance for diversity and civic commitment. However, like most demanding careers, a desire or intention to pursue such a career does not always mean an individual is confident they could be effective in that occupation. Thus, we made a concerted effort to determine if the CONNECT experience adds to agency or efficacy skills in the college student mentors.

To provide this evaluation, ISU mentors completed the *Urban Teacher Self-Efficacy Scale* at three time points over the course of the program. For each item, respondents rate their degree of confidence for successfully addressing or overcoming challenges in the urban context tied to parent involvement, school climate, student disciplinary issues, etc. The evaluation results are presented in the appended figure. Statistically, the mentors showed significant efficacy advancement across all domains—it is particularly relevant that the college students expressed **more confidence in the ability to enlist community involvement in urban schools**. Encouraging pre-service teachers to envision the ability to create community engaged classrooms—where barriers between schools and communities are removed—is a central goal of the CONNECT Program.

Mentors also completed reflection papers to specify program elements that were particularly influential in terms of developmental growth. Most mentors indicated that building a relationship with their mentee—that become more close and trusting over time—was a significant outcome of the program. Mentors also spoke about the impact of CONNECT on their own agency development. In particular, the resulting gains in self-efficacy were due to the immersion experience of visiting high-need schools and communities. As one mentor put it best, *“I am much more prepared and less scared to work in Chicago Public Schools because of the firsthand experience”*.

To sum, the CONNECT experience builds and motivates important aspects of positive youth development in all participants. Of particularly relevance is that the pre-service teachers are now more empowered with the confidence to actually make a difference in urban schools that can build on their initial excitement and motivation to work in this context. Because teaching self-efficacy is a **powerful** determinant of effective instruction, classroom management and student academic progress, our data suggest that the program should be expanded to additional school sites within each community. The ability to offer the program to more ISU students would signify that higher concentrations of pre-service teachers would feel empowered and confident to work in urban schools before they assume important student teaching positions.

Outcomes: Data presented at Society for Research in Human Development (April, 2012) and the CTLT Conference (January, 2013)

Figure 1: Urban Teaching Self-Efficacy (% Confidence Ratings)

