

# From Crisis into Capacity

*Final Report on Findings from  
Recent Research on E-Mentoring*



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# INTRODUCTION

For the past several decades, and mirroring major advances in communications technology, there has been growing interest in the virtual delivery of mentoring services and relationships, commonly referred to as “e-mentoring.” From the earliest “telementoring” programs of the 1990s, which utilized dial-up modems and relatively primitive bulletin board-style forums, through the sophisticated video-based and interactive activity-driven platforms of today, there has long been a desire to use technology to connect young people to adult mentors across geographic distance and beyond other barriers that may inhibit in-person mentoring sessions (Kaufman, 2017; Kaufman, Levine, Casella, & DuBois, 2022). Beyond just providing mentors across distance, online approaches also offer the potential for scaling the volume of relationships that all youth have access to, theoretically connecting youth to a far greater number and variety of adults than programmatic experiences that are dependent on in-person interactions.

In spite of this desire to scale mentoring through technology, e-mentoring has, until recently, constituted a fairly small niche of the programmatic mentoring landscape. MENTOR’s last national survey of programs found that only about 3% of youth in mentoring programs were served via e-mentoring programming (Garringer, McQuillin, & McDaniel, 2017). While it may feel like our world has always been hyperconnected, the reality is that it has only been in the last decade that communication technologies such as broadband internet, 4 and 5G cellular technology, algorithmic compression of multimedia, and modern web applications have made robust e-mentoring possibilities broadly accessible to most communities. This new landscape of streaming video and instant chat — along with a history of research suggesting that e-mentoring can be impactful in domains as diverse as educational achievement, career exploration, health behaviors, and identity development — had positioned e-mentoring as an exciting new frontier in the growth of the mentoring movement. (See the National Mentoring Resource Center’s review of e-mentoring research by Kaufman, 2017, for a detailed summary of this e-mentoring scholarship.)

## The Impact of COVID-19

While e-mentoring may have been growing in popularity already, nothing has spurred the adoption of virtual mentoring services more than the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in the spring of 2020. Almost overnight, the nation’s mentoring programs faced an uncertain future in which their main objective — bringing adults and youth together for quality time — was prohibited due to social distancing regulations and closed schools and other facilities. Several months into the pandemic, research suggested that as many as 1 in 5 mentors had been unable to have **any** contact with the youth they were mentoring. Those who had maintained virtual contact with their mentees expressed mixed results participating in virtual sessions, with only about half of all mentors noting they had engaged successfully with their mentees online. Even when they were able to connect, only about a third of mentors suggested the pandemic had strengthened their relationship with their mentee, while 56% indicated it had been “mixed” or a negative impact (MENTOR, 2020). Heading into the start of the school year in the fall of 2020, it was clear the nation’s mentoring relationships had struggled to connect, both in-person and online, and that virtual solutions often could not replicate the depth of engagement and support found prior via in-person meetings.

Other scholarship from this time highlighted the nuances of this story from the perspective of the nation’s mentors. One study involving focus groups of programmatic mentors found that, although most mentors had managed to connect with their mentees online at a frequency that matched their pre-pandemic rate, the communication was shorter and perceived by the mentors as not as high in quality as their in-person interactions (Kaufman, Simon, Wright, Edwards, Thrul, & DuBois, 2022). Mentors indicated that texting, phone calls, and videoconferencing were the most common connection technologies,

with apps and online games also serving as important sources of match activities. Mentors also reported needing to navigate new content in their relationships, as the stresses and isolation of the early pandemic weighed heavily on mentees and their families and required mentors to increasingly talk about difficult topics (e.g., depression or anxiety) and provide new forms of support (e.g., helping the family connect to food banks). But mentors largely reported rising to the challenge and noted several ways in which they had stepped up their emotional support as well as their practical support (e.g., helping deliver school resource packets to the home or providing information about COVID-19 resources to the family).

While this scholarship focused on what was happening between mentors and youth, there was another story unfolding within the pandemic: the impact on the staff of mentoring programs and their struggle with the new reality of limited in-person meetings. MENTOR's research found that almost 30% of programs had to reduce staff in the initial stages of the pandemic, with 65% reporting cancelled fundraising events, and 30% citing rescinded funds from those providing financial support to the program. In spite of this diminished capacity, interest in finding technology solutions to keep programs going was very high across the mentoring field (MENTOR, 2020). For example, over 500 programs serving over 100,000 youth expressed initial interest in using the Virtual Mentoring Portal coordinated by MENTOR, which offered in-person programs the opportunity to use existing e-mentoring platforms as a safe online meeting space during the pandemic. Unfortunately, right at this critical moment in which programs needed to get creative with technology in ways they had likely never considered, they were also facing reduced staff availability, inaccessible facilities and hardware, and limited funding. It was difficult in that first year of the pandemic to see how the mentoring field would navigate and endure these challenges.

## Shifting from Crisis to Long-Term Capacity

Thankfully, the mentoring field did navigate these challenges, with many of the nation's mentoring programs figuring out a way to offer virtual mentoring during times of social distancing using commonly available technology: Zoom meetings, Facetime, texting and email, and even old-fashioned phone calls. They made it work the best they could, even if it meant delivering their program in a different way or focusing on different goals. But as the nation emerges, hopefully, from the COVID-19 pandemic, the youth mentoring field is still at a crossroads regarding e-mentoring. Many programs have noted there were benefits to e-mentoring (e.g., more frequent mentor-youth interactions, easier delivery of mentor training, etc.) and that virtual service delivery can be helpful in times other than global pandemics, such as on snow days or over summer breaks, when matches need to stay in contact from afar.

But what does it take to transition to e-mentoring, either as an additional programmatic offering or as a permanent approach to program scaling? What was learned from these past two years of trial and error? Have we learned anything about what it takes to plan for and implement a successful e-mentoring program?

These questions were top of mind when we set out on a series of research studies, generously funded through the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, designed to explore what could be learned from these years of emergency program reconfiguration, hastily-arranged Zoom mentoring sessions, and virtual program management. The three studies funded under this project are all detailed below, followed by conclusions about how these findings can inform quality e-mentoring work in the future, pandemic circumstances or otherwise.

# STUDY 1: FOCUS GROUPS WITH PROGRAM STAFF ABOUT SWITCHES TO E-MENTORING

We figured that a good place to start when assessing what worked, and did not, about the pandemic shifts to e-mentoring was in conversation with the practitioners who had just navigated these choppy waters. To facilitate these conversations, we reached out to practitioners who had expressed interest to MENTOR early in the pandemic for exploring e-mentoring options, inviting them to participate in focus group conversations with their peers exploring how their unique attempts at e-mentoring had fared in the time since.

**Study Design:** We conducted seven focus groups with 23 participants in total, representing 20 mentoring organizations that covered rural, suburban, and urban areas of the United States. More than half (60.87%) of participants came from small organizations with a staff of less than five people, with most being school-based (60.9%), community-based (60.9%), or both. Almost all participants were coordinators or managers/directors of their mentoring programs, helpful here for their direct insight into organizational decision points and the factors that constricted or enhanced their ability to pivot to e-mentoring in a time of crisis.

Focus groups took place in April 2021 and were facilitated by research team members at Johns Hopkins University. All focus groups followed a structured interview protocol and were recorded and transcribed. The content of each was then analyzed using thematic coding and synthesized into the findings below.

**Study Findings:** Participants expressed a number of challenges early in the pandemic that caused major disruptions for their services even before thinking about switching to e-mentoring solutions. Many of these challenges are now hauntingly familiar to the nation after several years of pandemic shut-downs, social distancing, and a shaken economy: Mentors found it difficult to keep engaged with the program while managing their own pandemic circumstances; youth and their families found themselves in

“survival mode” faced with sudden insecurity on a number of fronts; the program itself lost staff due to both pandemic crises and lost fundraising opportunities and reduced financial support. The closures of schools and other facilities left many focus group participants without key equipment and space, with shifting and inconsistent social distancing mandates and policies making it challenging for programs to effectively plan for activities or events.

Programs’ subsequent pursuits of e-mentoring solutions found both successes and barriers. Programs were able to utilize a variety of mentor-youth communication technologies, including Zoom meetings, text messaging, FaceTime, and social media platforms. Focus group participants consistently reported that mentors and youth who already used virtual means for connecting before the pandemic generally continued to do so with ease, with existing matches that had never communicated that way struggling the most (new matches made during the pandemic also fared better as they had no in-person history to compare their virtual meetings against). Programs also mentioned allowing themselves to be creative and working hard to develop fun opportunities for virtual connection (e.g., several described online scavenger hunts, geocaching, group virtual movie nights, and a variety of online art activities that mentors and mentees could do together).

But the shift to e-mentoring also had pitfalls, including a primary challenge of youth simply not wanting to engage online with mentors or the program, particularly in the 2020-21 school year when they were largely on devices and screens for the bulk of the school day and experiencing considerable screen fatigue. Access to communication devices and internet connectivity was also a challenge for some participants, as was privacy within the home or other spaces for virtual match meetings.

## STUDY 2: SURVEY OF THE MENTORING FIELD TO ASSESS CAPACITIES FOR E-MENTORING

Many of the challenges, however, were practical challenges of capacity and implementation:

- ▶ Limited staffing to manage all the tasks associated with online meetings (e.g., monitoring Zoom interactions).
- ▶ Insufficient tech support, with many programs reporting needing to hire vendors quickly or even using board members, neighbors, other participants and stakeholders to offer support as a favor to the program.
- ▶ Scrambling to redesign activities and curriculum to work in a virtual environment and without access to facilities, equipment, and other infrastructure.

These practitioners also had several key pieces of advice for their peers thinking about e-mentoring, including:

- ▶ Starting small and building capacity slowly — most felt the shift to e-mentoring takes time, but it is worth the effort.
- ▶ Ensuring the e-mentoring they offer is accessible, especially for English language learners, program participants with disabilities, and those with limited internet or communications technology in the home.
- ▶ Emphasizing dedicated staffing support, such as hiring at least one staff person who is devoted to the e-mentoring aspect of the program.

**Bottom Line:** Perhaps as expected, the sudden shift to e-mentoring during the pandemic tested the capacity, professional skills, and adaptability of many mentoring programs. However, these rapid innovations also fostered a belief that e-mentoring is a meaningful addition to a program's capacity and scope, and that with proper staffing and planning time, virtual program delivery warrants further scaling.

The goal of the second study we conducted was to determine the capacity and readiness of traditional in-person youth mentoring programs to shift to or add e-mentoring. Given our focus group study highlighted potential pain points for programs shifting to e-mentoring too quickly, we wanted to create a measure that could be used by programs beyond the pandemic context if they decide to embrace technology and the potential of e-mentoring as a regular part of their programming.

Digital readiness is a measure of an organization's ability to successfully incorporate technology tools and use digital technology effectively to expand and enhance program reach. Tools have been developed by NTEN and HopeLab for organizations to self-assess their digital readiness before taking on a large technology integration project. For this study, we adapted existing instruments assessing organizational digital readiness and validated them for use in the mentoring sector.

**Study Design:** Using the adapted tools, we developed a survey that was distributed to mentoring programs across the country. Data for 95 programs were available for analyses. Half of the programs had less than five staff members. Prior to the pandemic, almost all the programs reported having only in-person mentoring activities.

## STUDY 3: SECONDARY ANALYSIS OF MATCH DATA FROM THE ICOULDBE PROGRAM

**Study Findings:** Most of the respondents were either very confident or confident they can effectively incorporate e-mentoring into their programming (60%), that their staff feel comfortable with the technology needed to do so (74%), and that mentees are comfortable with the technology needed (64%). Programs felt less confident in the mentees' families being comfortable with the technology (63%) and did not believe mentors would be sufficiently comfortable with an adult/child mentoring relationship using online means (61%).

To assess program readiness for e-mentoring, we developed a scale based on the NTEN and HopeLab tools that mentoring programs could use to self-assess whether they are ready to take on e-mentoring. Through a confirmatory factor analysis with the data from the 95 programs, we found that the scale measured two distinct factors: *e-mentoring capacity* and *e-mentoring readiness*. E-mentoring capacity refers to the capacity of the organization to run an effective program, including having the right equipment, staff, buy-in from all parties, and activities suited for the e-mentoring context. E-mentoring readiness refers to whether the mentor, mentee, and the families are comfortable and ready to try e-mentoring. While these two factors were found to be correlated in our analyses, they were found to measure two different aspects programs should consider before delving into e-mentoring.

Unfortunately, the confirmatory factor analysis, while revealing two distinct factors, did not produce a good model fit by typical statistical standards. More work is needed to refine this measure and continue to improve its psychometric properties.

**Bottom Line:** Programs looking to incorporate e-mentoring on an on-going basis (outside of the pandemic context) should carefully consider whether they have the capacity, resources, and buy-in to do so effectively. This measure (offered here at the end of this report) can be used to start a self-assessment of e-mentoring readiness. With use of this measure by the field, we can continue to refine it and use it to predict the success of e-mentoring programming.

This final study attempted to break free of the context of the COVID-19 pandemic to some degree by examining data collected by the iCouldBe e-mentoring program in the 2019-20 school year that was just wrapping up as schools suddenly closed. Because iCouldBe is an established provider of high school-based e-mentoring with a robust proprietary platform, their pre-pandemic participant records may hold clues about markers of quality e-mentoring without the filter of the pandemic circumstances.

**Study Design:** This study involved secondary analysis of youth intake and outcome data, as well as a number of measures of youth engagement in the iCouldBe platform (e.g., total time spent logged in, total number of posts, word count per activity, etc.), and the matches' progress through program activities and a number of key mentee outcomes (e.g., future planning, growth in social capital) captured in pre-/post-program surveys.

**Study Findings:** Our analyses showed that the main areas of growth over the program year for participating youth were in their *confidence levels* and perceptions of *self-efficacy* related to their future plans and goals. Importantly, given the program's focus on growing youths' networks of support as a core outcome, we also found that as the size of a youth's network increased, their self-efficacy and confidence related to their future plans also increased, even after controlling for potential confounders. Critically, these gains in confidence and self-efficacy also had significant correlations with several markers of program engagement, including total duration of participation in the program, number of log-in days, total minutes spent in the iCouldBe system, and the average word count per post by both mentors and youth. It is also worth noting that youths' understanding of the value of mentoring and their knowledge about the program at baseline both predicted youth levels of program participation, suggesting that preparing youth for the mentoring

experience, and making sure they understand the goals and their role in the program, may be important implementation steps that set the stage for positive outcomes.

Unfortunately, not even this study could avoid the impact of the pandemic. Because of school closures right at the very end of this annual program cycle, we did not have final post-program outcome data on a significant percentage of participating youth, limiting the strength of the conclusions here. However, other studies (DiRenzo et al., 2013) have found similar impacts on iCouldBe students' self-efficacy, suggesting that our findings here do highlight several participant engagement markers that facilitate these outcomes.

**Bottom Line:** This study suggests that e-mentoring activities that intentionally grow high school students' social networks with adults can, in turn, build confidence self-efficacy about their transitions into college and career. However, it also indicates that meaningful engagement in program activities, as measured by some critical engagement metrics, may moderate the size of those gains. Programs can maximize this engagement by emphasizing program preparation and monitoring engagement data over the program cycle.

## CONCLUSIONS AND ASSESSMENT OF CAPACITY

Looking across these three studies, some clear themes emerge from this pandemic-era examination of e-mentoring services:

- ▶ ***The need for deliberate planning and implementation runways for e-mentoring adoption*** – Finding the right tech and converting program operations and mentor-youth activities to virtual delivery is not easy under normal circumstances, let alone a global pandemic. But if programs start assessing and building capacity now, they can hopefully be ready when they need to make this shift.
- ▶ ***The need for participant buy-in and preparation*** – Many focus group participants noted that new matches and matches that had some familiarity communicating online fared better than those for whom virtual mentoring was completely new. The iCouldBe study highlighted that participant engagement may hinge on their preparation for the experience. The readiness tool development study showed participant buy-in is a main factor to consider when preparing for e-mentoring.
- ▶ ***The need for infrastructure*** – This can range from hardware and internet tech to IT support and dedicated staffing. This is especially true if program management tasks are also shifting to virtual, with tasks like mentor training and background checks also being done virtually. E-mentoring is labor intensive initially in spite of some of the efficiencies it eventually brings.
- ▶ ***The need to be creative and make the experience engaging online while connecting to the real world*** – There is a lot of fun mentors and youth can have together online if programs explore the world of apps and online learning tools. But it is important to remember that even e-mentoring is largely about what happens for youth in real life. As iCouldBe outcomes show, using e-mentoring to help youth build additional real-world support and confidence can still happen even if there are some Netflix watch parties and online personality quizzes in the mix, too.

## Assessing Your Program's Capacity and Planning for E-Mentoring

To support mentoring programs' consideration of, and shift to, e-mentoring services, we used this research to develop and refine two tools presented here.

### Capacity Assessment Questions from the National Survey of Programs

The questions below are the ones that held together during factor analysis to assess *e-mentoring capacity* and *e-mentoring readiness*. While the psychometric properties of this tool are not as strong as usually desired in measurement development, these two distinct factors can be used to help programs self-assess their readiness for e-mentoring.\*

Each item includes response options from 1 to 4 (e.g., 1 = not at all confident, 4 = very confident).

|                              |   |
|------------------------------|---|
| <b>E-mentoring Capacity</b>  | How confident are you that your program will be able to effectively incorporate e-mentoring?  |
|                              | How confident are you in the ability of e-mentoring to be used for activities your mentors and mentees used to do in-person?                  |
|                              | How equipped do you feel your program is to move to online/digital service delivery in response to COVID-19?                                  |
|                              | How comfortable do you feel your program staff is with the technology needed to incorporate e-mentoring?                                      |
|                              | How comfortable do you feel your mentors are with the technology needed for e-mentoring?  |
|                              | How comfortable do you feel your mentees are with the technology needed for e-mentoring?  |
|                              | How comfortable do you feel the families of the youth you serve are with the technology needed for e-mentoring?                               |
| <b>E-mentoring Readiness</b> | How comfortable do you think your mentors are with having sensitive discussions with youth via technology (e.g., sufficient privacy)?         |
|                              | How comfortable do you think your mentees are with having sensitive discussions with their mentors via technology (e.g., sufficient privacy)? |
|                              | How comfortable do you think your mentors are with an adult/child mentoring relationship using online means?                                  |
|                              | How comfortable do you think your youth's families are with an adult/child mentoring relationship using online means?                         |

You can download a ready-to-use version of this scale on the [MENTOR website](#). We encourage programs to share this completed tool with the research team so that we can continue to refine this measure. Send your responses, which we will keep anonymous, to the author, Michelle Kaufman, PhD ([MichelleKaufman@jhu.edu](mailto:MichelleKaufman@jhu.edu)). We also welcome any comments on the tool's usefulness or suggestions for improving it.

## Questions to Consider When Planning E-Mentoring Services

While not tested for psychometric properties, the researchers behind the studies discussed here have also developed and adapted a set of planning questions to consider when thinking about shifting to e-mentoring, either as a temporary way to keep matches together or as a long-term aspect of your service delivery. These questions have been used successfully in a number of consulting projects in 2021-22 to help programs discuss as a team whether they are ready to take on e-mentoring in categories such as participant expectations and buy-in, staff skills and perspectives, and technology infrastructure.

The questions and simple scoring rubric are available for [download in this file](#).

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