Connect, Coach, and Cultivate: The Importance of Mentoring Students of Color in Graduate Online Programs

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Minority students enrolled at predominately white institutions (PWIs) for graduate school are likely to encounter social and academic experiences that differ from their majority counterparts (Trent et al., 2021). Between 2012 and 2016, enrollment in online graduate programs grew 17% for students of color and continues to show significant enrollment increases compared to every type of higher education institution (Hoey, 2021). As more students of color enroll in online programs, research shows that faculty-student mentoring improves student academic performance, psychological health, and social environment (Curry, 2022).

For over 20 years, research has supported implementing mentoring in online programs to effectively expand support for students of color (Brown et al., 1999). Mentoring within an online format presents unique challenges and requires specific adaptive strategies. Considering the increases in enrollment in these programs, understanding best practices in mentoring must be a priority to ensure the success of mentoring programs and student completion in higher education institutions.

Several studies have identified best practices in mentoring. Booker and Brevard (2017) categorized themes of graduate student experiences enrolled in online programs. Their research identified mentor accessibility and communication, academic and social support, and meaningful college transition support as three significant areas that should be included when developing best practices for mentoring programs. Furthermore, Polland and Kumar (2021) noted the importance of fostering interpersonal connections between mentees and mentors, leading to improved communication, connectedness, and support.

This paper addresses the challenges and best practices of mentoring students of color in online graduate programs. The paper also examines a case study of a mentoring program for students of color enrolled in an online graduate program at a PWI private Christian university

paired with faculty. As an outcome of the university's diversity, equity, and inclusion five-year strategic plan, the mentoring program was intended to create a sustainable culture of support for students of color as they complete their graduate program. The following questions are addressed in this paper:

- What challenges exist when mentoring graduate students online?

- What factors influence the nature and quality of the mentoring relationship online?

- What best practices and strategies can be drawn from the peer-reviewed literature and five students' testimonies on online graduate student mentoring?

CHALLENGES WITH ONLINE MENTORING RELATIONSHIPS

Mentoring relationships between faculty and students have many benefits as students navigate their online educational experience. Students benefit by having closer connections with faculty, expanded opportunities for research, emotional support as they persist to degree completion, and an increased sense of inclusion and belongingness (Anderson & West, 2021; Byrnes et al., 2019; Trent et al., 2021). However, there are several challenges to mentoring associated with the online environment, as mentors and mentees try to replicate the in-person mentoring relationship using technology and virtual tools (Andersen & West, 2021). Specific challenges include the lack of in-person contact, limitations in mentor or mentee technology and communication skills, lack of faculty-student research collaborations, and mentoring as an extra-duty responsibility for faculty mentors (Andersen & West, 2021; Bear & Jones, 2017; Byrnes et al., 2019; DeAngelo et al., 2016; Kumar & Coe, 2017; Torres et al., 2021).

In several studies, mentors reported frustrations with the lack of in-person interactions between themselves and their mentees (Andersen & West, 2021; Bear & Jones, 2017; Byrnes et al., 2019; Kumar & Johnson, 2017; Sanyal & Rigby, 2017). They found it challenging to develop

meaningful relationships with mentees through the virtual meeting options, in part due to the absence of verbal and physical cues that would be present in a face-to-face encounter. Virtual mentoring can also be challenging for individuals unfamiliar with or who need more confidence in using technology (Andersen & West, 2021; Byrnes et al., 2019; Pollard & Kumar, 2021; Sanyal & Rigby, 2017). Communication is further challenged by unstable internet connections, dropped calls, and other technology disruptions. Communicating by email, teleconference, or other virtual communication requires mentors and mentees to acclimate to these communication styles.

In one study, Byrnes et al. (2019) found that online mentoring was challenging for many faculty mentors in a doctoral program. New students often require additional support in conducting research, and a mentor with research competencies could help guide students through their research and dissertation process. Nevertheless, many doctoral students did not experience research collaborations with their mentors. The lack of cooperation may be due to faculty work demands. In addition to navigating their regular faculty responsibilities inherent in teaching and research productivity, online mentors are challenged to influence, guide, and support students through virtual exchanges (Andersen & West, 2021; DeAngelo et al., 2016). More time may be required to cultivate mentoring relationships than mentors have as they manage teaching, research, committee work, and other institutional expectations required for promotion and tenure. Furthermore, mentoring is less valued in the promotion and tenure process, and the lack of institutional incentives can impact how much faculty can mentor (DeAngelo et al., 2016; Pollard & Kumar, 2021).

BEST PRACTICES TO SUSTAIN ONLINE MENTORING PROGRAMS

Given the challenges associated with online mentoring, the structure of the mentor relationship is essential to sustaining online mentor programs between faculty and students.

Researchers suggested that mentor relationships are successful when faculty and students are adequately paired based on shared interests, attitudes, and values (Berg, 2016; Byrnes et al., 2019). When mentors and students had shared research, practice, or other interests, both parties found the mentoring relationship more satisfactory. Students also reported success when mentors were accessible, fostered interpersonal connections, and showed interest and support during challenging life events (Andersen & West, 2021; Byrnes et al., 2019; Pollard & Kumar, 2021). Further, the relationships were better maintained when mentor/mentee dyads negotiated clear agreements and expectations for the mentoring relationship from the beginning (Pollard & Kumar, 2021). Lastly, successful online mentoring connections were sustained by regularly scheduled meetings with set agendas and regular and accessible communication between mentors and mentees (Andersen & West, 2021; Booker & Brevard, 2017; Kumar & Coe, 2017; Pollard & Kumar, 2021). Maintaining consistency and frequency of meetings allowed for routine and standard expectations for the mentor and mentee.

Although technology use was challenging for some, studies found that technology was essential in maintaining successful mentor/mentee relationships (Andersen & West, 2021). Mentor and mentee dyads preferred video teleconferencing, such as Zoom calls, over phone calls and emails, because it offered the best alternative to face-to-face interactions (Andersen & West, 2021; Torres et al., 2021). They appreciated the ability to see each other, which they found essential to communication. Students also reported that the virtual meetings helped them feel less isolated and motivated them to stay connected.

Researchers also indicated that faculty at institutions that valued mentoring and offered faculty greater flexibility, incentives, and support for mentoring had better faculty and student mentoring outcomes (DeAngelo et al., 2016; Kumar & Coe, 2017; Pollard & Kumar, 2021). Such

support gave faculty time and space to invest in their mentorship relationships. Researchers also suggested that peer mentoring, in tandem with faculty and student mentoring, reduced faculty mentor pressure to meet all their mentee's needs (Berg, 2016; Deshpande, 2017; Kumar & Coe, 2017; Kumar & Johnson, 2017). Faculty and student mentorship, along with peer mentoring opportunities, made mentoring programs more sustainable. Whether separate peer mentoring relationships or group mentoring with a faculty and small group of students, having multiple mentoring opportunities gave students the varying levels of support needed to succeed in their respective programs of study (Kumar & Coe, 2017; Kumar & Johnson, 2017).

CASE: ONLINE MENTORING EXPERIENCES AT A PRIVATE CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY

An example of an online mentoring program included a pilot program of faculty paired with graduate students in a student-led organization for students of color at a private Christian university. The program was designed to meet students' needs and desires by offering mentoring partnerships with faculty from various disciplines. The program was intended to create a space for students and faculty to partner in relationships that would help them reach their goals, expand their networks, and identify other areas of growth to work on together. Feedback from participants captured periodically via online surveys helped improve the program's quality.

Researchers offered strategies and best practices when forming and implementing online mentoring programs for graduate students (Kumar & Johnson, 2017; Pollard & Kumar, 2021). Three such strategies and best practices include the selection process (or pairing), promoting quality connections, and building and cultivating relationships. The following is an exploration of the university's mentoring pilot program implementation, best practices, and strategies for online mentoring.

MENTOR-MENTEE SELECTION – THE PAIRING PROCESS

The mentorship program staff at the private Christian university chose to partner with the student organization to observe results on a smaller scale before expanding the program to more students. They hosted a meeting with the student organization to announce the program and assess interest for mentees. Interested student participants completed a survey to determine their interests and desires in a mentor.

Due to time constraints and the large number of faculty within the university, the program staff used a different method for recruiting faculty. They extended personal invitations to those most likely to agree to participate, were not currently teaching students within the student organization, and would likely not teach those students in the future based on the students' programs of study. Faculty mentors who agreed to participate were emailed a survey to assist in the student mentor match process. The program staff paired faculty with students based on shared interests and preferences. Notably, gender was not a factor or a consideration in the pairing process. The program staff was also careful not to pair the mentee with a mentor who may become their instructor to avoid a conflict of interest.

PROMOTING POSITIVE CONNECTIONS

Pollard and Kumar (2021) stated that one of the best practices and strategies for mentoring programs is providing structure. Structure entails being clear on expectations and agreements from the outset of the mentoring relationship and maintaining a clear understanding of scheduled meeting times. However, it is essential to be sensitive to the fact that students have full-time careers, family responsibilities, and personal commitments and remain flexible in utilizing multiple means of communication, including text, phone, videoconferencing, and email (Kumar & Johnson, 2017).

The program staff initiated the mentor-mentee connection through an announcement via electronic mail and provided the web address of the mentoring pilot program website. The website included program objectives and a participant guide and contract. Objectives included supporting and developing metacognitive learning strategies, increased personal connection to the university, a better understanding of and equipping to address academic concerns, and students' greater professional insight and confidence about their career of interest. The participant guide identified the responsibilities and expectations of the mentors and mentees. Mentors and mentees were required to sign a contract indicating agreement to the terms of the mentoring relationship.

CULTIVATING THE MENTOR-MENTEE RELATIONSHIP

Successful mentoring is the foundation of a positive graduate school experience (Byrnes et al., 2019). Ultimately the outcome of a mentoring program is to build a lasting relationship between a mentor and mentee. Pollard and Kumar (2017) suggested that trust, similarities in values, empathy, and mentor presence influence the online mentoring relationship. The mentoring relationship should provide academic support, reassurance, guidance, and encouragement.

Although the mentorship program for students of color at a PWI private Christian university was in its infancy, students experienced varied interactions with their mentors. After four months of the program's implementation, the following testimonies were noted from five students of color who were enrolled in one of the university's graduate programs:

Student 1. "The use of a video communication platform, combined with regular meetings, has made getting to know each other easier. Our meetings hold me accountable for my goals, build trust, and provide the direction that I sometimes need."

Student 2. "One of my instructors leveraged his support through weekly video chats and access to his phone number. Having the ability to connect with this instructor via various platforms provided

mentorship in a personalized and meaningful way for me. I remember him taking time to guide me through concerns regarding my dissertation topic."

Student 3. "My relationship with my mentor has been valuable in helping me persist through my doctoral program. His encouragement reminds me that I can achieve this goal. It's also a collegial relationship. Even though he has much more academic experience, we are equal in communication and collaboration."

Student 4. "My mentor holds me accountable for my goals through text messages and phone calls. She is new to the university, and we are working to build our relationship."

Student 5. "I am most appreciative of my mentor. In the short time we have worked together, she has served as my coach and sounding board. I know that my success in the program is due in large part to her continued support."

LIMITATIONS

The private Christian university's pilot mentorship program was implemented in Fall of 2022. Due to the minimal months of implementation, data reporting is limited. The program's initial implementation was provided to a new student organization with 10 members. The limited number of mentor/mentee participants in the program provided a small data sampling. As the number of mentors and mentees increases, more studies should be conducted to determine the impact of the mentorship program on students' persistence, retention, and success.

IMPLICATIONS

Mentoring programs provide graduate students, namely students of color, with structured interactions to increase the probability of completing degrees and achieving career success (Brown et al., 2010). Creating and implementing a successful online mentoring program takes time and effort. The following implications are suggested:

1. Establish goals and objectives: Establish measurable, achievable, and actionable goals for the online mentoring program. Define the objectives that will enable the program to reach these goals.

2. Determine program scope: Decide what types of mentoring and support to offer. For example, program leaders should decide if the program is on job preparation, leadership skills, or career advice.

3. Assess program resources: Program leaders should assess the existing resources, such as staff and technology, and the cost associated with program implementation.

4. Select mentors: Leaders should determine the selection criteria for mentors. Mentors can be alumni, professors, or professional industry experts.

5. Recruit mentees: Program leaders should identify and recruit mentees from groups, such as graduate students, and consider establishing a list of qualifications for mentees, such as GPA, industry interest, or potential impact.

6. Develop mentorship matches: Leaders should create a structure to help match mentees with the most appropriate mentor for their needs and interests.

7. Create a communication plan: Program staff must establish guidelines for methods of communication, such as meeting frequency and duration, communication expectations, etiquette, good topics, and other policies.

8. Set up an evaluation system: Programs should include a system for tracking progress, goals, and successes for mentors, mentees, and the overall program.

9. Evaluate results: Program leaders should track, monitor, and measure the program's success by collecting data, providing surveys, and regularly evaluating the results.

10. Revise or refine the program: As the program continues, program leads should assess the effectiveness of the mentoring program, make necessary changes and updates, and adjust the overall program strategy.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Due to the limited data on the pilot mentorship program, the following recommendations for future research are suggested:

- Conduct a qualitative study and interview mentors to gain insight into their perceptions of how the mentorship program influenced relationship-building with students.

- Conduct a qualitative study to garner students' experiences after one year of the program's implementation.

- Conduct a qualitative study to attain faculty and student mentoring relationship satisfaction at institutions that include mentoring in the tenure and promotion process.

- Conduct a qualitative study to explore mentor-mentee communication, including type and quantity, to build effective relationships.

CONCLUSION

Diverse populations in graduate school settings benefit institutions by improving student satisfaction and increasing graduation rates (Greer et al., 2021). Mentors supporting students of color in graduate programs at Christian universities is one of the ways these students receive professional guidance, gain access to career enhancement, and persist to graduation (Trent et al., 2021). Mentors provided encouragement, fostered inclusion, and increased belongingness (Trent et al., 2021). This paper supports the success of mentoring program intentionality for students of color in increasing graduation rates and encouraging long-term success for students of color. The

students' experiences with their mentoring program at a private Christian university confirm the

relevancy and applicability of the implications and recommendations presented in the paper.

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