

The Impact of Mentoring Programs for African American Male Community College Students

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Retention and graduation rates among African American male community college students have received considerable coverage in recent years. African American male students enroll in community colleges at a steady pace, yet graduation and retention rates are the lowest among this group. In this paper, the author will review the literature pertaining to the implications of mentoring programs for minority male college students. The author will begin by defining mentoring programs, exploring major arguments associated with mentoring programs, and addressing implications that mentoring has on retention for African American male students. In the final part of the paper, the author provides practical recommendations to effectively implement a mentoring program, summarizes current arguments, and reemphasizes the significance of mentoring programs for African American male students in community colleges.

Low graduation and retention rates particularly among African American male community college students are becoming an epidemic in community colleges across the nation. This is an issue because the educational underachievement among African American males not only impacts society but also impacts the social positioning of African American men, as degree attainment is directly attributed to the workforce, income, social mobility, decreased likelihood of incarceration and increased life expectancy (Bush & Bush, 2010). Currently, nearly fifty percent of African American male students are enrolled in community colleges but struggle to obtain academic success (Toldson & Morton, 2011). African American male academic success rates (e.g., grade point averages, [GPAs], course completion, course attendance, and graduation rates) are also alarming in comparison to other male groups (Perrakis, 2008). Data indicates that African American males have the lowest mean GPA among male students in community colleges. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2006), African American males have

an average GPA of 2.64 (cited in Wood, J. & Turner, C., 2006). In contrast, the average GPAs of their American male counterparts are as follows: White males 2.90, Hispanic-Latino males 2.75, and Asian males 2.84 (Wood, J. & Turner, C., , 2006). Hence, African American men have low retention and persistence rates which are prohibiting them from obtaining a degree. According to Majer (2009), 67% of African American male students who begin college never obtain their degree. This illustrates that there is significant potential growth for increased degree conferral rates among African American male community college students (Toldson & Morton, 2011).

There are many factors that negatively influence retention for African American male students enrolled in community colleges. These factors include destructive campus racial environment, insufficient financial aid, lack of college funds for intervention programs, lack of institutional research on minority student retention and achievement, lack of minority faculty and staff, and lack of social and cultural activities (Opp, 2002). In addition to the factors listed above, there are other factors that serve as retention barriers for African American male students such as the lack of academic and social integration, guidance, and support (Opp, 2002). However, recent studies suggest that when support systems are in place, African American male students are more likely to succeed in higher education (LaVant, Anderson & Tiggs, 1997).

Parker & Scott (1985) contend that in order for minority male students to succeed in higher education, a connection must be established between the student and the university personnel (i.e. faculty/staff) by providing a warm, supportive, and nurturing environment the moment that they step on campus (LaVant et al., 1997). Aggravating these problems is the lack of institutional commitment to providing African American males with academic support services (e.g. mentoring) (Zell, 2011). These factors, in turn, affect the graduation rates of African American men, who are not only the least likely to enroll in college, but are also the most likely to drop out without earning a college degree (American Council on Education, 2003; Cuyjet, 2006, JBHE, 2007; cited in Zell, 2011, p. 215). Thus, mentoring programs designed specifically for African American male students have potential to increase retention and graduation rates.

The next section will discuss the definition of mentoring programs, major arguments associated with implementing a mentoring program, address implications that mentoring has on retention for African American male students and provide recommendations to effectively

implement a mentoring program. Finally, it will conclude with a brief summary of the arguments and reemphasize the significance of mentoring programs for African American community college male students.

Background

This paper argues that mentoring programs can increase academic success, provide a sense of community, and build positive relationships for African American male college students. In order to fully understand the importance of a creating a mentoring program, the term mentoring must be defined. Mentoring can be defined as an intentional process between two or more people in which the mentor can serve as the guide, the reality checker, and introduce the mentee to the new environment in which the person is about to enter (Shandley, 1989, as cited in LaVant et al., 1997). In higher education, mentoring is increasingly looked upon as a retention and enrichment tool for undergraduate education (Jacobi, 1991, as cited in LaVant et al., 1997). Mentoring can take shape in many forms other than face-to-face. Some colleges and universities utilize technology as a way to connect African American male students with a mentor. According to Grant and Hines (2009), many colleges utilize web-based mentoring as an innovative solution for African American male students to increase their social and technology skills. These web-based mentoring methods include chat rooms, email, instant messaging, blogging, video chats, and video clips.

Participants in mentoring programs tend to be open to new experiences, take constructive criticism, and develop critical thinking skills (Whitfield & Edwards, 2011). The goal of a mentoring program is to further develop and refine the mentee's skills, abilities, and understanding (LaVant et al., 1997). Thus, mentoring programs could have a real, practical solution to increasing graduation rates in this population and could therefore simultaneously increase African American male student representation on community college campuses.

Literature Review

There are several benefits of implementing mentoring programs as a mechanism to increase retention among African American male community college students. Hoffman & Wallach (2005) argue that minority male students who participate in mentoring programs show higher self-esteem as well as higher levels of academic motivation and performance. Jaswal &

Jaswal (2008) conducted a study that revealed that the earlier a student connects with social and academic systems in the college, the greater their academic achievement, thus their commitment to graduate. In addition, they found that students being mentored typically feel more comfortable sharing their concerns and issues with a mentor rather than faculty or an administrator.

Mentoring programs enable students to connect with professionals and develop relationships that can lead to increased retention, graduation rates and potential employment beyond their college career.

Successful operating models

There are several successful operating models that are currently in place to improve retention rates among minority male students. According to Jaswal & Jaswal (2008), Compton Community College created a Tiered Mentoring Program (TMP), which is a peer mentoring program that assists all new students in fall, spring, and summer semesters. TMP mentors assist new students with their transitional needs to the college environment and provide leadership experience, guidance, and support. These mentors attend new student orientation, assist students the first three days of school, and participate in quarterly phone calls. Also, TMP mentors connect students to professional industrial workers and assist with academic planning for the following semester (Jaswal & Jaswal, 2008).

In addition to TMP, a Vice-President of Student Affairs created a minority male mentoring program at Montgomery County Community College which found that “out of the young black men in the college program 73% stayed in school for the 2010-2011 academic year in comparison with 63% for those not enrolled in the program” (Giordano, 2012, para. 6). This particular mentoring program at Montgomery County Community College is an example of a mentoring program that has the potential to do the same elsewhere to make a difference in the lives of young African American male students.

Because the trend of low retention and graduation rates among African American male students continues to increase, many community colleges are beginning to take a stance by implementing mentoring programs designed specifically for African American males. For example, Forsyth Tech, a community college located in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, instituted the James A. Rousseau minority male mentoring program (Forsyth Tech, 2012). The program provides appropriate support services and other incentives to enable more minority students to successfully complete their educational objectives without dropping out or

interrupting their course of study. Components of this mentoring program include: providing an open forum for minority males to discuss issues and concerns, giving structure and support to promote goal-setting and positive choices in decision-making, increasing the awareness of support services available at the college, and assisting students with practical knowledge of budgeting, investments and savings. The mentors consist of Forsyth Tech's minority faculty and staff. Since the implementation of the James A. Rousseau minority male mentoring program, graduation rates have increased among African American males at Forsyth Technical Community College (Forsyth Tech, 2012).

In addition to providing students with a faculty/staff mentor, the literature also suggests that educators should link undergraduate African American men to older men who model appropriate ways of expressing masculinity, such as college-educated members from the local community (e.g. business leaders, clergy, or community leaders) for mentoring and role modeling. According to Harris, Palmer, & Struve (2011), such mentoring programs model more traditional, socially accepted forms of behavior, such as the ability to speak candidly about their experiences and challenges pertaining to their academic environment without feeling disheartened. In order to provide equitable opportunities for African American male students and enable them to become successful students, community colleges must provide mentoring programs as a way to engage African American male students and increase retention.

Because of the detrimental trend of low graduation rates among African American male students, non-profit organizations and federal agencies have created initiatives and programs to ensure that institutions have the resources and tools to alleviate this problem. For example, the Knights Foundation created the Black Male Engagement (B.M.E.) initiative which strives to provide resources and programs for black males. One of the programs under the B.M.E. initiative is the "Rising to the Occasion" program which seeks to increase the retention and graduation rates among black male students enrolled at the University of Akron (Thomas, 2012).

In addition, there are many conferences, institutes, seminars, and workshops that occur to encourage faculty, administrators, and staff to have conversations in hopes of finding a solution to address the problem of low graduation rates among African American male students, such as the annual QUEST Conference: Minority Male Higher Education Conference, which takes place at Baltimore City Community College. With the support of government agencies, non-profit organizations, and local businesses, mentoring programs could make a positive impact on

African American males' lives and increase their ability to become successful during their college careers (Cuyjet, 1997).

More recently, the Minority Male Community College Collaborative (M2C3) was developed to advance four objectives: to support a national consortium of minority male initiatives to facilitate collaboration and information sharing; to serve as a clearinghouse for federal, state, and institutional data on minority male student outcomes; to conduct and disseminate empirical research on the experiences of minority male community college students; and to facilitate capacity-building among minority male initiatives by integrating assessment, evaluation, and sustainability planning into their efforts (M2C3, 2014).

Benefits and hindrances for developing mentoring programs

There are several benefits and hindrances for developing and implementing mentoring programs for African American male community college students. The American Council on Education released an annual status report on minorities in higher education which indicated that African American males have the lowest graduation rate among other groups (Ashburn, 2007). The assumption for this claim is that African American male students lack sufficient support and guidance which prevents them from successfully obtaining a college degree (Pope, 2002). Additionally, African American male students enter college often lacking the social and academic skills needed to be successful in a college environment (Opp, 2002).

There is significant data to support the argument that African American males have the lowest graduation rate among other groups. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2006), African American male students have the lowest grade point average among other male groups. There is evidence that suggests that African American males take fewer notes in class, spend less time writing papers, participate less frequently in campus activities, and report lower grade point averages (Harper, 2012). These may be factors that prevent African American males from completing their degree.

Benefits of mentoring programs

Mentoring programs provide support systems which enable African American male students to succeed. For example, African American males in mentoring programs tend to show higher self-esteem, higher levels of academic motivation, and performance. Also, their social skills improve because participants gain confidence and feel more comfortable communicating with faculty and university staff (LaVant et al., 1997). In addition, evidence shows that when

African American males have been given the opportunity to participate in higher education, and when well-conceived and formatted support systems such as mentoring programs are in place, they have been successful (Harris, 1996, Morgan, 1996, as cited in La Vant et al., 1997).

Therefore, mentoring programs increase access and equity for African American male students.

African American males who attend predominately white institutions often feel alienated and increasing the number of mentoring programs with college faculty and staff for African American male students can potentially increase retention rates (Grant-Thompson & Atkinson, 1997). African American males also require successful role models that they can identify with to promote academic competence and self-esteem. Hence, African American male college students connections must be established between the student and college personnel during the early stages of enrollment such as new student orientations (Grant-Thompson & Atkinson, 1997).

Hindrances of mentoring programs

While there are many benefits to offering mentoring programs, there are hindrances as well. For example, relationships between African American male students and faculty are often weak (Harper, 2012). Thus, it is harder to measure the effectiveness of mentoring programs if faculty-mentee relationships are weak. The number of minority faculty in colleges and universities is typically low. According to the U.S. Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics (2011), in the fall of 2009 approximately 7% of college and university faculty were black and 79% were white. Whereas at community colleges, due to the limited amount of minority male faculty, recruiting faculty to serve as mentors is often a challenge. In addition, the number of African American males in colleges outweighs the number of minority faculty employed at colleges and universities (Grant-Thompson, & Atkinson, 1997).

Another hindrance is that mentoring programs can be costly, as well as time consuming to implement, assess, and monitor. Although, mentoring programs benefit students and institutions, there is a perception that mentoring programs are expensive, time consuming, and typically benefit a small percentage of students (Jaswal & Jaswal, 2008). A successful mentoring program requires more than just matching a student with a mentor. It requires having well-trained and professional staff to develop the program, quality mentor training, and mentoring recruitment campaigns. According to a report published by the National Mentoring Partnership (2010), the average cost for a mentoring program is \$1,500 per student. Although, mentoring

programs can be expensive and time consuming they can be successfully implemented at a low cost if institutions seek external partnerships.

Impact of Mentoring Programs

In addition to the increase of retention and graduation rates,, African American male students' level of self-esteem may increase due to mentoring programs (Whitfield & Edwards, 2011). Mentors influence their behavior and emotions as it pertains to dealing with difficult situations. Thus, mentors help participants to manage their cognitions and beliefs about success and overcoming obstacles which may translate to increased graduation and retention rates (Whitfield & Edwards, 2011). Moreover, mentoring can result in a student's ability to have a more positive attitude toward school, perform higher academically, have higher self-confidence, and express their feelings in a positive way (Curtis & Hansen-Schwoebel, 1999, as cited in Dappen & Iserhagen, 2005).

Mentoring programs can also increase the likelihood that African American male students will transfer to a four-year college. For example, the Compton Community College (CCC) mentoring program revealed that students successfully transferred to a four-year university by fostering relationships with mentors from California State University Northridge (CSUN) (Hoffman & Wallach, 2005). Students in the CCC mentoring program showed higher self-esteem, significant increases in self-report measures of internal locus of control, and higher levels of academic performance and motivation (Hoffman & Wallach, 2005).

Community colleges that use web-based mentoring programs enable African American males the ability to enhance their communication skills. By utilizing technology as a tool for mentoring, African American male students are able to learn new ways to communicate with faculty, peers, and potential employers (Grant, D. & Hines, R., 2009). This method of mentoring is particularly beneficial for male students who attend school on a part-time basis and work full-time, who otherwise would not have the ability to participate in a mentoring program (Grant, D. & Hines, R., 2009).

African American male students who participate in a mentoring program will have a structured program that provides support, guidance, and academic assistance, which will enable them to be successful academically. In other words, relationships between faculty and students would improve and grade point averages would increase (Stromei, 2000). In addition, African American male students could develop social skills, seek leadership opportunities, and become

more civic-minded (Opp, 2002). As a result, enrollment among African American male students would be more likely to increase on community college campuses, as they would feel a sense of inclusion and feel valued. Also, awareness of cultural sensitivity would likely increase, and lastly, the number of minority faculty and staff employed at colleges and universities would likely increase.

If mentoring programs for African American male students do not prevail, then higher education could change significantly. One long-term effect that could possibly occur is that African American male students give up on the higher education system and seek alternative ways to earn a living that are not productive. For example, African American males might sell drugs or do other illegal activities as a mechanism to provide for their family. Another long-term effect might be that African American male students would continue to enroll in college but drop out before earning a degree. Dropping out of college prior to earning a college degree could potentially put the African American male student at risk of having to pay back student loans, or incur other debts.

On the other hand, short-term effects for instituting a mentoring program could include the strengthening of relationships between African American males and faculty as well as their peers. In addition, the campus environment could become more welcoming, nurturing, and supportive for African American male students. The level of alumni and external support to the institution could also increase, causing a renewed sense of community and pride for the institution. In addition, African American males who participate in a mentoring program are more likely to seek other leadership opportunities on campus and their overall collegiate experience could improve. It is strongly recommended that community colleges take a stance on this issue and implement mentoring programs for African American male students in an effort to increase retention and human capital development.

Recommendations

A study conducted at Kennedy-King Community College during 1992-93, indicated that outside encouragement and support from non-college personnel increases persistence (Mason, 1998). In addition, the results suggested that encouragement from alumni and mentors is invaluable in improving student persistence. External partnerships and institutions can utilize technology and web-based mentoring as a way to engage African American male students. Mentoring programs should also be multi-layered and designed for individual groups. An

example would be students with 20 or more credits serving as peer mentors to assist incoming African American male students to ensure that they are connected. The peer mentors could serve as student volunteers, which would not cost the institution any money.

Another example of a low cost mentoring program is the Arranged Mentor for Instructional Guidance and Organizational (or Other) Support (AMIGOS). The AMIGOS model focuses on both the mentor and the protégé, together interacting with the four centers of the model: the IDEA (Individual Diagnosis, Evaluation, and Assessment), TIPS (Training Instruction Practical Tips), COPE (Center for Organizational Problem Enlightenment), and FUN (Friendship, Understanding, and Nurturing) (Stromei, 2000). Instead of providing mentors with a stipend, perhaps institutions could provide them with credits toward their degree, special recognition ceremonies, or special privileges (i.e. free parking pass or free admission into special events).

Conclusion

Community colleges serve as a gateway into post-secondary education and career readiness for many African American males. As mentioned previously, nearly fifty percent of African American males enroll in community colleges to earn either an associate's degree, certification, or certificate (Toldson & Morton, 2011). However, there is a significant disparity among the number of African American males who persist and actually earn an associate's degree in comparison to other groups (LaVant et al., 1997). While many interventions and initiatives have been implemented in an effort to increase retention for African American male students, few accomplishments have been achieved based on the current state of graduation rates among African American male students. It still remains true that many African American male students arrive at college campuses confused, intimidated, and experience feelings of isolation (Mason, 1998). Hence, they lose interest in the collegiate experience due to the extreme adjustments often felt in a college environment due to the need to acculturate to a new, different, and unfamiliar environment (Cuyjet, 1997).

Enrollment and graduation rates for African American males can improve if colleges and universities take an institutional approach to addressing the issue. Mentoring programs geared towards African American males can be a way of addressing this issue because it provides a structured support system that could enable them to be successful academically and ultimately

increase retention and graduation rates. In addition, institutions must remember that African American male students need a warm, supportive and nurturing environment to facilitate their long-term success (LaVant et al., 1997). In order to effectively increase retention among African American male college students, additional minority faculty is needed to serve as mentors.

The establishment of a mentoring program designed specifically for African American male students can enhance their career and professional development, self-esteem, academic and social skills, and increase their likelihood of obtaining a college degree. In addition, mentoring programs can improve retention rates for community colleges. Mentoring programs can also increase the likelihood that African American male students will successfully transfer to four year universities. The establishment of a mentoring program for African American males can increase human capital by providing more African American men with the skills, tools, and resources needed in order to be a productive citizen. Without a college degree, the career choices and possibilities are extremely limited (Cuyjet, 1997). If mentoring programs are not established future issues such as lack of career readiness, diversity in the workplace and graduation rates will decline.

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