ASHE/LUMINA FELLOWS SERIES
BUFFY SMITH, UNIVERSITY OF ST. THOMAS

Mentoring programs: The great hope or great hype?

Colleges and universities should restructure their mentor programs to systematically unveil the hidden curriculum and assist underrepresented students with navigating the institutional culture of higher education.

Mentoring has oftentimes been touted as critical to the academic success of underrepresented students defined as first-generation college students and/or students of color. Several studies on traditional mentor programs have reported success increasing the retention and graduation rates among underrepresented students (Haring, 1997; Jacobi, 1991; Johnson, 1989; Laden, 1999; Smith, 2005). Three major implicit goals of mentoring programs are to:

1. Reduce alienation underrepresented students experience at predominantly White institutions.
2. Grant students greater access to informal social networks with faculty and academic professionals (Girves, Zepeda, Gwathmey, 2005; Johnson, 1989; Watson, Johnson, & Austin, 2004).
3. Improve overall academic achievement and retention rates.

This critical essay examines the influence that different kinds of academic mentor programs have on underrepresented students' academic achievement and success. Data presented are based on a qualitative study consisting of 8 mentors and 12 mentees who participated in one of two academic mentor programs at a large Midwest research university. It is important to note that all the names of the programs and individuals have been changed to protect the anonymity of the respondents in the study (Smith, 2004). Each respondent was interviewed for approximately two hours. Of the 12 mentees, 9 were female, and 6 were first-generation college students. In terms of race/ethnicity, the sample included 6 Black, 2 Latino, 2 Asian, 1 American Indian, and 1 Biracial (Black and White) mentee. The eight mentors were equally divided among men and women.

The race/ethnicity of the mentors included 3 Black, 2 White, 2 Latino, and 1 Biracial (Black and Middle-Eastern). In addition, two mentors defined themselves as first-generation college students.

The primary question guiding this essay is: What mentoring program model and what curriculum within such a model can best assist underrepresented students with understanding and successfully navigating the culture of higher education?

Research indicates that "within three years of entering higher education, more than one-third leave empty-handed" (Goldrick-Rab & Roksa, 2008, p. 3). In fact, of "students starting at a four-year institution, only 34% finish a B.A. in four years, 64% within six years and 69% within eight-and-a-half years" (Goldrick-Rab & Roksa, 2008, p. 3). According to the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development, the United States has

the highest college dropout rates among developed nations, and only ranks 10th in the college attainment of its 25–34-year-old population (Soares & Mazzeo, 2008).

The persistent decline in college attainment disproportionately affects students of color and students who come from low-income families. For instance in 2006, 23.7% of Whites, 12.2% of African Americans, and 6.7% of Hispanics ages 20-29 had a four-year college degree or higher (Osterman, 2008). Likewise, socioeconomically disadvantaged students encounter more challenges on their journey to a postsecondary degree. In 2006, only 19% of young people (20–29-year-olds) who came from families with incomes below $25,000 earned an associate degree or higher. However, 76% of young people who came from families with incomes $76,000 or more graduated with at least a community college degree (Osterman, 2008).

Types of mentoring programs and research limitations

One-to-one mentoring

The most popular approach to mentoring is the one-to-one relationship. This type of mentoring is also referred to as "the grooming model" (Haring, 1997). One-to-one mentoring relationships usually pair students with an academic professional or faculty member. Two major problems with the "grooming model" are:

1. Mentors can use racial and gender differences as explanations for why their mentoring relationship does not work.
2. The model can serve to promote the status quo because mentors often select mentees whom they perceive to be more like them and in turn mold their mentees to be just like them. For instance, a White male professor may prefer to mentor another White male because of shared racial and gender characteristics (Gonzales-Rodriguez, 1995).

It is important to note that there is inconclusive evidence as to whether matching mentors and mentees on similar racial and gender characteristics promotes successful mentoring relationships (Haring, 1997; Jacobi, 1991; Johnson, 1989).

Network mentoring

An alternative approach to the one-to-one model is network mentoring. Network mentoring requires an intentional sharing of values, experiences, and perspectives among all participants in the mentor program. In other words, all students would benefit from learning from all mentors in the program instead of just one assigned mentor (Haring, 1997). Two significant advantages for implementing the network-mentoring model are:

1. There is no longer a need to find the "perfect match" between mentors and mentees. Mentors and mentees would not be able to cite racial or gender differences or lack of "chemistry" as justification for not having a successful mentoring relationship.
2. Students can learn more about the institutional culture from various perspectives and not worry about being cloned by one particular mentor (Haring, 1997).

Limitations of mentoring research

One of the major methodological limitations with research on mentor models is that programs do not differentiate between whether it is the actual mentoring relationship or academic intervention services that influence students' academic success. Academic mentor programs are usually

> Colleges and universities have a responsibility to provide all students equal access to both the formally exposed and hidden curricula. Since achieving academic success requires that students master both curricula, identifying and unveiling the hidden curriculum to students should be the first priority of mentor programs.

nested within several academic support services (e.g., academic counseling, learning centers, and tutorial services). As a result, it is very difficult to isolate and measure whether it is the actual mentoring relationships or the academic support services that directly affect students' academic success (e.g., GPA, retention rate, graduation rate). The other significant limitation with studies on mentor programs is that mentor programs are small and the research is usually conducted at one institution. Thus, internal and external validity limitations are the two most common problems with measuring the effects of mentoring on academic success (Jacobi, 1991).

Building academic cultural capital

Traditional academic mentor programs operate from the presupposition that underrepresented students, especially first-generation college students, lack the institutional knowledge needed to achieve academic success and navigate the culture of higher education.

As a response to this institutional knowledge gap, traditional mentor programs pair faculty members and academic professionals with students and hope that the mentees will acquire the necessary institutional knowledge that they need in order to thrive in college (Johnson, 1989; Laden, 1999; Schultz, Colton, & Colton, 2001). Unfortunately, most traditional mentor programs have not undergone systematic and rigorous evaluations, which make it difficult to measure the direct relationship between mentoring and academic success (Jacobi, 1991; Johnson, 1989).

Having a foundation of "institutional knowledge" can also be referred to as having a base of "academic cultural capital" (Bourdieu, 1986; Carter, 2003; McDonough, 1997). Bourdieu (1986) defines cultural capital as what individuals know, in terms of skills, education, experiences, and other privileges, that grants them a higher status in life. Bourdieu also refers to institutional cultural capital, which relates to the embodied cultural capital of the dominant social group which is normalized and embedded within an institution. For instance, most colleges and universities primarily operate and govern from a White, middle-class cultural perspective. Accordingly, this dominant perspective becomes integrated within the curriculum and programs of educational institutions. Unfortunately, many underrepresented students may feel marginalized and invalidated when their values and belief systems do not reflect what is already entrenched throughout the institution (Nora & Cabrera, 1996; Rendón, 1992, 1994, 2002; Smith, 2004).

Revealing the hidden curriculum

A key goal of mentor programs should be to assist underrepresented students with acquiring academic cultural capital in order to negotiate "border living" (Rendón, 1992), which essentially means helping students bridge the gap between their "home culture" and the "institutional culture" of higher education. To achieve this goal, mentor programs would have to intentionally reveal the "hidden curriculum" to students. The hidden curriculum refers to the unwritten and unspoken norms, values, and the rules of the educational game which govern the behaviors and interactions among faculty, academic professionals, and students (Apple, 1990; Margolis et al., 2001). An example of revealing the hidden curriculum is learning appropriate ways on how to disagree with a professor on "controversial issues" in a respectful manner that does not challenge authority. Another example would include how to engage in civil discourse when classmates make controversial statements. These types of "codes of behavior" may not be self-evident to all students.

In contrast, the formal curriculum refers to written core requirements and policies that students must satisfactorily complete in order to graduate from college. The formal curriculum is often found in the student catalog or handbook. Colleges and universities have a responsibility to provide all students equal access to both the formally exposed and hidden curricula. Since achieving academic success requires that students master both curricula, identifying and unveiling the hidden curriculum to students should be the

> Students do not know what they do not know. They need mentors to guide them through the higher education maze and to narrow the gap between the students' and the institutions' culture.

first priority of mentor programs. The best approach for teaching students how to navigate and decode the institutional culture of higher education is to help them build academic cultural capital.

Learning how to use time more effectively and understanding the culture of the institution represent additional examples of the hidden curriculum that must be unraveled in order for students to attain academic success. Mentors and mentees both agreed that time management was an important academic and social skill that students needed to learn. For example, Maxine, a Latina first-generation college student said:

You have to be able to stay on top of things and be able to balance everything. You can't just come here and just think that you are going to do all of your homework, and do all your school work because (laughter) that's not going to be a good thing. You can't just come here and think you are going to just be social, so you need to find the balance between both of those.

Maxine perceives balancing academics and social activities as part of learning how to navigate the culture of the institution and becoming a successful, well-rounded student. This perspective is also shared by Grace, her mentor, who is a Latina from a working-class background. Grace remarked:

I think that to be really successful, students have to understand the culture of the university, and each university is going to have a different culture. And they have to learn how to use it to their advantage and to maneuver within it. They have to learn academic strategies, study skills, resources, planning, preparations—all of that. They have to learn interpersonal and fiscal skills.

Grace discusses the connection between academic culture and academic success. She argues that it is critical for students to know how to maneuver themselves within the academic culture of the university. She suggests that students have to possess time management, interpersonal and fiscal skills in order to navigate the academic culture and achieve educational success. Some of the skill sets Grace recommended (e.g., knowing how to get along with people) belong to the domain of the hidden curriculum, which is not readily transparent to many students. Thus, one could infer that if mentoring relationships explicitly taught some of the skill sets that Grace suggested, these relationships could benefit students who either do not know that a hidden curriculum exists or do not know how to navigate the hidden curriculum.

Building relationships with professors

Students need to learn how to discuss their grades and in the process build strong, positive relationships with professors. The following quote is an example of one student's approach to building relationships with professors. Jovaun, a Black, low-income, first-generation, male college student, stated:

I think you [need to] put on a mask to appease people that you really need to get the most help from. If you piss them off or you say something or show disinterest, then they are not going to be willing to put their neck out for you.

Jovaun's remarks about "masking" demonstrates the frustration that some students experience when they have to "play the game" in order to succeed in college. Another problem that students complain about in terms of playing the game is that the "rules" or expectations are not written down in the college student handbook or on the professors' syllabi. In response to this lack of transparency, students have to discover their professors' expectations through direct experience (trial and error). A good way to reveal this type of hidden curriculum is through mentoring relationships. If students feel that they have to put on a "mask" (i.e., hide their authentic selves in order to play the educational game) to achieve academic success, mentoring programs should teach students explicitly and systematically the academic cultural capital that is necessary for effectively "masking" in higher education. Simply put, students do not know what they do

not know. They need mentors to guide them through the higher education maze and to narrow the gap between the students' and the institutions' culture.

Building social capital

One of the unwritten rules in higher education is that academic social networks play a significant role in students' academic achievement. Therefore, a second goal of mentor programs should be to help students build social capital (i.e., a strong base of academic social networks) because social contacts become conduits with which students acquire academic cultural capital. Social capital and academic cultural capital are interrelated and reinforce each other in a cyclical mentoring process. In other words, students are able to increase their academic cultural capital when they increase their social capital and vice versa (Smith, 2007).

Coleman (1988, 1990) defines social capital as a process in which individuals access one another's human capital and other resources such as prestige, status, and money through strong social networks. Coleman argues that social capital is created through the establishment of shared norms and expectations, reinforced through sanctions, reproduced through the transmission of information channels (i.e., knowledge, skills, and resources) and maintained through the closure (i.e., close ties and accountability among people) of social networks. Therefore, academic mentor programs could help students build social capital by providing them with the necessary knowledge and skills they need to establish successful academic

social networks with faculty, academic professionals and other students.

Ten mentees stated that their mentors did a good job referring them to different people and services on campus, and they considered this to be an important component of the mentoring process. However, two mentees stated that their mentors did not help them network. For instance, Basema, an Asian American, working class, first-generation female college student, described how her mentor helped her network:

I love that part of having a mentor. She knows who to go to all the time. When I was going to do the study abroad thing, I was, like, who should I talk to, and she was like, Armando Hill, and she gave me his number and all that stuff. She always seems to know who to go to, and I love that part about the mentoring thing.

Basema is expressing appreciation for the referrals she received from her mentor. However, she did not share the same enthusiasm for the "random courtesy introductions" made by her mentor at different mentoring events. She remarked:

Yeah, I don't remember all of them (chuckle) but when, like, for the Everlean Mentor Program when we all get together, for the fall picnic, the one we just had, she introduced me to a whole bunch of people. You know, this is this person, and they do this (laughter). I don't remember too many of them.

Through random courtesy introductions mentees were introduced to

> Mentor programs cannot focus on simply providing access to "superficial networks." They must intentionally foster the development of students' social capital that will enable them to create and sustain strong academic mentoring social relationships.

many people through their mentors. However, since most mentees did not recall names or job positions of the people they met, the process calls into question the effectiveness of these random courtesy introductions, which can amount to a form of campus directory assistance. Randomly introducing students to key people can be ineffective. The objective of mentoring programs should be to develop and foster supportive and effective academic social networks for mentees. In order to promote strong academic social networks, mentors should follow up with their mentees and their colleagues to ensure that they are developing a positive professional relationship (e.g., the mentor could facilitate the first lunch meeting between the mentee and colleague). Mentor programs cannot focus on simply providing access to "superficial networks." They must intentionally foster the development of students' social capital that will enable them to create and sustain strong academic mentoring social relationships.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Traditional academic mentoring programs are often touted as the "great hope" for helping underrepresented students attain academic success. However, there is not enough rigorous research evidence to fully substantiate this assertion, as much research in this area suffers from internal and external validity problems, which could then lead some educators to believe that mentor programs are just a "great hype." On the other hand, mentoring programs can certainly be improved, and the following are offered as recommendations that could help realize the potential of mentoring programs. These recommendations could be incorporated within most current programs, including TRIO-sponsored mentor programs. It is important to emphasize that the recommendations would not necessarily require additional resources. Rather, what is being emphasized is that resources be used more efficiently and that institutional accountability be increased.

1. Work with a network-mentoring model

The first approach to restructuring mentor programs is to move beyond the one-to-one mentoring model to a network-mentoring model, which would allow students to acquire academic cultural capital from multiple mentors. The network-mentoring model would also help students acquire more social capital from a network of mentors than from just one mentor. In addition, the mentor network would allow mentors to share knowledge, teaching strategies, and resources with other mentors. Mentees would also have the opportunity to learn from all the mentees in the program.

2. Design a mentoring curriculum handbook

Mentoring programs should focus on two explicit goals: increasing students' academic cultural capital and developing social capital. Designing a uniform mentoring curriculum handbook would help mentor programs address these two goals and standardize the academic cultural capital and social capital that mentees receive within the program. This would ensure that all mentees receive the same quality and quantity of institutional knowledge. The mentoring curriculum handbook would be based on the major components of the hidden curriculum (i.e., how to build relationships with professors and classmates, how to decode the culture of the institution, etc.). The handbook would also provide mentors with a blueprint for how to transmit academic cultural capital and social capital to mentees.

3. Improve the evaluation of mentoring programs

A more rigorous evaluation process for mentoring programs requires designing a pre- and postassessment of how much academic cultural capital and social capital students acquire through mentoring networks. For instance, mentor programs would conduct a preassessment of students' general knowledge about what is needed to navigate the institution's academic and social life at the beginning of the program. This could be achieved through a survey and a 30-minute one-on-one interview. Next, students would attend several mandatory workshops facilitated by the network of mentors. After each workshop, the students would complete a postassessment survey and a 30-minute one-on-one interview on what types of academic cultural capital and social capital skills they acquired through the workshops.

In conclusion, if colleges and universities do not systematically unveil the hidden curriculum to all students, they risk being perceived as institutional gatekeepers who intentionally or unintentionally mystify the academic and social culture of higher education to the detriment of underserved students. However, these institutions could minimize this "mystification process" by establishing mentor programs that encourage and support a network of mentors in transmitting the necessary academic and social skills that students need to master to achieve academic success.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Buffy Smith is an assistant professor in the Department of Sociology and Criminal Justice at the University of St. Thomas. The courses she teaches include Social Problems, Race & Ethnicity, Social Stratification, and the Sociology Senior Seminar. She was an ASHE/Lumina Fellow in 2003. This critical essay is based on her dissertation, entitled, "Demystifying the Higher Education System: Rethinking Academic Cultural Capital, Social Capital and the Academic Mentoring Process." She earned her Ph.D. in sociology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison (2004). Her research focuses on how colleges and universities can assist underrepresented students with understanding and navigating the institutional culture of higher education in order to achieve academic success. Dr. Smith's publications have been featured in research- and practice-oriented journals such as *African American Research Perspectives* and *Equity & Excellence in Education.* She can be reached via e-mail at bsmith@stthomas.edu.

ABOUT LUMINA FOUNDATION FOR EDUCATION

Lumina Foundation for Education is an Indianapolis-based, private foundation dedicated to expanding access and success in education beyond high school. For more information, please visit www.luminafoundation.org.

ABOUT ASHE

The Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE) is a scholarly society with approximately 1,900 members dedicated to higher education as a field of study. For more information, please visit www.ashe.ws.

ASHE   IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY   MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY   LUMINA Foundation for Education

REFERENCES

Apple, M. (1990). *Ideology and curriculum* (2nd ed.). New York: Routledge, Chapman and Hall, Inc.

Bourdieu, P. (1986). The forms of capital. In J. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education* (pp. 241-258). Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.

Carter, P. (2003). 'Black' cultural capital, status positioning, and schooling conflicts for low-income African American youth. *Social Problems, 50*(1), 136-155.

Coleman, J. (1988). Social capital in the creation of human capital. *American Journal of Sociology, 94*(Issue Supplement), S95-S120.

Coleman, J. (1990). *Foundations of social theory*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press.

Girves, J. E., Zepeda, Y., & Gwathmey, J. K. (2005). Mentoring in a post-affirmative action world. *Journal of Social Issues, 61*(3), 449-479.

Goldrick-Rab, S., & Roksa, J. (2008). *A federal agenda for promoting student success and degree completion*. Washington, D.C.: Center for American Progress.

Gonzales-Rodriguez, Y. E. (1995). Mentoring to diversity: A multicultural approach. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education, 66*, 69-77.

Haring, M. (1997). Networking mentoring as a preferred model for guiding programs for underrepresented students. In H. T. Frierson (Ed.). *Diversity in higher education: Mentoring and diversity in higher education* (pp. 63-76). Greenwich, Connecticut: JAI Press Inc.

Jacobi, M. (1991). Mentoring and undergraduate academic success: A literature review. *Review of Educational Research, 61*(4), 505-532.

Johnson, C. S. (1989). Mentoring programs. In M. L. Upcraft & J. Gardner (Ed.), *The freshman year experience: Helping students survive and succeed in college* (pp. 118-128). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Laden, B. (1999). Socializing and mentoring college students of color: The Puente project as an exemplary celebratory socialization model. *Peabody Journal of Education, 74*(2), 55-74.

Margolis, E., Soldatenko, M., Acker, S., & Gair, M. (2001). Peekaboo: Hiding and outing the curriculum. In E. Margolis (Ed.), *The hidden curriculum in higher education* (pp. 1-19). New York: Routledge.

McDonough, P. M. (1997). *Choosing colleges: How social class and schools structure opportunity*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Nora, A., & Cabrera, A. F. (1996). The role and perceptions of prejudice and discrimination on the adjustment of minority students to college. *Journal of Higher Education, 67*(2), 119-148.

Osterman, P. (2008). *College for all?: The labor market for college-educated workers*. Washington, D.C.: Center for American Progress.

Rendón, L. I. (1992). From the barrio to the academy: Revelations of a Mexican American "scholarship girl." In L. S. Zwerling, & H. B. London (Eds.), *First generation students: Confronting the cultural issues* (pp. 55-64). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Rendón, L. I. (1994). Validating culturally diverse students: Toward a new model of learning and student development. *Innovative Higher Education, 19*(1), 33-50.

Rendón, L. I. (2002). Community college Puente: A validating model of education. *Journal of Educational Policy, 16*(4), 642-667.

Schultz, E. L., Colton, G., & Colton, C. (2001). The adventor program: Advisement and mentoring for students of color in higher education. *Journal of Humanistic Counseling, Education and Development, 40*(2), 208-218.

Smith, B. (2004). *Demystifying the higher education system: Rethinking academic cultural capital, social capital, and the academic mentoring process*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Smith, B. (2005). The great hope of academic mentor programs: The unfulfilled promise. *African American Research Perspectives, 11*(1), 169-181.

Smith, B. (2007). Accessing social capital through the academic mentoring process. *Equity & Excellence in Education, 40*(1), 36-46.

Soares, L., & Mazzeo, C. (2008). *College-ready students, student-ready colleges: An agenda for improving degree completion in postsecondary education*. Washington, D.C.: Center for American Progress.

Watson, G., Johnson, G. C., & Austin, H. (2004). Exploring relatedness to field of study as an indicator of student retention. *Higher Education Research and Development, 23*(1), 57-72.

Suggested Citation: