

University Retention of Students-of-Color: Participation in a Peer-to-Peer Mentoring Program

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I. Background/Introduction

- ❖ **College enrollment in the US** is projected to reach record heights, notably between years 2018 to 2024 (Synder, de Brey, & Dillow, 2016).
- ❖ **More students than ever before in US history** are graduating from high school (White House Press, 2016), sparking interest and reasoning for understanding *considerations for contributing factors that support successful school transitioning, especially access and participation in higher education.*
- ❖ *We examined contexts that foster college student development of historically underrepresented college students in the areas of academic and social adjustment, preparation, and engagement with institutional resources via direct involvement in an established university peer-to-peer mentoring program.*

II. Guiding Premise

- > The **purpose** of this university peer-to-peer mentoring program was to support freshmen and transfer students in their transition to college student life.
- > This program emphasized the importance of academic excellence and personal growth. *Freshmen and transfer students are paired up with current student leaders who exhibit a balance between academics and overall campus involvement.*

III. Theory

- Tinto's (1993) student integration into an institution can occur along **two facets, the academic and the social.** Academic integration occurs when students become connected to the intellectual life of the college, while social integration occurs when students create relationships and connections outside of the classroom (Tinto, 1993).
- **A main premise** is that if colleges provide enough structured opportunities for students to engage with the institution, students will become integrated into the college and persist at a higher rate. *Students in the peer-to-peer mentoring program were mentored by upper-classmen who were both academically successful and socially invested in the university.*

IV. Research Design/Methods

- **Participants** consisted of a diverse pool of **Mentees** and **Peer-Mentors**, all who attend a mid-sized PWI in the Southwest region of the United States. *There was a diverse representation across stakeholders in regards to race, ethnicity, gender, classification, majors, geographic upbringing, parental education, socioeconomic status, and career aspirations.*
 - **Peer-Mentors** were selected from a diverse and competitive pool of applicants in order to have a fair representation for the **Mentees** to select from. **Peer-Mentors** were mainly selected based on their ability to demonstrate their capability of balancing their academic and social life. Agreement to one-on-one meetings, scheduled social gatherings, as well as commitment. High cumulative GPAs and leadership involvement in various student organizations was requested.
 - The **Mentees** volunteered to join the program based on an invitation that all first-year students received the summer before enrolling at the university. Those students who applied and agreed to all of the program's expectations were accepted into the program. *Mentees were given the opportunity to select their top three mentors and were guaranteed to be paired with at least of their top three choices.*
 - **Our study focused on interviewing three Peer-Mentors and their respective three Mentees - two males and four females.**

VI. Discussion

- **We gained insights into effective means of positively reinforcing ethnically diverse first-generation college students so that they can develop academically and socially, ultimately integrate well into the college setting.**
- The **dedication** that the **Peer-Mentors** gave to their **Mentees** surpassed their obligations. **Peer-Mentors** helped their mentees beyond academics and campus involvement; many made their **Mentees** *"feel more at home"* or motivated them to stay focused despite the stress of classes and college life.
- Since all of the **Peer-Mentors** had different classification, majors, backgrounds, and were involved in different organizations, their experiences and knowledge combined were vast and varied.

VII. Program Revisioning

- ⌘ **Peer-Mentors as a resource.** Inclusion of strategic bi-weekly meetings to ensure consistent opportunities for communication and collaboration (e.g., exchanging of information with **Mentees**; further relationship building, and accountability).
- ⌘ **Mentee Commitment & Incentive(s).** Targeting management and navigation of studies as well as personal and social development. Consistency in reminding **Mentees** of benefits of the program.
- ⌘ **Promotion of Peer-to-Peer Program.** 1st generation workshops; during orientation; and prioritizing approaches to methods of communicating how **Peer-Mentors** would be reaching out to **Mentees**.
- ⌘ **Links to Other Campus Services.** Particularly Financial Aid and Employment offices

V. Findings

- ✓ **Analysis of the data revealed** that this established university peer-to-peer mentoring program was effective.
- ✓ There were **notable impacts** on a diverse pool of first-year college students' academic and social integration on campus *through a positive first-year experience, college involvement, and retention.*
- ✓ The overarching **common themes** that were underscored from the interviews centered around **(1) Academic** as well as **Student Involvement** (e.g., such as greater awareness of campus resources) and **(2) Friendship** (e.g., sense of affiliation and belonging).

- ☑ **Academics.** **Mentees** expressed how their mentors helped them adjust to college by being a point of reference in finding campus resources, including study habits and time management.
 - **Mentor**, serving in a tutoring capacity, *"I would look over their paper and edited it with them."*
 - **Mentor**, *"I would provide them with an individual I personally knew who could help them in their studies."*
 Formation of supportive faculty relationships. **Mentees** were more susceptible to their **Peer-Mentors** advice since many looked up to them and could relate to them on a more personal level than they would with older professionals. For **Peer-Mentors**, it was important to help their **Mentees** avoid some of the same mistakes they had made.
 - **Mentor**, *"...I knew that if they started off bad {academically} it was going to be a hard road to climb, but if you start off at the top and falter a little bit, you'll be ok, for the most part."*

- ☑ **Student Involvement.** The program was also structured to remind the **Peer-Mentors** of reinforcing the importance for the **Mentees** to get and stay involved with campus and community organizations.
 - **Mentor**, *"...I asked him to {prioritize which organization will benefit him most} and though he dropped some he continued to do rugby of which I encouraged him to do because you do need a social aspect, and it's actually exercise as well."*
 - **Mentee**, *"if you are surrounded by a successful circle of friends then they will also rub off on you. You all will benefit from one another through methods of studying, or better study habits, or better habits in general."***Mentors** advocated early involvement in college. Identified senior **Mentors**, for example, themselves were completing internships. Some **Mentors** helped **Mentees** find employment on campus or served as a reference.

- ☑ **Friendship.** **Mentees** that were interviewed expressed a huge gratitude towards the mentoring program
 - **Mentee**, *"...gave me a friend right off the bat from college {so I wouldn't be by myself} and there was someone to answer all my questions, whether it was about class, or my dining dollars. Anything I had questions about {I knew she would be there for me to answer my questions} or if I needed anything she would text me."*
 - **Mentee**, *"made me feel so at home...I really enjoyed the campus and the people I've been introduced to by her."*