

Making Meaning of Peer Mentorship for Black Male Community College Students

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Introduction

Research surrounding student success and development often focuses on how mentorship affects students' non-cognitive and cognitive growth, college-engagement, and ultimately their performance and persistence (Astin, 1999; Brown, Davis, McClendon, 1999; Brooms, 2018; Campbell & Campbell, 1997; Crisp, 2010; Strayhorn, 2010). Whereas there are countless studies focused on mentoring relationships as related to college students, two common challenges exist. The first is a universally understood and accepted definition of what mentorship and mentoring experience are (Crisp & Cruz, 2009). The second is, how students make sense of their mentoring experiences (Brooms & Davis, 2017; Kegan, 1994). For Black male students, this need is especially concerning. Black male students stop out of higher education institutions at rates higher than their peers in both the 4-year and 2-year college sector. According to data from the National Center for Education Statistics Table 326.20 (2016), the graduation rates for the 2012 cohort of male students of color at public 2-year institutions, was 11.4% for Black males, 17.6% for Latino males, 21.5% for Pacific-Islander males. These rates are drastically lower when compared to the graduation rates of White male students, which was 25% (NCES, 2016).

Male students of color face many challenges that put their academic success at risk. In addition to managing many competing responsibilities such as work and family obligations, male students of color also deal with stereotypes about their ability to succeed. For some Black male college students, identification with academia can be a double-edged sword. A study by Nadler & Komarraju (2016) found that embracing an academic identity could lead to isolation and alienation for the student since "identifying with the academic domain may make them more susceptible to losing social support from friends and family and feeling uncertain about their fit within White-dominated academic settings" (p. 669). This uncertainty can cause peers to disconnect from academia, thus isolating themselves and reducing the pool of available social support for Black males as a whole. This suggests that mentoring programs may fill this gap by socially integrating Black male students into the culture of the institution through role modeling, kinship, and community building (Brooms, 2016; Davis, 1999; Grier-Reed & Wilson, 2016; Harper, 2013; Strayhorn, 2008), as well as, offering these students a pathway to academic success and increased retention (Bonner & Bailey, 2006; Brooms, 2016, 2017; Brooms, Goodman & Clark, 2015; Palmer et al., 2014). Countless dollars are spent in developing and implementing mentoring programs for Black male students, with limited data emerging as the need for best practices continues to climb (Wood, 2011). Research on Black male initiatives shows the importance of community and identity affirmation (Brooms & Davis, 2017; Clark & Brooms, 2018),

Therefore, this paper offers a student-centered conceptual model to consider in evaluating peer mentoring interventions for Black male community college students to expand understanding on how Black male students make meaning of peer mentoring and related mentoring experiences, and whether or not this meaning-making aligns with the intended goal of mentoring programs. This model is best suited for qualitative inquiry. To achieve this, the following research questions must be asked:

1. How do students define mentorship?
2. Where on the continuum of self-authorship does their definition of mentorship primarily reside?
3. Including formal and informal mentors, where on the continuum of self-authorship do students' experiences with peer mentors reside?
4. How do the student's perceptions of peer mentoring experiences align or deviate from the stated goals of peer mentoring programs?

Overall, we believe this work may help stakeholders center student voices, and progress their ways of understanding mentoring, mentorship experiences, and students' experiences with mentors –to improve students' engagement and performance.

Background

Bush and Bush (2010a) affirm that the community college is the best positioned educational institution to address the plight of Black male students towards achievement in higher education. Despite this awesome responsibility, several researchers indicate that efforts to improve outcomes for Black men at community colleges fall to siloed offices on campus, or worse, are spirited attempts from passionate individuals to better support, engage, retain, and graduate Black male collegians (Baber et al., 2015a; Harper & Kuykendall, 2012).

Numerous scholars stipulate that strategic, data-driven, institution-wide efforts are needed to address the issues that hinder the success of men of Color in higher education (Baber et al., 2015b; Bush & Bush, 2010a; Harper & Kuykendall, 2012; Wood, Palmer, & Harris, 2015). The need for more research regarding the societal, social, academic, and institutional factors that contribute to the disengagement of Black and Latino men at community colleges is urgent, evident, and requires stakeholder buy-in at every level (Barker & Avery, 2012; Bush & Bush, 2010a).

In a similar vein, researchers have warned against the tendency to frame disparities for men of Color as “products of individual dispositions rather than outcomes of structural inequalities” (Baber et al., 2015a, p. 99). By focusing solely on individual deficits among Black and Latino men, colleges miss out on a tremendous opportunity to remove structural and systemic institutional barriers to success for this underserved population (Wood et al., 2015).

The unique needs of commuter students of Color are primarily ignored on today's campuses and need to be a priority in higher education research. To best understand the challenges in conceptualization, we must consider the unique needs of the Black male college student. While recognizing that Black males do not have a homogenous experience, national data suggest that these students tend to be older than their peers, have higher levels of academic under-preparedness, financial need and financial distress, and are more like to have familial responsibilities (Glenn, 2004; Wood, 2014).

Mentoring in Undergraduate Education

Over the past few decades, mentoring has emerged as an important retention tool in undergraduate education (Asgari & Carter, 2016; Good, 2000; Jacobi, 1991; Keup, 2016; Kodama, 2015). A growing body of research supports the notion that mentorship plays a crucial role in effective undergraduate education and the success of students (Asgari & Carter, 2016; Keup, 2016; Rios-Ellis et al., 2015). Despite rising interest in mentorship as a viable retention and engagement tool for college students (Asgari & Carter, 2016), the sheer diversity of mentoring programs and ambiguity regarding an operational definition of mentoring contribute to a continued “lack of clarity about the antecedents, outcomes, characteristics, and mediators of mentoring relationships despite a growing body of empirical research” (Jacobi, 1991, p. 505).

Although mentoring can encompass an incredibly diverse array of functions and roles, Jacobi (1991) identified three main components of the mentoring relationship: (a) emotional and psychological support, (b) direct assistance with academic/professional development, (c) and role modeling. Moreover, Jacobi emphasized that mentoring interactions are direct, personal, and reciprocal, with both the mentor and mentee benefiting from the relationship.

Furthermore, strong mentoring relationships are linked to academic success, increased social support, enhanced self-esteem, and higher educational satisfaction (Asgari & Carter, 2016; Morales, Ambrose-Roman, & Perez-Maldonado, 2016; Rios-Ellis et al., 2015; Shotton, Oosahwe, & Cintrón, 2007; Strayhorn, 2012). According to Stanton-Salazar and Spina (2003), compelling mentoring “challenges the protege to aspire to certain goals, teach him or her how to cope with the challenges that lie ahead, helps him or her develop the requisite skills to progress toward identified goals, provides moral support, and sometimes transmits or negotiates the transmission of key resources and opportunities” (p. 238).

Peer Mentorship

The notion of peer mentoring suggests an ongoing relationship whereby a “more experienced student helps a less experienced student (mentee) improve overall academic performance by providing advice, support, and knowledge” (Moschetti, Plunkett, Efrat, & Yomtov, 2017, p. 2). Peer mentoring has been noted as an influential factor in the retention of college students, particularly among first-generation college students, first-year college students, and racial/ethnic minorities (Asgari & Carter, 2016; Jaswal & Jaswal, 2008; Keup, 2016; Kiyama & Luca, 2014; Rios-Ellis et al., 2015; Shotton et al., 2007). Peer mentoring has been linked to increases in students’ academic performance, self-efficacy, and social integration (Asgari & Carter, 2016; Hall & Jaugietis, 2011; Morales et al., 2016; Moschetti, Plunkett, Efrat, & Yomtov, 2017). Morales et al. (2016) contend that peer mentoring can lead to substantive gains in developmental course pass rates, and aid mentees in developing effective study habits and academic strategies.

The influence of peers on students’ college experience is profound. Collegiate peers can influence students’ intellectual and personal development, political views, self-concept, leadership and career development, and educational values (Good, 2000; Harper, 2007; Kiyama & Luca, 2014; Shook & Keup, 2012; Shotton et al., 2007). Peers also play a pertinent role in student persistence and retention (Bryant, 2005). Terenzini, Pascarella, and Blimling (1999) declared that “when peer interactions involve educational or intellectual activities or topics, the effects are almost always beneficial to students” (p. 617). Conversely, peer influence can also be highly negative, with particular regard to relationships that emphasize excessive partying, drug/alcohol abuse, and neglecting coursework (Fletcher, 2012; Shook & Keup, 2012).

Considering the high level of influence that students maintain over other students, higher education professionals have begun to utilize undergraduate peer leaders to offer services that are intentionally designed to enhance student success (Hall & Jaugietis, 2011; Shotton et al., 2007). Although faculty-to-student mentoring appears to be a common occurrence in higher education, particularly at the graduate level, undergraduate peer-to-peer mentorship is emerging as a high-impact practice in American colleges and universities (Keup, 2016; Shook & Keup, 2012).

Peer mentors have also been found to provide similar support as do other types of mentors, including psychosocial support, personal feedback, knowledge and information sharing, and career strategizing (O’Neil & Marsick, 2009). However, peer mentoring has been categorized as being more reciprocal in nature, as the absence of a hierarchal relationship (i.e., professor to student) can make communication and collaboration, more accessible, and more often leads to mutual learning and social benefits for both the mentor and the mentee (Hall & Jaugietis, 2011; Morales et al., 2016; O’Neil & Marsick, 2009; Shook & Keup, 2012). Kiyama and Luca (2014) contend that “the mentor role serves as a powerful mechanism in the retention of the mentor and the mentee” (p. 509). Similarly, Morales et al. (2016) postulate that mentors gain as much or more from their relationships than mentees.

While most studies related to undergraduate peer mentoring have generally reported improved outcomes for participants (Jacobi, 1991), not all researchers believe that increased peer interaction will improve retention for Black and Latino males. Numerous scholars posit that strong student-faculty mentoring relationships are the leading indicators of student satisfaction and persistence (Harper & Kuykendall, 2012; Harris & Wood, 2013; Strayhorn, 2012). Notably, a study by Strayhorn (2012) examined the relationship between social integration, which is linked to peer mentorship, and educational satisfaction among Black male community college students and found that students more socially integrated at their institutions were less satisfied than those less socially integrated. This echoed previous research by Bush and Bush (2010b) that suggests that “student involvement does not significantly predict any of the outcome measures for the achievement of African American male students” (p. 56). However, these studies did not individually examine students participating in structured peer mentoring programs. More research is needed to determine the relationship between student involvement/integration and academic/social success for Black men.

Peer Mentoring for Black Males

Numerous researchers support the notion that peer mentoring can be an effective retention mechanism for Black male college students (Asgari & Carter, 2016; Harper, 2007; Morales et al., 2016; Moschetti et al., 2017; Rios-Ellis et al., 2015). Several scholars contend that minority students enter institutions of higher education with an ethos that may significantly differ from the culture that is accepted and reinforced in the college environment (Morales et al., 2016; Strayhorn, 2010). This “cultural discontinuity is believed to be negatively associated with ethnic minority students’ schooling performance” (Tyler et al., 2008, p. 283). Mentors with backgrounds, experiences, and cultural values similar to their proteges are often in a better position to translate and transmit valuable information or behaviors effectively (Morales et al., 2016).

One of the key benefits for racial/ethnic minority students that is strongly linked to peer mentorship in the literature is the transfer of social capital (Kiyama & Luca, 2014; Morales et al., 2016; Moschetti et al., 2017; Strayhorn, 2010), which is defined as “high-status institutional resources embedded in social relationships and social structure” (Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2003, p. 1068). Black and Latino male students are more likely to come from households with low socioeconomic status, which can hamper the amount of social capital that one inherits or obtains (Strayhorn, 2010; Wood, 2011, 2014). Peer mentors may be especially helpful for Black and Latino men, as well as other marginalized student populations whose lack of high-status social capital often puts them at a disadvantage before they even enter college.

Conceptual Framework

This work applies an application of Baxter Magolda’s and King’s (2004) stages of self-authorship (2001; 2010). Baxter Magolda’s (2001) concept of Self-authorship, a 4-phase construct modeled from Kegan’s (1994; 2005) orders of consciousness, defines Self-Authorship as both a context-based sense of knowing, and a student’s understanding of their own internal goals, sense of self, and individual value systems. As with other self-authorship or sense-making models (i.e., Komives et al., 2005; Kuh et al., 2007), the process of making sense of experiences is non-linear.

Self-authorship allows researchers to investigate how individuals employ meaning-making to engage in the college experience. Baxter Magolda organized her self-authorship framework in three phases: 1. the crossroads; 2. becoming the author of one’s life; and, 3. internal foundations. In the first phase, the crossroads, individuals define roles for themselves and others based on a series of rules and expectations.

Here, students are focused on who they are and what they want. The crossroad occurs when an individual desires affirmation and acceptance, especially as they consider how their own beliefs are at odds with the needs of others. Becoming the author of one’s life is a stage wherein individuals can contextualize the needs of others, and see the complexity of their own needs as well. This order is marked by a more abstract understanding of the world and those in it. The last stage, internal foundations, refers to the ability to create a framework or values system to guide their actions, behaviors. Here, individuals intentionally reflect upon the nature of developed interpersonal relationships, synthesizing a clear sense of self while building the capacity to integrate others’ viewpoints and advice.(Baxter Magolda, 2001,2007).

Whereas mentors and support staff possess desires to help students make deeper meaning of events or processes, many falter as mentors often fail to meet students where they currently reside (Chickering & Schlossberg, 2001; King & Kitchener, 2004). Baxter Magolda (2001, 2010) argues that effective mentorship requires both students and mentors to move beyond transactional towards transformational, developmentally focused reciprocal relationships - an argument made countless times in college student development. Viewing these constructs through a culturally nuanced lens of self-authorship (Amechi, 2016; Baxter Magolda, 2010; Hass et al., 2014; Strayhorn, 2014) is an opportunity to situating beliefs and expectations of Black male community college students outside of a deficit framework.

An additional challenge for peer mentor program directors involves challenging students to take time to self-reflect on how their prior beliefs aligned or misaligned with current beliefs (Collier & Rosch, 2016). Essentially, Kegan (1994) argues that effective mentorship requires both students and mentors to move beyond transactional towards transformational, identity affirming, developmentally focused reciprocal relationships - an argument made countless times across many focuses of college student development and persistence (Blake & Griffin, 2010; Bowers, Rosch, & Collier, 2015; Brooms, 2017; Campbell, Smith, Dugan, & Komives, 2012; Collier & Rosch, 2016; Crisp & Cruz, 2009; McGowan, Landau & Scandura, 2002; Stone, & Kegan, 2007; Tinto, 2006-07; Strayhorn, 2012; 2014). Within the less nuanced phases of self-authorship, students and mentors tend only to come together when the mentee needs the mentor’s help with a singular issue (Kegan, 1994; McGowan et al., 2007) - for example, when a student may need a suggestion for course registration. Once the task is completed, both parties separate until the next transaction. Such relationships are convenient for both parties, serving as a check-in for expectations, but result in limited, if any, development and support beyond immediate needs. Students who can define personal value to the college experience are more likely to persist.

For Black male students, developing a sense of belonging that includes

The following table offers a method of organizing qualitative student comments, artifacts, and evidence by recognition of mentorship and self-authorship phase. Here, comments are sorted and compared to mentoring objectives.

Table 1: Mentoring Program Objectives

Mentoring Program objective	Mentoring activity	Recognized by the student?	Defined by student	Transactional or Transformational	Self Authorship Phase
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Implications for Policy

Students view a person exhibiting a sense of care and concern as being supportive and report that personal support, academic support, and career guidance help them balance their responsibilities. However, it is essential to ascertain how many students can identify this role, and what, if any, meaning is placed on the role. Using a qualitative, Self-authorship framework allows us to view the Black male community college experience through a culturally meaningful lens honoring the unique experience of each student, rather than to generalize by demographic. This model expands on the Black Male Initiative research of Clark & Brooms (2018), focusing specifically on the meaning-making of peer mentorship programs in a qualitative format.

A goal of this frame is to understand how mentorship affects meaning-making and how it adds valuable relationships to the college experience. A developmental disconnect in meaning-making can hinder even the most reliable students. While individual efforts are being made to reach out to students, not all students have or understand the role of mentors in their lives. Consistent framing of peer mentoring within student success programs could add value and increase persistence by integrating mentorship opportunities to ensure a higher rate of students with formal mentors. This paper lays the foundation for future research on peer mentorship addressing self-authorship and meaning-making.

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