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Exploring How Mentors Influence Sense of Belonging for Undergraduate Students of Color

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AT THE UNIVERSITY LEVEL, STUDENTS' SENSE OF BELONGING HAS BEEN RECOGNIZED AS A POSSIBLE LEVER TO FOSTER SUCCESS, ENGAGEMENT, AND WELL-BEING. A STUDENT'S SENSE OF BELONGING ENTAILS AN INTRINSIC MOTIVATION TO PERSIST WITH THEIR DEGREE AS WELL AS SOCIAL ACCEPTANCE; FOR STUDENTS OF COLOR, THEIR SENSE OF BELONGING IS AFFECTED BY RACE RELATED ISSUES AS WELL. RESEARCHERS HAVE EXPLORED THE SENSE OF BELONGING AND EXPERIENCES OF STUDENTS OF COLOR AT PREDOMINANTLY WHITE INSTITUTIONS, AS WELL AS THE DYNAMICS OF MENTORSHIPS BETWEEN STUDENTS AND STAFF OF COLOR, BUT THE INFLUENCE OF HAVING A MENTOR OF COLOR AS A STUDENT OF COLOR ON THE SENSE OF BELONGING IS UNCLEAR. THIS ARTICLE USES DATA FROM A SURVEY OF STUDENTS OF COLOR AND AN INTERVIEW WITH A STUDENT OF COLOR TO UNDERSTAND THE IMPACT A MENTOR OF COLOR HAS ON STUDENTS OF COLOR. OUR FINDINGS INDICATE THAT A COMBINATION OF BOTH ACADEMIC AND INTERPERSONAL SUPPORT FROM MENTORS OF COLOR ARE UNIQUELY INFLUENTIAL FOR STUDENTS OF COLOR AND THEIR SENSE OF BELONGING AT THE UNIVERSITY LEVEL. IT IS CLEAR THAT MENTORS PROVIDE SIGNIFICANT SUPPORT TO STUDENTS OF COLOR BOTH EMOTIONALLY AND PROFESSIONALLY, SO EFFORTS TO IMPROVE OR CREATE SUPPORT SYSTEMS FOR STUDENTS OF COLOR SHOULD BE ENCOURAGED.

1. INTRODUCTION

“Sense of belonging” is an idea that has existed in multiple fields, including sociology, education, and other social sciences. In general terms, a sense of belonging means a “feeling of relatedness or connection to others,” (Booker, 2016). More specifically, a sense of belonging at the university level entails an intrinsic motivation to persist in their degree as well as social acceptance within the student community (Booker 2016). Students’ sense of belonging has also been recognized as a possible lever to foster success, engagement, and well-being at university (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine [NAS], 2017).

Research has revealed that students at four-year schools, students in the racial-ethnic minority, and first-generation students report lower senses of belonging than their peers (Gopalan & Brady, 2019). Moreover, students of color struggle with feelings of isolation, separation, as well as weariness from the lack of race representation and microaggressions (Booker, 2016). These feelings of isolation, separation, as well as weariness from race related issues can have a serious impact on whether or not students feel as though they belong at their university. Research has also shown that “college students’ sense of belonging, especially early in their college careers, may be important for their academic motivation and success in that setting,” (Freeman, 2007). It is clear that the sense of belonging of students of color is affected by race-related issues, as well as academic motivation and social acceptance. Where these issues interfere with academic motivation and social acceptance is where students of color must be significantly supported.

Although researchers have explored the sense of belonging and experiences of students of color at predominantly white institutions, as well as the dynamics of mentoring relationships between students and staff of color, it is unclear whether having a mentor of color as a student of color influences their sense of belonging. Thus, the goal of this study is to explore the potential contribution of having mentors of color has on the sense of belonging of undergraduate students of color.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

There are multiple definitions of sense of belonging for students. According to Goodenow (1993), sense of belonging is the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in their school’s social environment. Finn and Zimmer

(2012) posited a model of school engagement that included three components: identification with the school to a small extent, a sense of belonging to the school, and a belief that they are welcomed, respected, and valued by their peers and other members of the school. Researchers have also found associations between students’ sense of belonging and a number of adaptive motivational beliefs, between academic engagement and success, and between emotional well-being and avoidance of risk taking behaviors (Freeman, 2007). For the purposes of this study, we will use a definition of sense of belonging that focuses on the academic engagement of students as well as social acceptance.

Sense of belonging has been thoroughly researched at multiple levels of education, including kindergarten through 12th grade (Goodenow, 1993), as well as at the postsecondary education level (Gopalan & Brady, 2019). At four-year universities, feelings of belonging projected better persistence, engagement, and mental health (Gopalan & Brady, 2019). For students of color, if they do not feel like a part of the greater learning community, they may feel excluded, which negatively affects their performance in the course and subsequently influences degree persistence (Booker, 2016). A number of researchers have also found that a sense of belonging has a powerful impact on academic performance and motivation of students. Furrer and Skinner (2003), as well as Stipek (2002), demonstrated that students’ sense of relatedness to key figures, which is a notion related to a sense of belonging, is connected to their emotional and behavioral engagement in school. Support from teachers and peers is also essential to fostering students’ academic motivation in elementary, middle, and high school levels of education (Covington & Dray, 2002). At the collegiate level, findings have suggested that sense of belonging is also associated with academic motivation, as it is with younger students. In particular, instructors who encouraged student participation and interaction contributed remarkably to college students’ sense of belonging (Freeman, 2007).

3. METHODS

Participants

This study utilized a survey as well as an interview to collect data. The survey was the best method to collect quantitative data on the views of participants, while the interview was ideal to elaborate on the data collected by the survey. The survey was completed by eighteen undergraduate students at a private, predominantly white

institution on the East Coast who identified themselves as students of color among a range of different ethnicities. Of the participants in the survey, there were twelve freshmen, four juniors, one sophomore, and one senior. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. This study also interviewed a student of color who was a senior at the university.

Data Collection

The survey used branching capabilities to allow for different questions based on whether or not a student had a mentor of color. Nine students indicated that they had a mentor of color on campus, and the remaining nine students did not have a mentor of color on campus. The survey also utilized a variety of question types, such as questions involving a Likert scale, yes or no questions, as well as open ended questions with a text box to gain a broad array of information. The use of questions that provided some qualitative data allowed there to be flexibility in the answers that were gleaned. The quantitative data collected by surveys showed areas where more intimate research was necessary. These areas were able to be more fully explored in the interview segment of the study, as the questions asked in the interview portion of the study were formulated based on the results of the survey and which areas needed to be further explored.

4. FINDINGS

Survey

The survey contained a variety of questions that asked primarily about meaningful relationships with professors of color vs. white professors, levels of engagement with professors, how having or not having a mentor of color has impacted students' academic lives, and how microaggressions and racially motivated incidents have influenced their academic persistence. There was variation in which professors students of color developed meaningful relationships with; professors of color maintained the most number of students. However, students reported similar levels of engagement with both white professors and professors of color, with the exception being no report of level 10 engagement in classes taught by white professors, while there was a significant amount of level 10 engagement reported in classes taught by professors of color. For students that did have a mentor of color, having a mentor of color had a largely positive impact on their perception of what jobs are possible for themselves. In numerous situations, mentors were able to show their mentees that people of color could have certain jobs that they believe they could not have or were recommended to job and opportunities outside they may

have otherwise not have pursued. An open-ended question concerning unique ways that mentors supported their academic careers was included to gain insight into how mentors supported their students both emotionally and academically.

A shocking conclusion gathered by these questions included that all of the students who had a mentor of color have seen or experienced micro-aggressions or harassment based on race, while 66.7 percent of students without a mentor of color have. Based on following questions in the survey, even though there is some variation in the answers, it seems as though racially motivated incidents do not impact the decisions of students to persist at the university level and continue their schooling. Some students reported the incidents do impact other aspects of their life, such as social life or overall college experience. This survey generally revealed that students generally agreed that having meaningful relationships with a professor or mentor of color positively helped or could help navigate difficult situations.

Interview

The interview was conducted with one senior at the university that identified as a student of color. The survey revealed the importance of having mentors of color for students of color became clearer; both in professional and emotional ways that mentors support students. The social implications of being a person of color and the positive role that mentors play in social life became apparent. Of note, not all mentors discussed were professors or part of administration; they were fellow students as well.

The survey brought up the question of what professors of color may be bringing to their classes that warranted such high feelings of engagement, and the interview revealed that certain professors of color may take a certain level of care for sensitive topics. The interviewee noted that regarding the murder of Emmett Till, one of her Black professors, "focused on the response of the people rather than focusing on the specific act even though she did talk about it because it's important to address them and raise awareness for them." This may have been a response to the situation that other professors may not have had.

The survey revealed that for students with a mentor of color, having a mentor of color had a largely positive impact on their perception of what jobs are possible for themselves. Their answers as to how mentors supported

“...sometimes students of color can run into obstacles with white professors because of issues concerning possible white savior complexes, while professors of color tend to ‘keep it more real’...”

them included both academic and emotional support, which pointed to interpersonal support being an important part of mentorship. This finding was further supported by the interview. The interviewee discussed not only how multiple mentors helped her find a job, but how they also gave her time, listened to her problems, and gave good advice. The interviewee believed that “wisdom is key to a mentor,” and that one of her mentors is “someone I can vent to and cry.” Regarding jobs, the interviewee noted that seeing people of color in positions of power or in the career she aspired to be in was “very powerful” for her, which supports the survey finding that having a mentor of color has a largely positive impact on students’ perception of what jobs are possible for themselves.

The survey also revealed that racist incidents impact other aspects of their life such as social life and overall college experience, and this became more apparent during the interview. The interviewee described a situation where her friends decided to give all the illegal alcohol they had to their friend who was “white-passing,” to avoid getting in trouble. Overall, the interviewee agreed that having mentors of color was extremely beneficial for her both personally and professionally.

5. DISCUSSION

This study has supported and expanded upon the existing literature concerning students’ subjective sense of belonging as well as the interpersonal and academic support that mentors provide. More specifically, this study has extended the literature concerning the unique experiences students of color have in academia and how mentors are able to support them, as demonstrated by the various relationships formed between professors and students of color. Six students reported professors of color,, while three students reported white professors, four students reported both white professors and professors of color, and five students reported developing meaningful relationships with neither. The interviewee pointed to the fact that sometimes students of color can run into obstacles

with white professors because of issues concerning possible white savior complexes, while professors of color tend to “keep it more real.” These findings relate to previous research that revealed that the decision of a group of African American students to persist at college was based on faculty being accessible, approachable, and providing authentic instruction (Booker 2016). Issues with “white savior complexes,” may feel inauthentic to students of color, which may influence their decision to reach out to these professors as mentors or persist with the class or their degree. Survey participants reported similar levels of engagement with both white professors and professors of color, with the exception being no report of level 10 engagement in classes taught by white professors, while there was a significant amount of level 10 engagement reported in classes taught by professors of color. The interviewee mentioned that a class that she took with a professor of color made her feel “very empowered as a person of color,” and that it is “good having the person in the room with all the power being a black woman,” which could point to shared or personal experiences being a large part of engagement.

For students of color with mentors, having a mentor of color had a largely positive impact on their perception of what jobs are possible for themselves. An open-ended question concerning unique ways that mentors supported their academic careers was included to gain insight into the multitude of ways mentors support students; the answers to this question included both emotional as well as academic support which points to interpersonal support being an important part of mentorship. This finding relates to previous research which found that mentors maintaining honesty and making themselves available to students were integral parts of a positive mentoring relationship (Luedke, 2017). This finding was further supported by the interview. The interviewee discussed not only how multiple mentors helped her find a job, but how they also gave her time, listened to her problems, and gave good advice. The interviewee believed that “wisdom is key to a mentor,” and that one of her mentors is “someone I

can vent to and cry.” Survey participants also revealed that their mentors supported their academic careers through writing letters of recommendation and sponsoring independent study. Regarding jobs, the interviewee also noted that seeing people of color in positions of power or in the career she aspired to be in was “very powerful” for her which supports the survey finding that having a mentor of color has a largely positive impact on students’ perception of what jobs are possible for themselves. The role of mentors finding students jobs relates to ideas of social capital discussed in previous research that found that students of color sought out staff of color who were able to develop meaningful relationships with the students by nurturing the multiple forms of capital the students brought with them (Luedke 2017).

100 percent of the survey participants who had a mentor of color have seen or experienced micro-aggressions or harassment based on race, while only 66.7 percent of students without a mentor of color have. Although it is a relatively small difference, a possible explanation for this could be that those who have seen or experienced micro-aggressions or harassment based on race are more likely to seek out support by forming a relationship with a mentor. Previous research discovered that students of color struggled with feelings of isolation, separation, and weariness from race representation and microaggressions (Booker 2016). These feelings from racially-motivated incidents may be a strong reason for students of color to seek out mentors. An anecdote from the interviewee supported the weariness that students of color feel from race representation; she described a situation where the name tags of the multicultural community were torn off their doors by a group of male students. The interviewee felt “embarrassed,” and did not understand how it only happened to the floor housing students of color instead of hallways housing white students. This relates to previous findings that students of color have an “awareness” of the division between the separate worlds of the white majority and the world of the students of color (Morrison 2010). Some survey participants reported

the incidents impact their social life and overall college experience and the survey also revealed that students generally agreed that having meaningful relationships with a professor or mentor of color positively helped or could help navigate difficult situations. This became more apparent during the interview when the interviewee described a situation where her friends decided to give all the illegal alcohol they were carrying to their friend who was “white-passing,” to avoid getting in trouble. This relates to previous literature that revealed how students of color being stereotyped contributed to the division of the White majority and students of color (Morrison 2010). This may point to different social “rules” that students of color have to follow because they feel as though they will get into trouble more often than their white peers. The interviewee also noted that when a friend of hers got into trouble with the university, she knew she could call her mentors and say “we really need a person of color to help us here,” because they understand administration and what it is like to be a person of color. Overall, both the survey participants as well as the interviewee agreed that it was valuable to have mentors of color as a student of color, and it is clear that mentors provide significant support to students of color both emotionally and professionally.

6. CONCLUSION

Limitations

While the use of a survey and an interview was deemed most suitable, these research methods were not without limitations. The sample of survey participants was small, so the generalizability of the findings is uncertain. The interview was only conducted with one participant, so her experiences may not be consistent with the experiences of other students of color. In addition, what participants say in interviews may be different than their actions in particular settings such as classrooms or social settings.

Future Research

Future research in race and sense of belonging among college students would benefit from exploring the impact of student mentors versus administrative mentors or the differing social rules that students of color have to follow.

“100 percent of students who had a mentor of color have seen or experienced micro-aggressions or harassment based on race...”

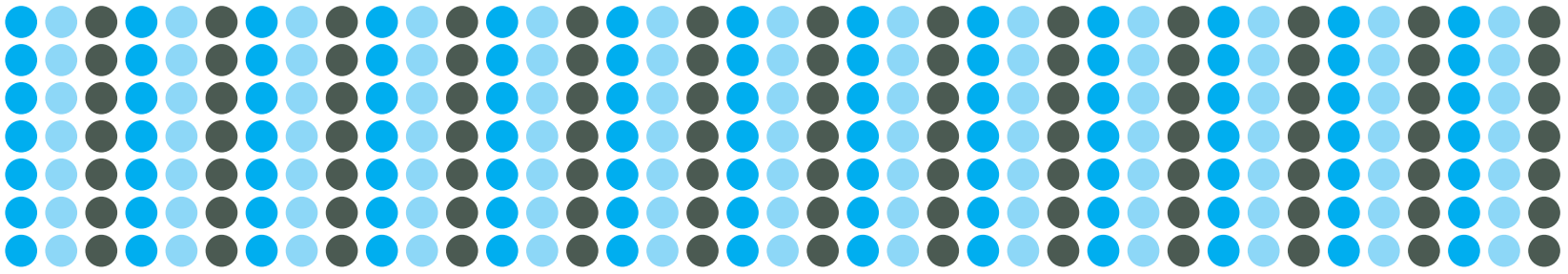
Research into developing mentorship programs for students of color would be beneficial as well. Researchers would also benefit from using multiple research methods, including observational approaches, and using larger groups of participants.

CONCLUSION

Despite the limitations of the study, the findings illustrate the importance of further research into students of color's sense of belonging and how having a mentor of color may influence that. Understanding the positive benefits of having a mentor has the potential to remedy lower senses of belonging that minority students experience (Gopalan & Brady, 2019). It is clear that both emotional and academic support are influential in positive mentorship, so efforts to improve or create support systems for students of color should be encouraged. In summary, the results of this study suggest that college students of color benefit from having mentors of color. This study identified how mentors support the academic and professional components of a sense of belonging through job placements and writing recommendation letters. Mentors of color also provided emotional and interpersonal support to students who don't feel included in the predominantly white student body. The findings of this study ultimately indicate that a combination of both academic and interpersonal support from mentors of color are uniquely influential for students of color and their sense of belonging at the university level.

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LIST OF ARTWORK

13 **ESPO WORKSHOP8**

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41 **CHAUCER ELLESMERE**

© Chaucer ellesmere. (2005, September 5). Wikimedia Commons. Retrieved January 18, 2022, from https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Chaucer_ellesmere.jpg

54 **FIGURE 1**

© EnergySage. (2019, May 10). “Storing Solar Energy: How Solar Batteries Work”. <https://www.energysage.com/solar/solar-energy-storage/how-do-solar-batteries-work/>