
Categories: Student Support, Mentoring

Summary

Entry into the professional world and success in it, argue the authors, requires more than classroom knowledge and academic development. Rather, sufficient preparation necessitates mentoring, through which graduate students of color learn the various non-academic “traditions, practices, and frameworks,” of their chosen fields. Unfortunately, the literature on mentoring graduate students of color is scarce. Given the need for effective mentoring, the authors attempt to debunk five myths surrounding mentoring graduate students of color, provide examples of mentoring models, and recommend three modalities for those who want to mentor.

The article begins by engaging in a necessary debunking of five myths that continue to undermine the effectiveness of mentoring for graduate students of color. The first is that any senior faculty member can mentor. Far more important, argue the authors, is the potential mentor’s attitudes towards mentoring and its benefits, and his or her personality. The second myth is that the role and function of mentoring can be satisfied through classroom interactions. It is crucial that mentoring take place outside of the classroom or even office hours, so that mentees can view/participate in the “totality of [their] chosen profession or academic arena.” The third myth is that mentoring really amounts to little more than extra advising. Contrary to this view, mentoring moves beyond advising into co-discovery, collegiality, and personal and professional development. The fourth myth is that students of color can only be mentored by faculty of color. This myth not only reinforces caste-based systems, it also fails to recognize a basic logistical issue: there are a far greater number of graduate students of color than faculty of color. The final myth is also the most damaging- the notion that mentor and mentee must share strong similarities in terms of academic interests, philosophy, and personality. This myth is particularly problematic because it rest on the fallacious construct that mentors are in effect trying to clone themselves. In truth, mentoring should entail providing guidance and support to allow students to develop their own identities.

From debunking these prevalent and damaging myths, the authors turn their attention to the common characteristics of effective mentoring programs. Successful mentoring programs, according to the article, adopt an institutional wide approach, offer “symbolic (if not meaningful) financial support...,” and are created for the purpose of growing the “pool and pipeline” of faculty and professionals of color. Additionally, these programs have a number of common characteristics and activities. They generally depend on the assignment of a faculty mentor and/or a student/peer mentor, and regularly hold a variety of support sessions: academic and computer/tech workshops; research writing and publishing guidance; orientation/welcome programs; social events; and career workshops. They also maintain quality by consistently surveying participants in order to continually gain insight into the needs of mentees. To offer greater specifics in this regard, the authors close this section of the article by discussing the Peabody program at Vanderbilt University. The mission of the program is to increase the
number of students of color in graduate programs and to help them succeed. To do this, Peabody works to create an environment that encourages diversity through the development of a caring, personalized support network. The mentorships consist of one on one pairings based on research and personal interest commonalities, and regularly scheduled academic and social events.

Finally, the authors discuss what they believe to be the core functions, or modalities, of mentors. While “myriad missions exist in mentoring,” the article presents three modes of mentoring that encapsulate all of the various roles played by the mentor. The first modality is “Academic Midwifery,” in which the mentor primarily aids in the academic and intellectual development of the student. In this regard, mentors serve as facilitators who provide guidance so that mentees can “find their own way” intellectually. A good mentor, in this sense, “respects oppositional ideas,” and is open to the mentee’s development of his or her own approaches and techniques. The second modality, “Role Molding,” is less concerned with theoretical or intellectual guidance, and instead helps to shape the student’s life in both academic and personal terms. In essence, the mentor helps the mentee become the person and/or professional that he or she wishes to become. The last modality is what the authors refer to as “Frientoring.” This function involves the “unique nexus between mentoring and friendship,” and while it opens up a whole gamut of potential risks, it represents the fruition of a sincere, personal relationship in which the mentor imparts guidance and wisdom.

Conclusions

The authors argue that in order to decrease the underrepresentation of minorities in academia and the professional world, we need to focus on institutional means of supporting them. One proven means of doing so is mentoring. To effectively utilize mentoring in an impactful way, however, the academy must construct programs that embrace the tripartite modes of mentoring.

Applications

The utility of this article lays is threefold. First, it stresses the positive impact of mentoring on the success of minority students. While the authors focus on graduate students, it is reasonable, given the broader literature on the subject, to argue that mentoring’s impact is equally powerful for undergraduates. Thus, mentoring would seem to be a useful facet of student support to implement at U.D.C. regardless of student level. Second, the authors offer poignant commentary on the myths have traditionally undermined the effectiveness of mentoring for minority students. Finally, the authors provide a useful checklist of characteristics and activities to incorporate into a mentoring program.

Citations of Interest

