
**Categories**: Student Support, Mentoring

**Summary**

Often it is assumed that high achieving African-American students aren’t in need of help succeeding in college. This belief stems from the fact that, after all, they enter higher education as academically successful, and because the presence of other students who so clearly demonstrate the need for assistance. Unfortunately, the notion that high achieving students will continue to succeed without support fails to consider the fact that such students often face interrelated challenges: the pressure and responsibility that they feel that they have to succeed, and their sense of distance from their fellow African-American students. The fallacy of this idea is substantiated by studies that show that a considerable number of high achieving African-American students, in this case those selected by *Ebony* as “Top High School Seniors, are underperforming when they get to college. According to the students interviewed in this study, one common perceived cause of their challenges was difficulty ‘adapting academically and socially to the college environment.’ One potential solution to the trend of underperformance amongst high achieving students, argues the author, is mentoring.

The study conducted by the author examined the experiences of high achieving African-American students at a range of higher educational institutions, in order to ascertain their perceptions of mentoring and to identify the characteristics they believed defined good mentoring. These students’ experiences emphasized the crucial role that mentoring played in helping them to deal with a variety of crises, navigate the challenges presented by adjusting to the college environment (academically and socially), and transitioning to graduate school or work. In addition, the interviews conducted by the author helped to elucidate three commonly identified traits of effective mentoring. The first was that good mentorships were based on trust and provided encouragement. This trust was developed primarily by demonstrating a willingness, on the part of the mentors, to spend time with their mentees “without expectations,” and to gain a deep understanding of the students and their needs. The second commonly identified facet of good mentoring, was that it led students to “think bigger.” Mentors achieved this by challenging the students, or as they put it, “staying on top” of mentees. They also exposed their students to a range of possibilities that the students might not have otherwise considered. The third element of good mentoring was notion that mentors often served in the role of a “second mom or dad. This was particularly true of those students who identified as needing a more intimate or nurturing type of mentor. In such cases, mentors took on this role by being available at almost any time and by being willing to discuss any matter. Finally, many students who attended HBCUs noted that in their experiences the “whole campus is like a mentor.” Here, interviewees felt that they were embraced not just as students, but as human beings. This sense of being immersed in a welcoming environment allowed students to see themselves as being mentored by everyone on campus.
Conclusions

The experiences recounted by the students who participated in the study substantiate the impactful role that mentoring can play in ensuring the continued success of high achieving African-American students. This is perhaps especially true given the expectations that are placed upon such students and that they place on themselves. Effective mentoring for high achievers requires that mentoring programs assign mentors who offer nurturing support and exhibit personal interest in their mentees, are available at any point in a student’s tenure at the school, and provide challenges and opportunities to help mentees develop their full potentials.

Applications

On the one hand, this article presents findings that do not seem particularly provocative. In particular, the article’s assessment, albeit drawn from student reflections, of what makes for good mentoring simply echoes, in different language, what much of the relevant literature asserts. On the other hand, Freeman’s study highlights what would appear to be both a significant lacuna in the scholarship on mentoring and a matter of great interest: the impact of mentoring on those students who enter college as high achievers. This would seem to be an issue of particular concern for U.D.C. Surely such students exist at U.D.C. and, given the preponderance of students who need extensive assistance making the transition to college, they may indeed be offered little of the support that they require. Moreover, investigating the needs of those students who enter U.D.C as high achieving students but struggle nonetheless would potentially offer significant benefits in terms of retention, graduation, and recruitment. Thus, Freeman’s article suggests both the benefits of investigating this facet of the U.D.C experience and a host of possible questions to research: what are the experiences of students who enter U.D.C as high achievers; are they succeeding, with or without support; what support is available/targeted for them; what do they perceive as factors allowing for or impeding their success; in what ways, if any, does U.D.C. engender the same sense of welcome and support as that noted by the students in this study attending HBCUs?

Citations of Interest
