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Monmouth's Empowering Young Black Males Leadership Mentoring Program: A Catalyst for Retention, Access & Student Success

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ABSTRACT

This manuscript will provide an anecdotal report of the key elements of Monmouth University's Empowering Young Black Males Leadership Mentoring program and its relevance to the university's goals for diversity and inclusion. The program served dual roles, one as a catalyst for access to opportunities for personal and academic achievement for high school Black male students (mentees), and a retention initiative for current Black male college students (mentors). Throughout the program, participants were exposed to various leadership development workshops and topics related to academic, career, college access, and personal success. The program created a transformative learning opportunity for Monmouth's current Black male students to connect, inspire, and empower the next generation of young Black males toward personal and academic achievement. These mentoring opportunities provided engaging experiences that extend beyond the classroom. In addition, these experiences assisted in preparing the mentors for life after Monmouth as future community leaders and advocates.

Keywords: Empowering, Black Males, Mentoring

Introduction

Peer mentoring has been labeled as a well-utilized intervention in educational settings (Goodrich, 2018). Peer mentoring is a form of mentorship between two people or more and can be completed through fixed or reciprocal roles (Goodrich, 2018). According to Goodrich (2018), fixed roles peer mentorship is viewed as part of a larger hierarchical structure, where one student can share knowledge with a less knowledgeable peer. Peer mentoring can also be built within reciprocal relationships (non-hierarchical) where peers can share knowledge on an equal footing (Goodrich, 2018).

Many benefits are derived from peer mentoring such as social and personal growth, and cognitive skills (Goodrich, 2018; Castleman & Page, 2015; Sinclair & Larson, 2018). Both mentees and mentors experience these benefits. Connolly (2018) found that residential advisors involved in a peer-mentoring program saw a significant change in their personal academic

growth, specifically an increase in grade point average (GPA), growth of leadership skills, and balancing time management. Additionally, Sinclair and Larson (2018) discovered that a majority of peer mentors involved in a mentoring program in high school developed a sense of pride that prevailed throughout their adult life. Peer mentoring has been adapted to provide needed support to well-deserving groups and specific communities, like first-generation college students.

Monmouth's Empowering Young Black Males Leadership Mentoring program (EYBM) served dual roles, one as a catalyst for access to opportunities for personal and academic achievement for high school Black male students (mentees), and a retention initiative for current Black male college students (mentors). Thus, this anecdotal report will highlight key elements of the EYBM mentoring program and its relevance to the university's goals for diversity and inclusion.

Educational State of Black Male Youth

While there is a large amount of research examining the benefits of peer mentoring on specific communities, there is a gap in the literature evaluating the effects of this type of mentorship on Black male youth. To understand the effect of any intervention on a specific population, a comprehensive history of the community should be reviewed. The educational state of Black male youth in the United States displays a visible opportunity gap that is motivated by racial inequities. An achievement gap between Black and White students has been noted to start as early as three years old (Burchinal et al., 2011). The lack of socio-economic resources and opportunities Black male youth receives can also be linked to low representation in higher education settings. For instance, the overall college enrollment rate for Black male youth was 36%, yet only 42% of this percentage completed a bachelor's degree or higher (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). This racial and ethnic disparity in education parallels the imbalance of power in other institutions such as mass media and the criminal justice system, as displayed in the school-to-prison pipeline. Also, this population is vulnerable due to the heinous police targeting of Black males, which preserves social inequality and stigma against Black men in the United States (Teasley, Schiele, Adams, & Okilwa, 2018).

Yet, despite the oppression and systemic racism this group faces, few studies are evaluating possible interventions to assist this demographic. Hall (2011) asserts there is a lack of priority surrounding this demographic. A suggestion to overcome this barrier is to incorporate male elements and ensure that professionals working with Black male youth understand the limited access they have to resources and role models to inspire their success (Hall, 2011). Mentoring programs provide these opportunities for young Black males.

Peer Mentoring Programs & Black Male Youth

The limited articles that explore mentoring programs with Black male youth found similar themes in both the academic and social categories. Gordon, Iwamoto, Ward, Potts, and Boyd (2009) observed significant positive changes in math and reading test scores for eighth-grade Black boys compared to those who were not in a mentoring group. Their research also found students in the mentoring program were able to develop a positive view of their racial identity and recognized the impact of internalized racism, a process connected to Cross's Racial Identity Theory (Gordon et. al., 2009).

Furthermore, Watson, Sealey-Ruiz, and Jackson (2016) investigated the importance of care the mentors and mentees shared for each other in a mentoring program in New York City

for high school students of color. Building upon the culturally relevant care (CRC) framework, the researchers concluded the essentiality of the education of Black and Latino males goes beyond the standard curriculum and requires a culture that fosters warmth, trust, and humanity (Watson et al., 2016). Using an empowerment-based positive youth developmental perspective, Sanchez, Pinkston, Cooper, Luna, & Wyatt (2018) recognized boys of color in a peer mentoring program as active agents of their growth and viewed them as potential leaders who could create change in their communities. This study further suggests the components of peer-mentoring programs, such as rapport-building activities; creations of safe spaces, and building of trust contribute to students of color creating a positive group identity (Sanchez, Pinkston, Cooper, Luna, & Wyatt, 2018). The peer mentoring programs that focus on male students of color reveal it is not only about improving academics but creating a growth mindset about one's self-concept. The support of mentors is critical to social-emotional learning, which can impact a student's future achievement (Durand, 2019).

Other mentoring studies with a focus on Black male youth are set in a higher education setting. Brooms and Davis (2017) used an anti-deficit framework to highlight that an emphasis should be placed on what we can learn from Black men who are successful, rather than focusing on their underrepresentation in education and negative societal stereotypes. They found the positive influence of peer mentoring relationships prompt Black students to observe and critique racial challenges at their college, usually a historical white institution (HWI) (Brooms & Davis, 2017). The students in these mentoring relationships recognized the importance of having a Black male mentor as a role model and aspiration for future growth and success (Brooms & Davis, 2017).

Monmouth University History

Monmouth University is a private academic institution located in West Long Branch, New Jersey. It was founded in 1933 as a junior college and gained university status in 1995 after receiving its charter from the New Jersey Commission on Higher Education. Presently, Monmouth University offers 33 undergraduate and 25 graduate programs, hosts 23 Division I sports teams, and home to a renowned national polling institute (Monmouth University, 2020). One area Monmouth is lacking is racial and ethnic diversity. According to data found on the university's website based on enrollment data from the Fall of 2019, 25% of the students are members of racially or ethnically diverse groups (Monmouth University, 2020). With this information, it is assumed that the majority of the students are White. Other data revealed that the students are 70.3% White, 12.1% Hispanic or Latino, 5.62% Black or African American, 3.3% Asian, 2.19% Two or More Races, 0.0946% American Indian or Alaska Native, and 0.0315% Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islanders (Monmouth University, n.d.).

While there is a lack of racial and ethnic diversity on campus, there are some strides towards improving the level of diversity and inclusion. Monmouth has recently created the Intercultural Center on campus, and the President's Advisory Council on Diversity & Inclusion. The campus is also home to only a few student organizations that embrace racial and ethnic diversity, such as the Black Student Union, Latin American Student Organization (LASO), Multicultural Club, National Council for Negro Women, and three Greek Organizations (Monmouth University, 2020). Monmouth's mission to become a more diverse and culturally competent campus can be seen through the events they host, as well as including the Interdisciplinary Conference on Race and the Central Jersey Consortium for Excellence and Equity (Monmouth University, 2020). Despite these efforts, Monmouth is currently lacking

racial and ethnic diversity leaving their students of color limited resources compared to their White students. The creation of programs that establish a focus on students of color, such as the Empowering Young Black Males Leadership Mentoring Program, would be a step closer to building a more diverse generation of students.

Monmouth's Empowering Young Black Males Leadership Mentoring Program (EYBM)

Peer mentoring is known as one of the most effective and well-utilized interventions in educational settings (Goodrich, 2018). The goal of Monmouth's Empowering Young Black Males Leadership Mentoring Program (EYBM) is a tri-partner collaboration between Monmouth University Educational Counseling Program, Big Brothers Big Sisters of Monmouth & Middlesex Counties, and Neptune High School. The high school has a 77% minority enrollment with 49% of its student population economically disadvantaged (U.S. News, 2020). About 20% of their student population has taken at least one AP exam, though only 8% of students have passed at least one AP exam (U.S. News, 2020). This high school is below State standards for English/Language Arts and Math statewide assessments, respectively at 28.7% and 13.9%. Participation and attendance from students are also lacking, as 40.6 % of students are chronically absent, compared to the state average of 14.9%. The overall graduation rate is 80%, below the median rate of 90.9% for the State of New Jersey (New Jersey Department of Education, 2018). This program aligns with the Monmouth University strategic plan and the School of Education commitment to diversity and social justice for underserved populations.

The EYBM program is dedicated to educating, equipping, and empowering at-risk Black male youth from grades 9-12, with hopes of inspiring them to pursue a higher education degree. This program aligns with the Monmouth University strategic plan and the School of Education commitment to diversity and social justice for underserved populations. The program also provided male students from the local high school with the knowledge, skills, and values necessary for effective and engaged citizenship in their local and global communities. In addition, the program provided mentoring opportunities to support and promote personal and academic achievement for the young men. Both the mentees and mentors were exposed to leadership competencies and prominent male leaders throughout the University and local area, who have already established their roles as leaders within their communities. Throughout the program, the participants were exposed to various leadership development skill workshops and topics related to academic, career, college access, and personal success. Students were also encouraged to assume leadership roles in and out of school to enhance their ability to lead in all aspects of their life.

The program created a transformative learning opportunity for Monmouth's current Black male students to connect, inspire, and empower the next generation of young Black males toward personal and academic achievement. These mentoring opportunities provided engaging experiences that extend beyond the classroom. In addition, these experiences assisted in preparing the mentors for life after Monmouth as future community leaders and advocates.

The first cohort of the EYBM program consisted of twenty-five (25) Black male mentees from the local high school and twenty-five (25) Black male college mentors from Monmouth University. The primary make-up of the mentors was sixteen (16) student-athletes, six (6) undergraduate EOF (Educational Opportunity Fund) students, and three (3) graduate students. Both the mentees and mentors were interviewed individually and paired based on the data collected from the interviews. Age, interests, personalities, family life, background, and the

mentors' experiences working with teenagers were considered when making the match. Mentors were also assessed on their ability to develop trusting relationships, the ability to motivate, guide, and be a good role model for the mentee. All participants were required to make a full academic year commitment to the program. The EYBM mentoring sessions were held every other Tuesday for approximately two (2) hours on the college campus. Each session was structured with a hot lunch, fellowship, and sharing between mentees and mentors; followed by a formal interactive and engaging personal development presentation, and panel or discussion led by professionals and college students. The program also held a culminating EYBM Summit on a Saturday, where parents were invited to join their sons for an all-day event that included informational and personal development sessions, panel discussions, campus tours, and games and culturally relevant activities.

Discussion

Many of the mentors expressed pleasure and fulfillment of being a part of an important initiative. They identified feeling a sense of pride in paying it forward by encouraging other young men to aspire toward achieving success at the collegiate level. Sinclair and Larson (2018) identified similar findings among peer mentors in high school having a sense of pride that has prevailed throughout their adult life. Anecdotally, one student shared how he was fortunate to have family members' who helped to guide him toward his success, but reflected on how some of his peers did not have the same resources and support and ended in terrible situations.

Mentoring has shown to assist not only the mentee but also the mentor as they continue their journey toward becoming exceptional leaders among their peer groups, teams, and communities. Connolly (2018) also found peer mentors serving as residential advisors exhibited a significant change in academic performance, specifically an increase in grade point average (GPA), growth of leadership skills, and time management. This program appears to have created a community and a safe space on campus for Black male students to share concerns, and find solutions to various challenges and barriers Black males face on a predominantly white campus, as they eagerly engaged in challenging conversations. The mentors were able to gain transformational learning experiences that connected the students' classroom learning to the real world.

Through this program mentees were given the opportunity that few would have had, to visit the college campus and engage in conversation with students from similar backgrounds who made it to college. They were also exposed to the lived experiences of Black male faculty and professionals who were successful, despite real-life barriers and challenges that mirrored some of their current experiences. In addition, the students were able to tour the campus and walk the hallways of a university, with hopes of one day living that reality. Brooms and Davis (2017) used an anti-deficit framework to highlight that an emphasis should be placed on providing opportunities for young Black males to be exposed and glean knowledge from Black men who are successful, rather than focusing on their underrepresentation in education and societal negative stereotypes. It is imperative to shift the narrative and create safe spaces for young Black men to dream dreams and aspire to greatness.

A major barrier for young Black males pursuing a higher education degree is funding. The program assisted in revealing possible solutions to financial barriers by sharing with the young men and parents access opportunities on campus, such as the EOF (Educational Opportunity Fund) program, and other resources such as the First to Fly program for first

generation college students. Additionally, they were presented with the financial aid general information on the affordability of attaining a college degree.

Recommendations and Future Research

The EYBM program provided a sense of connection and opportunity for continuous growth and development for both the mentees and mentors. The college mentors felt a sense of belonging and valued by the mentees and supervisors of the program. This is one initiative that could assist with boosting the university climate for young Black males who often fail to feel a sense of belonging, especially on predominantly white campuses. In addition, the college mentors were able to make connections and find mentors among other Black male faculty and Black male professionals both on the campus and in the immediate community. This platform also created a networking opportunity for the college mentors, as it relates to career and future plans.

With limited studies examining the effects of mentoring programs on college Black male mentors, a follow-up qualitative study should be employed that explores the mentor's experiences and perspective on growth and development as a result of the program. In particular, what role the program played in engaging and creating a sense of community for them. Another aspect would be to gain understanding from their perspective as to the success and areas of opportunities for growth and further development of the program.

Conclusion

This program appears to have created a community, and a safe space on campus for Black male students to share their concerns and find solutions to various challenges and barriers Black males face on a predominantly white college campus. The program also created a transformative learning opportunity for Monmouth's current Black male students to connect, inspire, and empower the next generation of young Black males toward personal and academic achievement. These mentoring opportunities provided engaging experiences that extend beyond the classroom. In addition, these experiences assisted in preparing the mentors for life after Monmouth, as future community leaders and advocates. The program also provided a platform for the mentors to find meaningful ways to empower and inspire the young mentees, who one day will be sitting in the mentor's seats and paying it forward.

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