

## **Laying the Foundation: The Importance of Implementing Minority Mentoring Programs**

Bernice Alston

Researchers (Johnson, 1999; Allen 1992) suggest that minority students find it necessary to create their own social and cultural networks in order to achieve satisfaction and social involvement. Through mentoring programs, minority students are able to experience this environment. Johnson (1999) argues that collaboration with faculty and other students can be a strong motivating force for learning. Interaction gives students a sense of validation, motivating their academic performance (Irizarry, 2002). Without these positive interactions, minority students may become isolated from their learning environments and not have the opportunity to develop a support system to encourage them during completion of their academic program.

Mentoring programs can offer many positive outcomes for the students involved. Research (Institution for Higher Education Policy, 2011) suggests that mentoring can help students feel a greater connection to their institution, promote student engagement and contributes to positive student outcomes. Both the mentee and mentor can benefit in many ways from mentoring programs. Students as mentees can receive assistance with social and psychological development and nurturing. Students who serve as mentors have the opportunity and responsibility of being a role model, and giving support to mentees with setting and achieving goals (Institution for Higher Education Policy, 2011).

Mentoring programs have proven to have very positive effects on minority students. Although college enrollment rates for minority groups such as African American and Latino students have increased, fewer of these students are receiving degrees compared to Asian and Caucasian students (Alexander, 2009). Participation of minority students in mentoring programs

can play a critical role in the success of these students. Literature (Okozi, Hebsur, Zainab, & Clark, 2010) has suggested that mentoring programs can assist in improving communication abilities, removing financial obstacles, and eliminating institutional barriers that can contribute to a sense of alienation. Minority students involved in mentoring programs are also more likely to persist and have higher GPAs than minority students who are not involved in mentoring programs (Institute for Higher Education Policy, 2011).

#### Case Study: NCCU S.O.A.R.t Program

This study highlighted a program employed by a mentoring program at North Carolina Central University, a historically black college located in Durham, North Carolina. The program entitled, S.O.A.R.t was required for all incoming freshmen enrolled at the university. Individual student experiences of past mentors and mentees from the informal mentoring program were examined.

Ten years ago, 843 first year freshmen started their long awaited college journey at NC Central University (Anyanwu, Davis, Yu, & Harrison, 2003). During the summer of 2002, these students participated in the Student Orientation Advising Registration and Testing program, known as S.O.A.R.t. This orientation program allowed incoming freshmen to gain real-life experience as college students by spending an all day and overnight experience on campus.

Prior to orientation, incoming freshmen were provided a list of all of the items they would need to bring with them for their dorm stay and were assigned a roommate. Once the students arrived, they were divided into color coded groups. Each small group of students was led by three to four upperclassmen students, known as peer leaders. While in these groups, students were able to tour the campus, complete testing and registration, seek advice about college life, and participate in campus activities.

The incoming freshmen were required to attend S.O.A.R.t and were offered four sessions to choose from. Although the incoming freshmen were only able to become acquainted with the other incoming freshmen attending their summer orientation session, these students had one more opportunity to get more comfortable with each other prior to the start of the fall semester. A few days before the university was opened to the upperclassmen the incoming freshmen were able to move in early and invited to participate in the “Week of Welcome”, which was led by the same group of peer leaders from S.O.A.R.t. During this time the students moved into their assigned dorm rooms for the school year and participated in activities that promoted engagement and helped students become more familiar with the campus.

### Student Experiences

For this study, the researcher interviewed three alumni of the 2002 S.O.A.R.t program. The following are reflections of the S.O.A.R.t program experience from Herbert Mckinney, Ranita Bullock, and Agu Onuma:

#### Herbert McKinney

Herbert participated in the S.O.A.R.t program as an incoming freshman in 2002 and as a peer leader in 2003. Herbert explained that peer leaders helped him to be more prepared for college because he was able to get advice on what to expect in college from students that were already at the college. He explained, “most people only get to see college experiences from the images on TV, but peer leaders were able to tell us the real do’s and don’ts about things specific to our school, like financial aid, friends and chicken day.”

He expressed that some of the most important relationships that he made in college came from his S.O.A.R.t experience. He reflected on the bond that he made with his peer leader, David

Gardner. Herbert recalled starting classes and seeing David around campus. “Seeing David, an upperclassman that I knew, as a freshman made me feel good, like I was important.”, he said. Herbert continued to explain ways that David offered support. “When I came to school, I didn’t have a car. David would pick me up. I used to wear pajamas to class all of the time. One time, David came and asked me if I needed jeans or anything to wear for class.”

When Herbert was asked if he believed that any of these experiences impacted him today, he informed me that he now works as a social worker; a career that has allows him to help others. “Having been a peer leader made me realize how important mentors are. Someone reached out and helped me, I want to do the same for someone else.”

#### Ranita Bullock

Ranita participated in S.O.A.R.t as an incoming freshman and as a peer leader. She shared how instrumental her peer leaders were in her college preparedness. “If no one was there to tell me exactly what I needed to do and what to expect I wouldn’t have known. They showed me that I had support.” She believes that receiving this type of support early on helped her throughout her entire college experience.

Although Ranita felt that having a peer leader was beneficial to her college success, she believed that the greatest success from her experience in this program was being a peer leader. “Being a peer leader made me aware of the things that I was doing because I always knew that someone was looking up to me. This helped me make better decisions, because I knew I was being held accountable.” Ranita later shared that being a peer leader gave her a greater appreciation for her institution, and contributed to her passion for helping other people be successful.

## Agu Onuma

Agu was an incoming freshman that participated in the S.O.A.R.t program. He shared that what he appreciated the most from the program was the relationship building. He discussed how being able to identify people from the program reduced anxiety when the school year started, especially the peer leaders that he viewed as “role models.”

He reflected on how he felt seeing the peer leaders during his four years at NCCU. “Every time I would see them around campus it would take me back to that place of them being there for me when I started. I felt like they cared about me. We would speak and I could ask them questions. It felt good.” Agu felt that the connection that he made with the university early on during this program contributed to his wanting to give back to NCCU in a positive way.

## Conclusion

The university’s mission is “to prepare students academically and professionally and to promote consciousness of social responsibility and dedication to the advancement of the general welfare of the people of North Carolina, the United States and the world” (Anyanwu, Davis, Yu, & Harris, 2003, p. 4). It is apparent that this program supported the university’s administration in carrying out this mission. During my interviews, common themes such as “relationship building”, “support”, “role models”, “advice” and “motivation” emerged. The interviews of these three NCCU alumni suggest that formal and informal mentoring programs can have positive effects on student satisfaction and student persistence. The participants in this study discussed how the S.O.A.R.t program contributed to their success while in college and how it has impacted their lives after college. This study found that peer mentoring can contribute to positive student outcomes for both the student participating as the mentee and the student participating as

the mentor. Each participant believed that their participation in this program contributed to their commitment to the university even after graduation.

Further research revealed that the retention rates of first year freshmen students attending NCCU (78.2%) fell slightly below UNC System institutions (80.9%) and slightly above other predominately black institutions (74.7%) in the state for the first year of college (Yu, & Seward, 2007). Upon completion of the 2003-2004 school year 69.9% of these students were retained, while 70.8% were retained for UNC System institutions and 62.7% were retained at other predominately black institutions in the state of North Carolina (Yu, & Steward, 2007). Although the differences in the retention rates for these institutions are not drastic, NCCU does show a significant increase compared to other predominately black institutions in the state of North Carolina. This suggests that historically black colleges and institutions struggle with retaining students and that the students at these institutions may need to receive more support to assist with student satisfaction and persistence.

Transitioning can be very challenging for many incoming freshmen. It is recommended that a support system, such as an informal mentoring program, is in place early for incoming minority students. The ability for students to make connections with their institution early on, particularly through relationship building, encourages a sense of commitment to their university. This sense of commitment can assist the institution in retaining the students. This sense of commitment can also be beneficial to the institution after the student has graduated from the institution.

It is the role of student affairs and academic affairs professionals to create and implement these programs. Both must also recognize the importance of collaborative partnerships when

implementing these programs. Satisfaction and persistence among minority students is the key to retention. Therefore, the efforts of mentoring programs must contain to be updated and implemented by student and academic affairs professionals.

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