Institutionalizing Mentoring in Community Colleges

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Abstract
Mentoring is positioned in this paper as an essential strategy for supporting and matriculating community college students. The range of informal, formal, peer-to-peer, group, and faculty/staff-student mentoring relationships have the power to minimize inequity in higher education and contribute to the nation's completion agenda by arming students with social capital and a sense of belonging on campus. Recommendations for institutionalizing and evaluating mentoring in community colleges are discussed.

Introduction
The impact of mentoring has been well-documented and positioned within higher education literature as influential in supporting student persistence, grade point average, and comfort level within a university environment (Crisp & Cruz, 2009). Centered on growth and accomplishment, career and professional development, and reciprocal interaction, mentoring exists as a powerful way to informally (through naturally occurring relationships) and formally (via outcomes-oriented programs) promote students' academic and post-baccalaureate success (Coles & Blacknall, 2011; Crisp & Cruz, 2009). Despite anecdotal evidence that supports and describes the profound role of mentoring in higher education, the value of the activity has not always been well communicated in empirical literature and thus is not readily supported as an evidence-based practice among all colleges and universities (Gershenfeld, 2014). The current community college completion agenda and a serious national need to improve parity in educational achievement for all students are the most significant reasons for institutionalizing mentoring.

In 2010, an alliance of five stakeholders in community college education (i.e., the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC), Association for Community College Trustees, Center for Community College Student Engagement, League for Innovation in the Community College, National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development, and Phi Theta Kappa Honor Society) launched an initiative called the College Completion Challenge to increase the number of certificate and associate degree-credentialed students to 50% by 2020 (McPhail, 2011). Although analysis from scholars within the AACC indicated an 8% decrease in community college enrollment from 2010 to 2013 alongside a 6.1% increase in first-time certificate and associate degree awards from 2010 to 2013 (a result of the turbulent economy), the completion agenda highlighted a need for significant commitments from community colleges (AACC, 2015). Among the commitments were recommendations for community colleges leaders to emphasize institutional cultures of access and success, engage in courageous conversations about diversity and equity, and eliminate attainment gaps for underrepresented students. To actualize these commitments the leaders of the alliance of community college stakeholders requested that

> every community college president, trustee, administrator, faculty member, counselor, advisor, financial aid officer, staff member, and stakeholder … examine their current practice, identify ways to help students understand the added value of degrees and certifications, and to help them progress toward their goals. (p. 23)

Such a call for critical evaluation to support college completion undergirds the imperative for community colleges to examine the supportive relationships established with students.

Not only is an institutional emphasis on mentoring important given the College Completion Challenge, mentoring is increasingly crucial given that community colleges are now seen as the "gateway to postsecondary education for many minority, low income, and first-generation postsecondary education students" (AACC, 2016, para. 1). Although the pool of 7.4 million credit earning community college students is diverse and comprises 41% of all first-time freshmen, 52% Black, 57% Hispanic, 43% Asian/Pacific Islander, and 61% of all Native American undergraduate students, completion rates remain low—42.9% for all full-time students and 18.7% for all part-time students (AACC, 2015; Juszkiewicz, 2015). To combat the disparaging statistics that depict low completion rates, community colleges have advocated for numerous changes at the macro-level, which include customization of student learning plans, collaboration across institutions, and diversification of revenue streams (AACC, 2014). Although changes in institutional processes can help to remedy systemic issues that create barriers to college completion (e.g., transfer credit loss, remediation, and financial aid access), the interpersonal processes at work within community colleges are worth highlighting.

Mentoring exists amongst the interpersonal strategies community colleges use to improve student success and encompasses the formal and informal relationships between individuals in which career and academic development, reciprocity, and goal-setting are defining features. Although mentoring takes place in just about every space within American community colleges (Coles & Blacknall, 2011), little is known about the success of informal and formal mentoring practices occurring within community college classrooms, academic support offices, student affairs units, and even over the phone or through computer-mediated media. The lack of research on minority student mentoring in the higher education literature, in general, and the nonexistence of a hub for institutions to access evidence-driven best practices collected from a large pool of community colleges contributes to a larger problem of implementing field-tested and research-based practices within the two-year sector—perhaps where it is needed most.

This paper begins with a focus on the power of mentoring and collaborative efforts to institutionalize mentoring in community colleges and continues with a review of the literature to contextualize the topics of informal mentoring in community colleges that have been facilitated via research courses, service learning, and civic engagement. Further, a discussion of social capital and sense of belonging illustrate the importance of mentoring practices, which Chen (2014) described as "socially conscious interventions" (para. 19). Lastly, practical recommendations for integrating mentoring into the institutional culture of community colleges are presented.

Informal Mentoring in Community Colleges
Although numerous noteworthy mentoring programs exist across community colleges (e.g., Puente Project and Project MALES), institutions are engaged in a variety of strategies—outside of programs—to foster student learning while equipping students with meaningful relationships to support them toward matriculation. For example, at State Fair Community College (SFCC), one student's desire for scientific research experience led to research collaborations between students and faculty to offer curriculum that would give students a taste for experiments in science, technology, engineering, and math (Brandt & Hayes, 2012). Not only did this curricular change at SFCC support students' research competencies, the relationships developed a culture of student-faculty collaboration. Barnett (2011) also examined the positive impact of faculty and staff interactions with students through a correlational study and found that caring instruction from faculty and staff, mentoring, feeling known and valued, and institutional appreciation for diversity predicted students' sense of academic integration. She explained that "active institutional efforts to increase the validation of students by faculty may contribute to increased student persistence" (p. 215). Ultimately, she argued that through incentives for increased out-of-class availability, professional development focused on student validation, and redefinition of roles and responsibilities, faculty and staff could influence student persistence. Such suggestions are aligned with an institutional value for informal mentoring and are indicative of efforts to institutionalize mentoring within the community college culture through policies that support and allow for faculty involvement in students' success.

Examples of civic engagement and service learning opportunities also allow spaces for institutional interventions that help make room for mentoring and reduce the impact of risk-factors (or barriers to completion), which typically inhibit community college student completion. These factors include working full-time, caring for dependents, low socioeconomic status, immigrant status, and remediation needs (Ellerton, Di Meo, Pantaleo, Kemmerer, Bandziukas, & Bradley, 2015). In their study of the vulnerable population of urban community college students enrolled at City University of New York, Ellerton et al. found that the integration of a civic engagement opportunity in course curriculum increased students' self-confidence. Among the sample of approximately 750 students enrolled in more than 60 courses across 15 disciplines, students who completed the survey after completing a service learning project in their class reported that they not only experienced greater appreciation for general education and civic engagement, but more confidence in their educational attainment. Examples of curricular emphasis on civic engagement and service learning at community colleges demonstrate the atypical modes for changing students' negative habits of mind, which might impede their progress toward degree completion. More indirect strategies that transform student thinking and break down barriers to student success are worth integrating into the fabric of institutions as second nature and commonplace. Mentoring exists as one such strategy.

Institutionalizing Mentoring
To support mentoring and continue initiating new mentoring efforts, community colleges must learn more about what works, for whom it works, and how to replicate and maintain successful models for student achievement. While community colleges are home to students who come from widely diverse backgrounds, we focus this paper on racial and ethnic minority students (e.g., Hispanic, Black, Asian/Pacific Islander, and Native American) because this group is overrepresented within the nation's community colleges (AACC, 2015). These students arrive at community colleges for myriad reasons; however, with lower academic preparation, lower socioeconomic status, and higher attrition rates, these students may feel an increased sense of alienation while enrolled (Pope, 2002), which leads to their exit. Rather than advocating for the existence of more formalized mentoring programs, institutionalization—or deep integration into an institution's value system—of mentoring practices within community colleges must become a focus. Although informal mentoring is often left to develop by happenstance through academic advising and peer relationships or purposefully through formal mentoring programs (Cole & Blacknall, 2011), institutional policies and processes must be in place to support mentoring practice. Opportunities for institutionalized mentoring in community colleges have the potential to manifest in the promotion and tenure process, faculty development seminars, student recruitment and admissions procedures, and throughout curriculum development. However, colleges must make a concerted effort to weave and explicitly communicate mentoring as a value through mission and vision statements, strategic goals and outcomes, and even course objectives. Related to faculty mentoring, Levin (2013) discussed the complex and important role faculty assume in student achievement, which infers a sense of support and mentoring as part of the challenge whereby faculty influence students in the educational environment and are simultaneously responsible for developing student potential while achieving educational outcomes. Mentoring is inextricably tied to the work faculty do; however, institutional support through faculty development and rewards serve to increase opportunities for students to develop meaningful relationships with their faculty. Kezar (2007) focused on the idea of institutionalization in terms of university diversity agendas and explained, "To institutionalize a practice often requires organizations to modify reward structures, policies, and the environment" (p. 415). To develop a culture in which mentoring is a natural facet of the community college experience, leaders must understand the importance of mentoring students of color as well as the steps necessary for institutionalizing mentoring and the implications such a cultural shift has for the larger community college context.

Social Capital and Sense of Belonging
Empirical studies have supported numerous benefits associated with college student mentoring, which can potentially impact students' ability to transition into the new campus environment, succeed academically, and feel prepared for life after graduation (Crisp, 2010; Crisp & Cruz, 2009; Pope, 2002; Sedlacek, Benjamin, Schlosser, & Sheu, 2007). Research dedicated to minority student mentoring experiences has emphasized a need for multiple informal and formal mentoring efforts to assist students in feeling a part of the "social fabric of the institution" (Pope, 2002, p. 42). For racial and ethnic minority students who may not feel they fit in at their institutions because of their racial/ethnic minority status, proactive mentors in the

form of faculty, staff, and peers can benefit students' persistence decisions and integration into the institution. However, to institutionalize mentoring and foster an environment where students of color feel welcomed, supported, and a part of the larger community, the institution must first include a commitment to promoting social capital and a sense of belonging.

While Bourdieu's (1986) definition of social capital encompasses a tacit outcome of higher education, institutions rarely assess or evaluate this concept when considering student success. He defined social capital as "the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition" (p. 251). Relative to minority student mentoring, which does not necessitate that mentors and mentees possess the same ethnic or racial background (Davis, 2007), social capital resources can provide minority students of all social class backgrounds with access to increased opportunities for persisting during college and succeeding after college (Museus & Neville, 2012). In her critical essay of formal mentoring programs within higher education, Smith (2009) called on institutions to work toward more efforts to assist students in establishing valuable, academic social networks in order to navigate the hidden curriculum of higher education. Further, Salomon-Fernandez (2014) discussed the power of social capital for underprivileged students as an opportunity to undo years of historical marginalization, inequity, and exclusion in the United States.

Along with social capital resources, which can be leveraged through mentorships, community colleges must also incorporate specific activities to promote student belonging (Strayhorn, 2012). Such activities can occur within mentoring relationships. Encouragement, shared resources, guidance through a formal collegiate process (e.g., applying for financial aid) and words of affirmation can support a student coping with financial hardship, challenges with courses, or feelings of dissatisfaction associated with peer, familial, and faculty/staff relationships. Mentoring programs exist as exactly the sort of activity that community colleges can use to foster a sense of belonging among students and increase their odds for success (Gershenfeld, 2014). Although faculty-student mentoring relationships have been tied to students' increased academic performance (Campbell & Campbell, 1997), group and peer mentoring models within formal mentoring programs also serve an important role as they help to lessen the accumulating workload of overextended faculty and staff who remain the lifeblood of community colleges (Galbraith & James, 2004). An integrated framework for viewing minority students' academic achievement, social capital, and sense of belonging while enrolled at community colleges must also include a boundary spanning process that does not simply end when the student reaches his or her educational goals. Cross-institutional or cross-organizational mentoring or recruitment outreach (Espinosa, Gaertner, & Orfield, 2015) may also be an efficacious way to support students through the entirety of their chosen educational pathway (e.g., K-12 educators, four-year institution personnel, and industry leaders could serve as mentors for community college student mentees). The combined efforts of multiple mentors on community college campuses communicating care, concern, and value for the presence of diverse students on campus contribute to the sense of belonging students need to complete.

Implications for Community College Practice
As numerous higher education scholars have noted (Chang, 2005; Crisp & Cruz, 2009; Gershenfeld, 2014; Pope, 2002), mentoring programs within American colleges and universities require improved evaluation processes. Further, non-cognitive outcomes in the areas of social capital (Sedlacek et al.; Smith, 2009) and campus climate for diversity must also be considered in evaluative practice. The following paragraph includes the action items necessary for the mobilization, implementation, and institutionalization of mentoring at the community college level with a specific focus on best practices related to informal and formal mentoring geared toward minority students.

First, leaders must foster a community that values diversity on all levels by routinely assessing the current climate for diversity in multiple areas (Rankin & Reason, 2009). This step includes establishing and facilitating networks, both structured and unstructured, which promote mentoring relationships inside and outside of classroom environment (Gershenfeld, 2014). For example, faculty development workshops that emphasize and teach instructors about mentoring provide an infrastructure for mobilizing the value (Johnson, 2015). Next, institutions must use both quantitative and qualitative methods to assess and evaluate sense of belonging and social capital networks established for minority students (Green, 2007).

This can be facilitated through assessment of students' faculty-student relationships, advising, and peer relationships on campus. Lastly, by researching other institutions' practices (benchmarking) and disseminating self-studies within the larger higher education sphere, community colleges will have more data to support innovation.

Conclusion

In this paper we sought to inspire community college stakeholders to take an active role in institutionalizing mentoring in community colleges. By valuing mentoring as a critical strategy for ushering students toward completion community colleges can weave the practice into many levels of students' college experience. The completion agenda for community colleges, increased numbers of minority students, and the positive student outcomes of increased social capital and sense of belonging comprise the major arguments for integrating mentoring throughout the institutional culture in teaching, advising, and co-curricular activities. Missions, assessment efforts, and daily practices should reflect these efforts in order to ultimately experience the lasting effects and payoff (increased access to post-secondary education) of institutionalized mentoring practice.

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