

Mentorship to Sponsorship: Advancing Underrepresented Professionals

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This paper explores the strategic shift from mentorship to sponsorship as a lever for equity-centered leadership development among underrepresented professionals. Anchored in the experience of the anonymized Black Women Who Mentor (BWWM) program, the work examines how structured, culturally aware approaches to mentorship can evolve into systemic sponsorship pathways. Designed to support Black women and historically excluded identities across higher education, research, and corporate sectors, BWWM integrates coaching, curriculum, and community across dual delivery models (live cohort and self-paced learning). Drawing on Culturally Aware Mentoring (CAM), Critical Race Theory (CRT), and social capital frameworks, the program aims to foster resilience, sisterhood, leadership readiness, and visibility. This paper outlines the conceptual underpinnings, structural design, programmatic outcomes, and institutional implications of the BWWM model. Core to this work is the transition from transactional mentor relationships to transformational sponsorship grounded in intentional allyship and institutional accountability. Evaluation data shows increased leadership confidence, greater cultural competency among mentors, and the ripple effect of participants initiating mentorship circles in their own communities. As mentorship evolves into a broader, equity-embedded ecosystem, this paper argues for its institutionalization as a strategy, not a side effort. The findings point to a replicable model for building equity-centered leadership pipelines that address barriers like tokenism, imposter syndrome, and structural exclusion. Sponsorship, when rooted in culturally responsive practice, becomes a strategic act of institutional transformation. The implications of this model extend beyond individual development into systemic change, offering a roadmap for institutions to invest in inclusion as a leadership imperative.

Keywords: Mentorship, sponsorship, Black women, equity, professional development, underrepresented professionals

Introduction

Persistent disparities in professional advancement continue to hinder historically underrepresented professionals (URPs), particularly Black women, across academia, research, and industry. Despite decades of diversity initiatives, barriers such as implicit bias, limited access to influential networks, and institutional cultures that marginalize non-dominant identities remain entrenched. Traditional mentorship, while valuable, often centers on advising and emotional support rather than strategic career advancement. For Black women and minoritized professionals, this approach can fall short lacking the power, visibility, and institutional backing needed to catalyze real leadership mobility.

The distinction between mentorship and sponsorship is not merely semantic, it reflects a shift in both responsibility and leverage. While mentorship is typically focused on guidance,

sponsorship entails active advocacy, risk-taking, and the deliberate use of influence to elevate emerging leaders. Sponsorship demands a deeper commitment to systemic change and a more intentional design. It challenges institutions to move beyond individual acts of support to strategic, structural interventions that address inequity at scale.

This paper presents a case study of a transformative model that bridges this gap: the Black Women Who Mentor (BWWM) program. Rooted in culturally responsive frameworks and equity-driven leadership theory, BWWM provides a replicable approach to transitioning from mentorship to sponsorship. The initiative is designed to address not only the professional development of URPs but also the institutional blind spots that perpetuate exclusion. The paper proceeds in four parts: it begins with a literature review grounding the program in existing theory and empirical research; describes the BWWM program's design and implementation; presents

evidence of impact; and discusses implications for institutional transformation. At its core, this work argues for reframing mentorship as a mechanism for systemic sponsorship, an essential shift in building inclusive, resilient, and representative leadership pipelines.

Literature Review

A robust body of research underscores the necessity of culturally responsive mentoring for historically underrepresented professionals (URPs). The Culturally Aware Mentoring (CAM) framework (Byars-Winston et al., 2018) emphasizes the importance of identity, power, and positionality in mentoring relationships. Unlike generic models that assume neutrality in professional development, CAM calls for mentors to engage in self-reflection, examine biases, and create space for mentees' cultural values and lived experiences. This awareness is particularly vital for Black women and other minoritized professionals who often navigate both hypervisibility and invisibility in predominantly white institutions. In addition, structural models such as the Synergy Ecosystem (Packard et al., 2025) highlight the importance of coherence between mentoring interventions and institutional support systems. The Synergy model integrates peer mentoring, institutional mentorship, and community-building within a strategic framework that supports URP advancement. Similarly, Rodriguez Wimberly et al. (2022) describes the Cal-Bridge program as a blueprint for building identity-conscious support systems in STEM, demonstrating how institutional design can foster long-term outcomes for marginalized students.

Montgomery (2017) adds to this discourse by mapping mentoring roadmaps for faculty of color, advocating for sponsorship and network-based mentoring that accounts for systemic barriers and career stage. Her work emphasizes the importance of “mentor constellations”—a networked model of support—and the integration of mentorship into institutional priorities. These perspectives challenge the “mentor-as-hero” narrative and promote collective responsibility. Brown et al. (2021) extend this work to include the psychological realities faced by URPs, such as imposter syndrome, racial fatigue, and tokenization. Their call for equity-centered mentorship models aligns with the necessity of embedding cultural validation into career advancement. Together, these frameworks provide the foundation for BWWM's design. They affirm that successful mentorship is not only about individual relationships but about transforming systems of access, voice, and opportunity.

Black Women Who Mentor Program

The Black Women Who Mentor (BWWM) program is a 14-week structured initiative

designed to cultivate leadership, community, and sponsorship for Black women and other historically excluded professionals. Built around the C.H.A.N.G.E. philosophy, Compelling Hope And Nourishing Generational Empowerment, the program is both an intervention and a model for culturally responsive professional development. BWWM incorporates a multi-modal approach combining curriculum, coaching, community dialogue, and personal reflection. Participants select from two delivery models: a live cohort experience and a flexible, self-paced track. The live cohort includes synchronous weekly sessions facilitated by experienced coaches and guest speakers, while the self-paced option offers modular content supported by asynchronous reflection prompts and a peer accountability structure. Both models begin with an orientation that sets the cultural tone and concludes with a required capstone presentation showcasing participant growth. Each week focuses on a core leadership theme such as identity integration, boundary setting, visibility without tokenism, legacy building, and radical self-advocacy. The curriculum is scaffolded to deepen over time, allowing participants to unpack lived experiences while building concrete strategies for navigating professional spaces.

A key component of the program is the “Sister Circles” peer-led affinity groups that meet independently to provide dialogue, support, and accountability. These groups offer space for vulnerability, peer mentoring, and collective wisdom-sharing. Materials provided include a digital workbook, structured journaling prompts, and excerpts from the “Purple Harvest” trilogy, an anonymized resource featuring narratives from Black women in leadership.

Upon successful completion, participants earn a digital badge recognizing their commitment to leadership and equity. Mentors who engage in the program also participate in cultural competency training and are encouraged to transition into sponsor roles through intentional goal-setting and public advocacy. The program design ensures that mentorship is not passive but active, transforming mentors into co-conspirators for change.

Results

Evaluation of the BWWM program was conducted through a mixed-methods approach involving pre- and post-program surveys, weekly reflection journals, and anonymous testimonials. The data collected provided both quantitative measures of change and qualitative insight into participants' experiences.

Across multiple cohorts, 92% of participants reported an increase in professional confidence, while 88% indicated an improved ability to articulate their leadership goals. Participants cited growth in areas such as boundary-setting, strategic visibility, and alignment between personal values and professional trajectories.

Many expressed that the program was the first professional space where they felt fully seen and heard.

One participant shared, “Before BWWM, I questioned if there was a place for someone like me in leadership. Now I not only see that space, I’m claiming it.” Such testimonials were consistent across cohorts and delivery modes. Mentors who participated also reported significant gains. Over 80% described increased cultural competency and a greater sense of accountability to advocate for marginalized professionals in their institutions. Several mentors went on to formalize sponsorship roles by nominating participants for awards, introducing them to leadership opportunities, or advocating for promotions.

Participants leveraged their digital badge and capstone presentations to initiate leadership conversations at their home institutions. Graduates of the program have since been accepted into senior leadership fellowships, launched their own mentorship initiatives, or joined advisory boards focused on equity.

In addition to personal growth, several institutions began to examine their internal mentorship structures after witnessing the program’s impact. One university’s Office of Diversity launched a pilot version of BWWM for faculty women of color. These ripple effects suggest the potential for BWWM to function not only as a development program but as a catalyst for institutional change. The results affirm that culturally grounded sponsorship can accelerate leadership readiness while transforming the professional ecosystem around URPs.

Discussion

The findings from the BWWM program underscore the power of culturally responsive mentorship to evolve into strategic sponsorship. Participants not only gained professional tools but also experienced a shift in identity, from undervalued professionals to emerging leaders with voice, vision, and validation. This transformation did not occur solely through curriculum but through intentional community, critical dialogue, and institutional accountability. The program’s structure, particularly the Sister Circles and public capstone presentation, created a pipeline for self-advocacy and public recognition, crucial elements often missing from traditional mentorship.

These outcomes align with the literature on equity-centered mentorship, especially CAM and the Synergy Ecosystem frameworks. Like Montgomery’s (2017) mentor constellations, BWWM prioritizes collective support over one-to-one relationships, acknowledging that no single mentor can provide everything a URP needs. Similarly, the program reflects

Rodriguez Wimberly et al.’s (2022) calls for identity-affirming mentorship spaces grounded in shared experience and systemic insight.

The program also revealed the limitations of current mentorship models. Too often, mentorship is positioned as advice-giving rather than advocacy. This model implicitly assumes that the mentee must adapt to the system, rather than challenging the system to adapt to diverse leadership. BWWM disrupts this by preparing participants to expect more than advice, to demand sponsorship, access, and advocacy as standard components of professional development.

There were limitations. The program’s scale was relatively small, and participants were self-selecting, which may influence outcomes. Institutional resistance also emerged as a barrier when graduates attempted to replicate elements of the program in less supportive environments. These findings highlight the need for institutions to build mentorship ecosystems, like the STEM-ME framework, which aligns strategy, resources, and accountability structures.

Future iterations of the program will include longitudinal tracking, deeper mentor training, and alignment with leadership certificate programs. There is also potential to adapt BWWM across sectors, healthcare, law, and nonprofit leadership, where underrepresentation persists.

Conclusion

Mentorship is a foundational tool for professional growth, but alone, it is not sufficient to dismantle systemic barriers faced by underrepresented professionals. Advancing equity requires a shift from passive guidance to active advocacy. The BWWM program demonstrates that when mentorship is rooted in cultural relevance, structured design, and intentional allyship, it can evolve into sponsorship, a leadership practice that opens doors, amplifies voices, and creates lasting change.

The program’s impact suggests that culturally responsive sponsorship works. It builds leadership confidence and institutional visibility for participants, fosters cultural humility in mentors, and sparks ripple effects in organizations. BWWM’s structure supports Black women and other URPs by offering community, curriculum, and credibility in an integrated pipeline. It is not a standalone solution, but a scalable model that can be adapted across contexts and career stages.

For early-career professionals, BWWM provides the foundational tools to navigate spaces where they are often isolated. For mid-career leaders, it offers affirmation, strategy, and access to networks often guarded by gatekeepers. And for institutions, it presents a replicable blueprint for transforming mentoring into a systemic equity tool, complete with measurable outcomes and leadership development pathways, as follows:

- What works: Intentional sponsorship, identity-affirming design, public recognition, and community accountability.
- For whom: Black women and historically underrepresented professionals navigating exclusionary institutions.
- When: Across career stages, with resonance for early- to mid-career professionals seeking leadership visibility.
- How: Through structured mentorship ecosystems grounded in cultural awareness, collective empowerment, and strategic allyship.

To achieve equity in leadership, we must not only change how we mentor, but we must also redefine what mentorship is for. Sponsorship should not be a favor for the few, but a function of leadership for all.

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