

Encouraging Growth: A Case Study of a Tiered Mentoring Program for Undergraduate Students

Merlain-Moffatt, K.

Tufts University

The purpose of this case study is to explore the process of creating a tiered mentorship program structure, rooted in care and wellness, that challenges mentees to grow as individuals and professionals. Given that identity can shape one's professional development, the researcher focused on providing a space for the development of personal and social capital in the context of an affinity community. For marginalized undergraduate students, mentorship can serve as a source of academic, personal, and career guidance. While a number of studies consider the impact of peer mentoring on mentees, few focus on the impact of these relationships on mentors. Even more illuminating is the lack of research discussing the mentorship that peer mentors receive to facilitate peer mentoring relationships and the role that alumni mentors can play. The primary function of this article is to describe the enhancements made to a 40-year-old peer mentorship program through the implementation of a tiered mentoring model. The second purpose is to offer perspective on the mentorship role that the program manager plays, with the goal of helping peer mentors feel supported as they provide mentorship to first-year students. This is analyzed through an evocative autoethnographic lens and offers insight into the tiered cohort model development from conceptualization to implementation. Additionally, it highlights the opportunities and challenges faced in developing such a program and encourages readers to take intentional steps to build a trusting community, while offering a framework for those who may implement a similar model in the future.

Keywords: Tiered mentoring model, peer leaders, alumni mentors, higher education mentoring

Introduction

Peer mentorship at the undergraduate level plays a vital role in helping first-year students acclimate to a new environment, while also allowing student mentors to gain cultural capital and develop skills in time management, confidence, leadership, and networking, etc. (Hayman et al., 2022; Connolly, 2017). For marginalized undergraduate students in particular, mentorship can serve as a source of academic, personal, and career guidance (Booker & Brevard, 2017). While several studies consider the impact of peer mentoring on mentees, fewer focus on the impact of these relationships on those offering mentorship. More illuminating is the lack of research discussing the mentorship that peer mentors receive to facilitate peer mentoring relationships and the potential role that alumni can play in mentoring student mentors. The primary function of this article is to describe the enhancements made to a 40-year-old peer mentorship program for underrepresented students through the implementation of a tiered mentoring model at a private research university in New England. The second purpose is to offer

perspective on the mentorship role that the program manager inevitably plays with the goal of helping peer mentors feel supported as they provide mentorship to first-year students.

Program

The Peer Leader Program is a 40-year-old program that is housed at the Africana Center of Tufts University and managed by one professional staff member from the Center. This person, who will be referred to as the program manager, is responsible for interviewing and selecting peer leaders/mentors, planning and conducting peer leader training, assigning the mentor-mentee matches, and meeting with the peer leaders monthly. The program is designed to match incoming first-year and transfer students who self-identify as being of African descent with a peer leader who is trained to provide guidance and support to students during their first year at the institution. Peer leaders are sophomores, juniors, and seniors who have been selected and trained to mentor first-year students and help them acclimate to the collegiate environment. As part of their role, peer leaders plan and facilitate

social activities and programs for their mentees. In the 2024-2025 academic year, the program took on a new vision: to build a community of peer leaders who are accountable to themselves, each other, and their mentees. As a cohort, working through a framework of centering their wellness, they develop expansive ideas and strive to create an environment that uplifts the Africana community while also gaining the skills and guidance to achieve their personal goals. As a token of appreciation for their efforts in building and sustaining community, the peer mentors receive a small stipend for the academic year.

Literature Review

Mentorship, as defined by Nuis et al. (2022), is “a formalized process based on a developmental relationship between two persons in which one person is more experienced (mentor) than the other (mentee).” In the collegiate setting, peer mentorship programs can provide great value to both first-year student mentees and upperclassmen mentors. These programs can help student mentees to acclimate to the institution, learn more about campus resources, form connections across class years, and find community in affinity. Mentors can benefit from giving and gaining social and cultural capital (Hayman et al., 2022) by building community and sharing resources. Through these programs, student mentors can find themselves building their confidence and problem-solving skills, while also being challenged to grow as leaders (Connolly, 2017). Overall, these programs have the ability to shape how students interact with mentorship and develop as leaders. However, Nora and Crisp (2007) note that mentoring programs tend to lack a foundation in theoretical framework. Consequently, they propose a conceptual framework for undergraduate mentorship programs that comprises of four latent constructs: psychological or emotional support, support for setting goals and choosing a career path, academic subject knowledge support, and specification of a role model. After analyzing survey data from 200 students, their findings demonstrated that students perceive effective mentors to provide an emotionally safe and psychologically sound support system.

Critical to leadership development--and sound mentorship--is the ability to care for oneself and others. Mindfulness is defined as “a state of nonjudgemental awareness in the present moment, a practice that fosters momentary awareness, and a skill that one can strengthen over time” (Long et al., 2021). Given that the COVID-19 pandemic greatly accelerated the decline in university students’ wellness and students of color are disproportionately impacted (Clabaugh et al., 2021), mindfulness is increasingly important in the collegiate setting (Zarowski et al., 2024). To combat stress and potential mental health challenges, Dvořáková

et al. (2019) hypothesize that mindfulness and compassion skills may promote positive coping strategies and find that mindfulness can be an avenue to improving one’s wellness and wellbeing. Futch et al. (2023) examined college students’ interest in wellness and wellness programs. Their findings suggest that students have a strong interest in both, where emotion regulation, goal setting, and time management emerged as topics of interest to students. In developing wellness-based programs, the inclusion of a strengths focused approach can improve wellness and wellbeing (Long et al., 2021). Furthermore, where students are able to identify and apply their strengths, they are more likely to have a more holistic view of themselves and aspire to achieve their academic and career goals (Anderson, 2024).

From a developmental standpoint, peer mentoring programs can play a crucial role in facilitating professional and personal development. At the same time, there has been a focus on utilizing alumni mentoring programs in higher education as a means to support students’ career pathways. There are several benefits of student-alumni mentorship programs. While alumni mentors give back to their alma mater, student mentees receive “career guidance, encouragement during the academic program, advice on important course and field work, and opportunities to make professional contacts” (Dragovich & Margeton, 1995, p. 346). Yet, there is a gap in the literature as to what merging peer and alumni mentorship programs might yield for participants.

Methods

While colleagues across the higher education field have similar experiences in student facing roles, I find that we often learn about these experiences after the fact. Evocative autoethnography focuses on “narrative presentations that open up conversations and evoke emotional responses” (Ellingson & Ellis, 2008, p. 445). This paper is born out of the desire to share my experience in restructuring a peer leader program because I know that this process, along with the frustrations and joys along the way, are not a singular experience. While my process is not meant to be generalizable, I concur that autoethnography can be ‘an avenue for doing something meaningful for yourself and the world’ (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 738) and thus, have chosen this methodology with the hopes that it aids someone in their future process. Through a data generation exercise, I detailed key moments that contributed to the creation and implementation of the program between January 2024 and May 2025. I asked myself two key questions to better understand how I approached the restructuring of the program: 1) What does mentorship look like to me? and 2) What role did I play as a mentor? Additionally, I analyzed my journal entries, written prayer

requests, a letter I had written to my future self, meeting notes, emails, and text messages to search for themes and to better understand my own thoughts regarding the program. I open coded this data and developed in vivo codes like “peer leaders today said that even though they didn’t [initially] want alumni mentors, they are liking them.” Through axial coding, the aforementioned code evolved into codes like “acquiesce” and “came around.” While I coded data, the ultimate objective was not to develop neither a codebook nor theoretical explanation, but rather to provide context to the narrative. As I did not interview others to gain an understanding of their perspective on the program, what follows are not results in the traditional sense, but rather a journey through the re-conceptualization of the program followed by the processes of implementation and open reflection.

Case Study

Re-conceptualization of the Program

Upon arrival at my position, I was tasked with restructuring the Peer Leader Program. Fortunately, the Peer Leader Program had a solid foundation and history, which informed the ability to make enhancements rather than build a program from the ground up. Between starting my role in January 2024 and the selection of new peer leaders taking place by mid-March 2024, I had roughly two months to conceptualize any changes the program needed to ensure that contracts could be updated for the new cohort of peer leaders to sign.

With a short timeline, I did not consider grounding the restructuring in a theoretical framework. Rather, I spoke with my colleagues to understand their perspective on the program and had informal discussions with current peer leaders to learn about their experience in the program. I left those conversations understanding that mentors needed to be held accountable and given more engagement opportunities with their cohort, first-year mentees, and professional staff. I also noted that while peer leaders gave so much of themselves to the community at large, I wondered if they were being poured into or if they were simply pouring from empty cups. With this in mind, I began to think about how this support gap could be filled.

In February, at an Africana Center alumni meet and greet event, an alumnus asked the team how alumni would be utilized moving forward. That inquiry was the catalyst for me to begin thinking about how our alumni could support current students actively, more intentionally, and sustainably. While still in the brainstorming phases of how to enhance the Peer Leader Program, I considered how mentoring relationships can be beneficial when mentors and mentees have similar backgrounds (Atkins et al., 2020). I then began to wonder what it would look like for alumni to serve as mentors

for the peer leaders while the peer leaders mentored first-year students. Knowing that there is an intersectional nature of self and identity development that can inform one’s professional development, there was great attention given to creating a space where student mentors would be able to grow their personal and social capital. Consequently, the tiered mentoring program was birthed with the idea that it would: 1) enable alumni to be engaged with current students through mentoring peer leaders throughout an academic year, and beyond if they desired, 2) create a developmental network for student mentors and an avenue to explore personal and social capital, and 3) give student mentors a platform to connect with someone who was both familiar with the experiences they were having at the institution and also in a position they wanted to be in, in the future.

I imagined that I would ask the new cohort of peer leaders about their intended career paths during the spring/summer of 2024 and that I would subsequently reach out to alumni with aligned interests to serve as mentors. During that time, I would keep the alumni abreast to what the peer leaders were doing in the program and would develop a list of framing questions for alumni and peer leaders to better facilitate dialogue and the mentorship. While I was prepared to go down this route, my attendance at an event changed my direction.

Implementation: The Importance of Synergy

In April 2024, at a campus event, I met a campus partner who briefly mentioned that her office was conducting a pilot tiered mentoring program with alumni and current students, in collaboration with another identity center. At that moment, I informed her of my desire to create such a program for the students I worked with, and we agreed to stay in contact. I sent her an email the following week and detailed how I wanted our peer leaders to be matched with alumni mentors during the upcoming summer/fall and asked to schedule a conversation soon so that our offices could collaborate in this endeavor. After meeting in June, we spoke about the current structure they had in place and what my vision was for the mentorship program. By early August, the collaboration was greenlit. We put out an application for mentors by mid-August, interviewed alumni by September, and had the alumni career mentorship program up and running in October.

Where bureaucracy can oftentimes slow down progress, the synergy of cross-departmental collaboration was crucial to the program development. Rather than shouldering the alumni component of the Peer Leader Program alone, I gained a partner who cared deeply about this work. With her help, we brought in several other campus partners to get the word out to as many alumni mentors as possible. She took it upon herself to not only develop the application, but

to also interview, train, and meet regularly with the alumni mentors throughout the academic year. Her partnership is invaluable to structuring this tiered mentorship program.

Implementation: Wellness

While the Peer Leader Program is a student leadership development program, it is one that is rooted in care and wellness. From the initial interview, students are informed that this is a program in which they will pour out via mentoring first-year students, and they will be poured into by the Center's professional staff and alumni. Students learn how to be effective peer leaders during summer training. Part of this training includes sessions on mindfulness, how to implement and enforce one's personal boundaries, and how to conduct self-checks for one's wellness. These sessions help students recognize the burdens that they place on themselves, prompt students to actively think about what their stressors are and create an action plan to mitigate overwhelm during the school year and encourage them to start thinking about how they might care for themselves and one another throughout the year. To encourage the cohort members to talk to one another, student mentors are assigned a "buddy" within the group. This could be someone they could plan social events with during the school year, talk to if they ran into any issues with their mentee group, check in with about their experience, and more. Additionally, the Lead Peer Leader(s) host bonding sessions and regularly check in with the group via text or during monthly meetings to see how everyone is doing.

At the start of the spring semester, a one-day retreat focused on the peer leaders as individuals rather than as mentors. All peer leaders were encouraged to suggest topics that they wanted to discuss in order to curate the retreat specifically for the needs of their cohort. The day opened with a grounding circle activity to allow the group to reintroduce themselves to one another before the Lead Peer Leader led a guided meditation. Later, the group delved into talking about their career interests, networking, and their ability to be flexible among life's transitions. This retreat provided space for the peer leaders to reflect on the previous semester and gave them room to express their needs to professional staff to feel supported for the rest of the academic year.

Implementation: Career Development

Since peer mentorship programs can provide "scaffolding for effective career development and professional integration" (Monroe, 2003, p.94), the Peer Leader Program is designed to encourage students to grow personally and professionally. During summer training, through collaborative workshops with a campus partner, peer leaders have an opportunity to have

their resumes reviewed, discuss their value systems and how they directly tie into their career interests, and learn about various career development resources. These sessions serve as an opportunity for peer mentors to explore what their career identities mean to them and to begin considering how they would navigate them. With this foundational work, students were later introduced to their alumni career mentor—many of whom shared similar career interests—who would review their resumes and cover letters and offer guidance on networking and exploring intended majors and career paths.

Opportunities, Challenges, and Looking Forward

Though I was focused on creating a platform for the students to receive mentorship from alumni, I did not think of myself as a mentor to the students, by any means. It was not until a student told me that even though they would not be a peer leader the following year, they expected me to know that they would still come to me as their mentor. I wanted peer leaders to serve as the "role model" that Nora and Crisp (2007) discuss in their conceptual framework, but in that moment, I realized that I had inadvertently found myself in the mentor role because of the consistent exposure I had with the students over the course of the school year.

On a monthly basis, I had peer leaders provide updates on their mentees' wellbeing and adjustment to the institution in an Excel sheet. In this sheet, peer leaders detailed if they had upcoming plans to spend time with their mentees, any concerns they had about their mentees' adjustment to the institution, if a professional staff member should follow up with a mentee, or if the mentee was unresponsive to outreach. Since peer leaders filled out these sheets regularly, my monthly meetings with the peer leaders were centered on them rather than their mentees. I firmly believe that we are embodied beings of depth who deserve the time and space to share who we fully are with others. This is one of the reasons why care and wellness are focal points of this program. Without the student mentors feeling cared for and being well, how would they uplift and help facilitate community? In the first programmatic interaction, the interview, prospective peer leaders are asked the following question: "What have you needed from mentors in the past and what would you need from us (professional staff leading the program) [to feel supported]?" Admittedly, the initial intent behind this question was to understand what potential areas of improvement may exist within the cohort. However, this question helped me to gain a better understanding of what peer leaders would need so that they could be successful in their roles, not only as participants in the program, but also as siblings, friends, and students committed to growth.

In my 30-minute one-on-one meetings with students, I intentionally limited conversations

about their mentees to no longer than five minutes, if at all. I wanted these meetings to be focused on how they were doing as individuals and how they were finding their time in and out of the program. Ultimately, I wanted to better understand who they were and wanted to be as people. During our meetings, I prepared specific agenda items for the first half, and I left the remaining 15 minutes for them to ask any questions, raise any comments, or express any concerns. In line with Nora and Crisp's four domain conceptual framework (2007), through these monthly conversations, I learned about the peer leaders' professional, personal, and academic goals. Evoking Long et al. (2021), I helped them identify their strengths and encouraged them to further develop and apply them. We spoke about the books they were reading for fun amidst their busy schedules, how to succeed in their intended majors, their part-time jobs and internships, their concern for relatives they had left across state lines, and their relationships with their alumni career mentors. I held them accountable to the goals they set for themselves each semester and eventually, built rapport with them--something I felt came too late in the year.

Perhaps one of the biggest challenges I faced in restructuring the program was sensing that the students and I did not see eye to eye on several program changes. Across the data analyzed, "misunderstanding" emerged as a major theme. As they questioned and bemoaned their disapproval of many of the changes, I began to feel that they did not trust me to do my job. In time, I understood that the students I worked with had dealt with high turnover of Center staff and thus, were weary of me and my commitment to the work. Still too, I recognized that my work style and demeanor had differed from what students had grown accustomed to which at times was jarring to some peer leaders.

Though I only had two months to restructure a program, in hindsight, I do wish that I had taken time to build a trusting relationship with the new cohort of peer leaders. I imagine that this would have made difficult conversations easier and that there would have been less resistance to the new accountability structures implemented. This work revealed that there can seemingly be tension between care and accountability. Where one party views accountability as authoritarian another may view it as an act of care within itself. Where this dichotomy exists, tensions will be present until they are thoroughly addressed and both parties are heard. To mitigate this, it is critical for someone leading a program like this to be open and honest. While it is important to clearly communicate, it is also necessary to listen not simply to correct, but also to understand. I posit that asking students what they need to feel cared for and to feel heard before a tense situation arises may serve as an aid to diffuse difficult conversations. After all, while one person is responsible for managing the program, ultimately, all parties are co-collaborators in

ensuring the program is impactful.

Conclusion

The needs of today's students cannot be met in a silo, but rather students must be supported through a network. Peer mentorship is an invaluable resource that can positively impact mentees, but how student mentors are poured into and valued must also be considered. Through cross-departmental collaboration and utilizing alumni mentors, there is an opportunity to help students expand their developmental network and intentionally position them to continue working on their personal and professional goals as they mentor others.

A key component to providing sound mentorship is practicing mindfulness to enhance one's wellbeing and to position oneself to adequately support others. It is my hope to further this research and conduct a qualitative study to better understand the impact of the tiered mentorship program on the peer leaders. Until then, I am grateful for the new understanding I have gained in knowing how I have been perceived as a mentor by the peer leaders, even though I did not intentionally set out to be one. Through centering wellness and care, I look forward to being more intentional about building trusting relationships with the new cohort of peer leaders. And as they pour into their first-year mentees, it is my hope that they also feel poured into in a meaningful way.

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