

Understanding the Benefits and Barriers to Mentoring: The Experience of Black Faculty in Academia

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Abstract

Many researchers have addressed the benefits of mentoring for Black students, yet little is known about their mentors, who are often Black professors. This study addresses three questions: How do Black faculty benefit from mentoring, how do Black students benefit from the support faculty offer, and what barriers keep Black faculty from mentoring students. This is a qualitative study. Interviews were conducted with eleven Black faculties at a large research university. Findings indicate that although Black faculty sees the benefits of mentoring for themselves and students, institutional pressures may be hindering them from mentoring more.

Introduction

There is an achievement gap between Black and White college students, which shows differences in academic performance. For those entering college, 56% of Black Americans never graduate, as compared to 36% of White Americans (Brower & Ketterhagen, 2004). The college graduation rate for Blacks is 40%, which is 21% lower than the 61% graduation rate of White students ("Persisting Racial Gap," 2004). Further, fewer than a third of Black men who enter four-year colleges as freshmen graduate within six years, the lowest six-year graduation rate among all racial and ethnic groups, according to analysis by Shaun R. Harper (Schmidt, 2009).

Perhaps these retention problems can be explained by the low levels of academic and social integration of black college students. Tinto's model of student retention highlights the importance of academic and social integration for all students. This model provides variables that can increase the retention rate of Black college students.

Tinto's model for retention in colleges and universities stresses that academic and social integration are important for success in college (Severiens & Wolff, 2008). Academic integration is the development of a strong affiliation with the college academic environment both in the classroom and outside of classroom (Kraemer, 1997). Social integration is the development of a strong affiliation with the college social environment both in the classroom and outside the class (Kraemer, 1997). Without these two areas, the likelihood of succeeding in college is not as high (Severiens & Wolff, 2008). With high proportions of Black students dropping out of college, the need to explore what factors prevent attrition and promote academic and social integration for

Black students. Student faculty interaction is vital for student retention (Lee, 1999), and mentoring and informal relationships with faculty have been shown to positively influence the integration of Black students (Allen, 1992). Mentors provide just what these students need to be successful in the college and university settings: support, understanding, positive role modeling, and instruction for people in different stations of life (Hurte, 2002). According to Holmes, Land, and Hinton-Hudson (2007) students “who participate in formal and/or informal mentoring relationships are more likely to persist and succeed in higher education than those who do not” (p.105)

The literature states what students gain from being mentored by faculty. It explains why it is important for Black students to be mentored and how it helps with academic achievement, academic success, social integration and connection to campus. Mentoring students is expected of all professors regardless of race/ethnicity, however Black faculty tend to be overwhelmed with this responsibility more often than faculty from other backgrounds (Allen, Epps, Guillory, Suh, & Bonous-Hammarth, 2000). Black faculty often feel like it is their duty to mentors, so they engage in mentoring more students than their white peers (Allen, et al., 2000; Beaz, 2000). Black faculty often feel especially obligated to Black students because the history of racial and ethnic inequalities in today’s society (Allen, et al., 2000).

These scholars suggest Black faculty renowned for mentoring students for. Whether it is inside the classroom or outside of an academic setting, Black faculty have inspired many students. While we know Black faculty have been helpful in mentoring students, there has not been much research from the faculty perspective addressing their experiences in these relationships.

The purpose of my study is to understand the relationships Black faculty form with students from the faculty perspective. My research questions are: How do Black faculty think students benefit from mentoring? How do Black faculty benefit from mentoring? What forces shape how much Black faculty work with Black students?

Literature Review

Tinto’s model of college student retention suggests that when students fully participate in the college experience both in and outside of the classroom, they increase their social and academic integration and are more likely to excel in college and graduate successfully (Severiens and Wolff, 2008). According to Severeins and Wolff (2008), informal integration is essential to academic and social integration so students can excel in college. Informal academic integration refers to relationships between teachers and students outside of the classroom (Severeins and Wolff 2008). Informal social integration includes factors like social contact and participation in student activities (Severeins and Wolff, 2008).

Similarly, there are two forms of interaction for student faculty relationships: formal and informal. Formal interaction includes structured experiences in the academic setting such as group work, labs, and classroom. Informal faculty interaction is important as well (Lee, 1999). Both of these components, out of the classroom and in the classroom interactions, are essential for student retention (Lee, 1999). Since student faculty interaction is important for student retention and academic success in college, we should focus on mentoring and its importance for students, especially Black students.

There are many benefits that students gain from mentoring. According to Credle and Dean (1991), it is important for Black students to be mentored once they enter college. Mentoring offers students positive role models and helps them with academic problems

(Redmond, 1990). Mentors can also help protégés continue on to graduate college and make choices about various career options (Blackwell, 1989; Dutton, 2003; Juarez, 1991). Mentors can also increase the numbers of minority students who enter into graduate school (Hurte, 2002; Juarez, 1991). These mentoring relationships can help minority students engage in research experience in fields related to their future careers (Cawyer, Simonds, & Davis, 2002). And professors can show these students how to deal with issues of prejudice they may face as students through these interactions (Allen et al., 2000).

Some researchers have suggested that mentors and mentees both benefit from the mentoring relationships. Mentors gain satisfaction by helping students, respect for their own capability as professionals, and examine their own past through their interactions with students (Dutton, 2003; Patitu & Terrell, 1997). However, research also explains that mentoring can be very challenging for Black professors and very time consuming. They are described as being expected to give students social support and counseling, writing letters of recommendation, helping with selecting graduate or professional schools, reviewing job and fellowship/scholarships applications (Allen, et al., 2000).

Black faculty face many demands and priorities as they pursue the collegiate experience in the academe. Not only do they perform these responsibilities, they also are overwhelmed with obligations to their departments, university, and community (Bowen & Schuster, 1986). Black faculty members are also expected to serve on committees that focus on minority issues, racial/ethnic relations, recruitment of faculty and students of color, university relations, and community outreach (Allen, et al., 2000; Beaz, 2000; Tierney & Bensimon, 1996).

With all of these responsibilities and expectations around serving their university and community, often their research agenda suffers. Black professors are also not as likely to be tenured when compared to white counterparts because they spend more time with teaching and administrative tasks as opposed to working on research and publications (Astin, Antonio, Cress, & Astin, 1997; Nettles & Perna, 1995). According to Nettles and Perna (1995), all faculty members have to perform research and deliver scholarly publications, teaching, advising, mentoring, and committee responsibilities. Depending on the institution, each of these criteria weighs differently in the tenure process (Jarvis, 1991; Tierney and Benison, 1996). Certain institutions emphasize scholarship as the main criteria, especially research universities (Blackburn and Lawrence, 1995; Tierney and Bensimon, 1996). Prior research says that service is required by all faculty members, but it is not valued highly in the tenure process and faculty members are often punished for over engagement in service activities (Baez, 2000; Tierney and Bensimon, 1996). Mentoring, advising, and serving on committees are not seen as important as producing research or publications. The reason being because they see a personal or social benefit to engaging in service (Cuadraz, 1997; Johnsurd, 1993; Padilla and Chavez, 1997; Pollard, 1990). This often means that they are not as successful in the tenure process (Banks, 1984; Blackwell, 1981; Menges & Exum, 1983). They tend to have lower academic rank and work at less prestigious institutions (Astin, Antonio, Cress & Astin, 1997; Nettles & Perna, 1995). Because of this they often spend more time advising, mentoring students and serving on committees and it makes it harder for them to gain tenure. Serving on committees can be beneficial to faculty members and the institution since it can increase the diversity of perspectives (Menges and Exum, 1983), it helps to fill the needs of people of color (Tack and Patitu, 1992), and it can be a personal reward for faculty of color as well (Johnsrud 1993). Since Black faculty have responsibilities to teach, advise, serve on diversity issues committees, and try

to produce research, it makes it harder for Black faculty to mentor students without losing focus on their other work.

Methods

The primary method used in this study is a qualitative design. The participants are 11 professors employed at a large research university. My general goal is to explore the relationships that Black professors form with Black students. My research questions are:

1. How do Black faculty think students benefit from mentoring?
2. How do Black faculty benefit from mentoring?
3. What forces shape how much Black faculty work with Black students?

Institutional Site

The qualitative data used in this study were collected from professors employed from one institution: Royal University (pseudonym). Royal University is a large, public, research university that is located on the East Coast in the mid-Atlantic region. In the fall of 2007, Royal's total enrollment was 36,014: 25,857 were undergraduates and 10,157 were graduate students. The undergraduate racial/ethnic breakdown is 57% White, 13% African-American, 6% Hispanic, 14 Asian/Pacific Islander, 0% American Indian/Alaskan Native. The total number of faculty employed at the institution are 3,752: 2,896 were full time faculty. The tenure/non tenure track faculty population included 1,464 members. The faculty racial/ethnic breakdown is 72.9% White, 10.2% African American, 2.8% Hispanic, 8.6% Asian, and 0.1% Native American.

Participants

There were 11 participants in this study; all were full-time Black faculty at Royal University when interviewed. The sample was comprised of 6 males and 5 females. The faculty were from various fields of study, five of the participants teach in the social sciences, three in mathematics or engineering, two in life and physical sciences, two in humanities, one in the arts, and one in the interdisciplinary program. Their academic rank varied three were assistant professors, four were associate professors, and four were full professors.

Procedures

The data I analyzed for this project was collected by Dr. Kimberly Griffin between 2006 and 2007. Based on an interest in having ample sample representation by gender, rank, and discipline, interview participants were selected and recruited using purposeful rather than random sampling (Bogdan and Biklen, 1998). Key administrators at Royal University assisted with identifying Black faculty at their campus, compiling contact lists, and emailing potential participants. Snowball sampling (Bogdan and Biklen, 1998) was also used to recruit participants. Participants were asked to recommend other African American faculty that could add additional insight by their involvement in the project.

Each faculty member who agreed to be in the study participated in a 1-on-1 semi-structured interview (Bogdan and Biklen, 1998) with Dr. Griffin. Prior to each interview, participants completed a brief demographic questionnaire, taking approximately 2-3 minutes to complete. Interviews followed, taking approximately 60 to 90 minutes to complete. In this interview, participants talked about several topics related to their lives as professors, and focused especially on their mentoring of Black students. To ensure confidentiality, all participants and the institution they work at were assigned pseudonyms. Professors were asked permission to tape the interviews, which were later transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed by reading 11 interviews provided by Dr. Griffin. First, I compiled notes on the professors' responses based on how these responses related to my research questions. Second, I developed a list of codes that pertain to what related to my research questions. The lists of codes were: "motivation", "benefit," and "support," these codes were attached to any statement when a professor discussed their reasons for mentoring, how they viewed their helpfulness and when they offered support to Black students. These codes were used to organize my data. Using the codes, I looked back through the interviews, and attached the codes to the quotes. I then made a new code: "barriers", which was attached to any statement when a professor talks about when they were not able to mentor a student for a particular reason. I then analyzed coded data and grouped quotes into patterns, which I call themes, and described how these patterns relate back to my research questions.

Findings

Themes emerging from the data show that Black faculty members see how students benefit from mentoring, Faculty have benefited themselves from mentoring, but there are also barriers that Black faculty face in academia that may hinder them from devoting their time to mentor students.

Student Benefits

According to Allen, et al. (2000), the informal relationship between faculty and students has a positive influence on Black students and their academic achievement. Throughout the interviews many Black faculty expressed various benefits they think students gain from these mentoring relationships. First, social support was seen a positive experience, and faculty said students gained a closer relationship with these faculty members, which enable them to receive help when needed. Professor Shawn Johnson expresses he has a close relationship with his students. Students were able to talk with him not only about personal issues, but also academic issues to solve problems

"I feel like I have a closer professional relationship and that that they feel more comfortable to come in and just sit down and talk and to complain and whine . . . and I just for the most part listen, and we try to problem-solve and we think through stuff"

Professor Jackson made sure that the one of the students he worked with was able to receive help so she can achieve all of her goals and dreams.

"I think we established a relationship early on that I was willing to help in any way I could to help make sure she succeeded . . ." Professor Smith, on the other hand, just wanted to connect with her students by doing more than just greeting them. She wants to get to know them on a more personal level, not just as students in her class:

"I want to connect in more ways than just saying hi. If I have time, I'll try to get to know a little bit more about the person."

These quotes explained the sort of social support each professor offered their students.

Fostered skill development was also a benefit to students from these mentoring relationships. Students were able to gain research experience, learning how to write and publish in scholarly journals, but they learned these skills through hard work and dedication.

Professor Johnson makes sure to offer his students research opportunities through writing and publishing articles. This shows that he wants his students to be involved in contributing to the collection of scholars that pertain to their respective fields.

Professor Hayward wants her students to not have their hand held in the research experience. Challenging and teaching them how to gain these skills offers her students great tools for graduate school:

"I am really one of those people that believes that you shouldn't spoon feed or you shouldn't show people what all the research is – figure out how to motivate them and then train them as critical thinkers."

Professor Smith wants her students to accomplish their goals so they can successfully complete their doctoral program. "Try to work in a reciprocal way with them, try to understand what it is that they are trying to accomplish and help them meet their goals around their doctoral program."

Academic support was also offered, which could be a tremendous help to these students. They were able to learn about goal setting so they can achieve the goals they set out for themselves. Also, faculty offered support for entrance into graduate school, writing letters of recommendations so they can be competitive in the graduate admissions process. Professor Hempfield wrote a letter of recommendation for a student and they were accepted a graduate program: "He asked me to write him a letter and I was very happy to and he got accepted to the program." The student was able to get into the program through this relationship and hopefully will be successful in graduate school. Professor Johnson also expressed how he still keeps close contact with some of his students and writes letters of recommendations for them when they ask him: "I've had a couple of students who kind of keep in touch with me and I'm constantly writing letters of reference for them and things like that."

Professor Miller really wants to help her students choose between various course options and makes sure they succeed in their major of choice. This can also help them pursue graduate school in the future because they know it can be a goal in the long run: "I do try to help them think about long term goals in terms of what kind of courses, what they want their major to be in and what sorts of sub-disciplines they want to have in their vita given what they want to do . . ."

Faculty Benefits

Faculty also describe the benefits they receive from mentoring students. Faculty described learning new ways to improve their scholarship and intellectual growth. They also bond with these students. Faculty members expressed that there is a special bond that they form with Black students.

This faculty member learned not only how to improve her scholarship, but also the students taught her new ways to grow intellectually: "I think my scholarship is better, my intellectual growth is better, because of these interactions. They [students] keep me fresh. They keep me on my toes. They giving me new perspectives that I add to my scholarship and that increase my intellectual . . . growth."

Professor Williams is able to read and learn from her students to keep her fresh in her field and her research interest current. She can use these new ideas so she can approach new ways to develop skills and perfect them.

"Well, one is knowledge...they're working on things or approaching things in ways that are interesting and different and new and so I'm learning stuff and reading stuff I wouldn't necessarily have read otherwise and just being kept up in the field and in areas . . . that's one of the things I gain from it."

Professor Smith expresses a special connection she makes with her students, specially her Black students. They are able to engage in a relationship because of their similar racial

backgrounds. They relate to each other because they have similar issues and challenges they can share with each other.

"I'm working with students of color, particularly African American students, that there's a different kind of bonding that happens, in part because typically the student relates to or I relate to something with them. We understand each other's sort of background experiences."

Not only do they learn from these students, faculty members gain personal rewards from these relationships. It makes them feel good about themselves and they get satisfaction from working with these students. Professor Richards is very proud of his student's accomplishments. He says it makes his "heart sing" to see them on television and award shows. He really gains a sense of happiness to see his students succeed:

"I mean, seeing your students succeed is the best feeling that you can ever have. It's like I always want those students to go out and do work and be better than I am, so you see students, they're nominated for awards and winning awards and I see them on T.V. and . . . in a commercial . . . or on stage and it makes my heart sing. . ."

Professor Hempfield likes the fact he can see his students progress in their academic career. Also he gains satisfaction with these relationships because he realizes that the students look to him as inspiration to pursue their dreams because he is proof that it can be done.

"If they're doing well, I think it feel always good to be helpful to someone and then to see that they're some sort of progressing a lot . . . but just the satisfaction that you've been able to kind of have an impact on that person . . ."

Factors Shaping Interaction

We know that Black faculty mentor more students than their white peers (Allen, et al., 2000), but there are factors that may hinder them from mentoring students. Black faculty have personal life issues just like other faculty members; they have families and also want time for themselves.

Professor Johnson not only has a personal life with his family, he also has to mentor his students, which can be time consuming. At times he isn't able to perform all of his family and academic duties because he has so many other obligations to attend to:

"There are certain times when I'm trying to mentor a student through something and my kids are sitting there going, "Daddy, when are you going to play with us?" Or my wife is like, "OK, dinner's getting cold," . . . it certainly is time-consuming . . . You don't always have the time to give them [students] what they need, so they sometimes end up not getting the support that they really would like."

Professor Terry Robinson has to take care of her young child and advise students which makes it hard for her to balance these two responsibilities.

". . . I have a three year old, so I don't have the time to give to students . . . I was commuting an hour each way, couldn't possibly really see myself doing that with a three year old."

Prof Hayward talks about how doing research, being a single mother it can be too much on her plate. She says "there's only 24 hours in a day and she has to sleep at some point", so it can be hard to get everything done.

"Because it's so time consuming and exhausting . . . I just would work harder on the weekends or just stay up later at night and do my own research. But also I'm a single mother, so if it doesn't take time away from my research it takes away from my time with my kids . . . There are only 24 hours in a day and I have to sleep some of those hours, as much as I hate to admit all that."

There is also a lot of work responsibilities faculty have to deal with, as well. They have to teach and advise students, work on diversity committees for minority issues, and also produce research and publications for the tenure and advancement process. All of these responsibilities can make it hard to mentor student and produce research. Professor Hayward has a hard time balancing mentoring her students and producing research. She expresses how not being able to produce scholarly research is going to hinder her in the tenure and advancement process and she is not able to produce scholarly research because she has multiple roles to perform:

"I don't know if I've balanced it well, which is not to say that I'm totally there for my students. . . The other thing that I'm balancing is this engaged scholarship, which is also not what's going to get me tenure. So I have a lot of pushes and pulls and tensions"

Professor Jenkins has to produce publications as a young scholar and he is so focused on his research, he is not able to be accessible to his students. He expresses that it is very hard to maintain both responsibilities and he wished he would have more time to mentor students.

". . . Whether I had to do my research and get the publications out, versus not being as open and available to students . . . for idealistic young PhDs [They] want to be able to do it all"

Professor Robinson had a difficult time with one of her students who really needed her attention. She was also trying to teach, advise, and produce research creating conflicting priorities for this faculty member. She expressed the difficulty in trying to get all of these responsibilities done and trying to advance in the tenure process:

". . . We had another student who came first year who needed a lot of work and she was draining and my colleague and I at the other institution . . . and you're trying to finish your own work and teach courses and publish and do all the things that our profession requires of you, it really is a lot, and then when you have to argue with your institutions about why they should pay you a certain amount of money because you did this cultural work which enables them to retain the very students that they say they want, although they're not really doing anything to demonstrate that, it becomes a pain in the butt, then you get tired of that."

Discussion and Implications

My analysis of the interview data showed many students do benefit from these mentoring relationships with students, especially black students. Students gain social support, academic support, and foster skill development that is beneficial to their academic success in college. These relationships show students that they can achieve their goals beyond undergrad and take strides to apply and be successful in graduate school. We know that mentoring is important to Black professors and can promote student success in college. Mentoring and informal relationships show a positive influence in college success, especially black students (Allen, 2000). According to Hurte (2002), students do gain support, understanding, positive role modeling, and instruction for people in different stations in life. The students get letters of

recommendations, help with graduate school process, and job and scholarship/fellowship applications (Allen, et al., 2000). Similar to this research faculty in this study expressed that they saw all of these benefits for students, and faculty thought students were able to succeed with all of this assistance they were able to provide for them.

Faculty members also gain benefits from these interactions with students as well. They learn new ways to grow intellectually to improve their scholarship. The bonding that they formed with these students, specifically Black students, was seen as a great experience for Black faculty. Since we know that Black faculty mentor more often they are satisfied by helping these students, they can gain respect for their own capability as a professional, and examine the past by interacting in the student's early career (Dutton, 2003; Patitu & Terrell, 1997). They also perform service because they see it as a personal or social benefit and in the interviews there were many faculty members that expressed service as something they enjoyed. They gained a lot by interacting with students.

However, there were some factors that shaped professors' level of interaction with their students. Mentoring students affected their available time with family, and also personal time. It was hard for them to work on their research and publications, and still spend time with kids and other personal hobbies. At times, some professors were working long hours during the day trying to accomplish their goals, but most times they are not able to get everything done. Work responsibilities are another barrier they face in their profession. In order to obtain tenure, the most important thing is producing research and scholarly publications. When Black faculty are teaching and advising, serving on diversity committees for faculty/student recruitment for people of color, trying to mentor students, they at times are not able to produce as many publications. Since Black faculty tend to mentor and participate in service more often, this means in many cases they are not able to get tenure (Banks, 1984; Blackwell, 1981; Menges & Exum, 1983).

Implications

Based on my findings, I believe there are a few things that can be improved in the mentoring relationships between Black students and Black faculty. As stated throughout the literature, mentoring is not seen as a critical element in the tenure and advancement process. Mentoring is something that is valuable to not only to Black students, but Black faculty as well. More emphasis should be placed on mentoring in the tenure and advancement process because mentoring can influence students' lives, especially Black students. Mentoring is one of the main reasons students, especially Black students stay in college, it increasing our retention, graduation rates.

Promoting these relationships is very important, as well. Statistically only 6% of all faculty members at a four year college are Black faculty members, Universities need to recruit Black faculty. It is important to have Black faculty to mentor students, so that the small number of Black professors are not overwhelmed by the students who want to work with them. Even though recruiting Black faculty can promote interaction, I think connecting with a professor is the most important thing to consider when trying to improve Black student success. Having a diverse faculty not only for Black students, but all for students is very important. Having a diverse faculty can promote more diversity initiatives on campus and help more students learn from different faculty members from all ethnic/racial backgrounds. Encouraging more White faculty and Black students to work together is important. It shouldn't matter about race or ethnicity when it comes to mentoring Black students; the student receiving mentoring is the most important factor.

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