



How Postsecondary Mentorship Programs Can Advance Equity: A Resource Review by the CTE CoLab

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The purpose of this resource review is to describe what we know about the value of formal mentorship programs in the postsecondary context—especially for students of color. We also provide resources concerning the different models and modalities of mentorship and implementation considerations.

How Should the Resource Review Be Used?

This resource review provides information on mentorship in the postsecondary career and technical education (CTE) context. It contains key takeaways from the literature and links to resources that the Urban Institute compiled to support community and technical colleges participating in the [Career and Technical Education CoLab \(CTE CoLab\)](#), a research-informed community of practice that focuses on building knowledge for the field. Colleges participating in the CTE CoLab are working to refine and implement equity action plans, which identify goals and strategies for advancing racial equity at the programmatic and institutional level aligned with the needs of their college.¹ The CTE CoLab aims to reduce disparities in academic and career outcomes for historically marginalized students—especially students who are Black, Latinx, or Indigenous—enrolled in online and hybrid postsecondary career-focused programs. The Urban Institute team developed resource reviews on mentoring, orientation, and culturally sensitive research to support colleges in implementing strategies to advance equity.

About the Resource Reviews

Each resource review features key takeaways and considerations for practitioners interested in developing and implementing postsecondary programs with an equity lens. Rather than conducting a systematic review or endorsing a particular approach, the Urban Institute has aggregated resources to provide information about where to learn more, so that readers can do a deeper dive into aspects of the topic that are most interesting and relevant to them. By building on available evidence, knowledge, and experience from the field, practitioners and policymakers using this resource review can consider available options and potential approaches to address student needs and improve outcomes for students of color and other historically marginalized groups. Strategies designed to meet the needs of students who face barriers can also yield benefits for all students.

Overview

“Mentoring” describes a supportive learning relationship between a student and a mentor. Mentors are usually a faculty member, a student peer, or a professional with experience and knowledge in the student’s desired field. Colleges can create mentoring programs to support their goals for closing outcome gaps for students of color and other historically marginalized groups. This resource review will summarize literature on the value of formal mentorship programs in the postsecondary context (including in online/hybrid courses and programs), models and modalities of mentorship, and implementation considerations.

Mentorship: Key Takeaways

- **Value of mentorship:** Mentoring has shown promise as a postsecondary student success intervention—resulting in higher grade point averages (GPAs), persistence, and degree completion rates, typically in the first year(s) that follow the intervention. Many studies focus on the four-year institutional context, rather than two-year, career-focused programs. Furthermore, few studies of mentoring programs focus on how to structure mentorship effectively for students learning primarily online. Additional rigorous research is needed to determine which components of mentorship programs are associated with the strongest outcomes for students of color.
- **Models and modalities of mentorship:** There is not one definition of what constitutes a “mentor”—the approach varies based on multiple factors. Variation includes who the mentee and mentor are (peer-to-peer, faculty to student, peer to industry professional, etc.), the services provided (academic support, social support, mental health support, etc.), and the method of mentorship delivery (in-person, virtual, or hybrid mentoring).
- **Implementation considerations to advance equity:** Mentorship connects students with a support person who can provide advice and guide them to other supports to help them reach their education and training goals. But it does not completely mitigate the challenges that historically marginalized students face, nor does it address all the root causes underlying the need for mentorship. In light of these challenges, important questions to consider when implementing mentorship programming include:
 - Are there ways to ensure that mentors reflect the demographic characteristics of mentees?
 - When peer-to-peer mentoring is used, will student mentors be fairly compensated?
 - How are mentorship activities integrated and aligned with comprehensive advising?
 - How are service utilization and outcomes being measured?
 - Do the format, frequency, and duration of services match the students’ expressed desires and needs?
 - How can colleges anticipate cost and capacity issues that come with providing intensive mentoring services?

Value of Mentorship

- **Mentoring is widely supported by research as a powerful tool for helping students achieve success in college** (Eby and Dolan 2015). Mentoring removes barriers by:
 - enhancing persistence (Bettinger and Baker 2011);
 - improving grades (Fox et al. 2010);
 - promoting a greater feeling of connectivity and campus engagement (CCSSE 2009; Pascarella and Terenzini 1980);
 - increasing transfer rates from two- to four-year institutions; and
 - increasing degree completion (Bordes-Edgar et al. 2011; Campbell and Campbell 2007; Crisp 2011).

In particular, college mentoring promotes more equitable outcomes for traditionally underrepresented students, such as first-generation college students, students from low-income backgrounds, and students of color. Mentoring develops the mentee's life skills (Crisp 2009; Crisp and Cruz 2009; Kram 1988; Nora and Crisp 2007). These skills include student engagement outside of the classroom; personal development (Kuh 1995; Kuh et al. 2005; Harper 2005; Harper 2006); confidence and self-esteem (Kram 1988); and knowledge of the education system—something particularly challenging for students who are first in their families to attend college (excerpted from Knepler, Hamilton, and Tanenbaum 2021).

- **Many studies of mentorship focus on case study research or examinations of one program and lack rapid cycle evaluation evidence of their success.** A systematic review of mentorship as an advising strategy published in 2022 by the Institute of Education Sciences and College Completion Network found that among the four studies that met standards for either What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) criteria for promising evidence (Campbell and Campbell 2007; Coladarci, Willett, and Allen 2013; Thomas 2005; and Salinitri 2005), results were mixed, but the majority concluded that mentoring had a positive role in student outcomes (Feygin et al. 2022). Some studies found positive associations with short-term outcomes like GPA and retention to the next year, but longer-term outcomes were either not found or not studied.
- **Mentoring may also play an important part in easing transitions to postsecondary education and employment for students of color, as well as youth and young adults with disabilities.** For example, survey work by Booker and Brevard (2017) explored how first-year African American students experienced a year-long mentoring program at a mid-sized liberal arts college. They surveyed 58 undergraduate African American students and found that the program was worthwhile and a positive part of their transition to college (Booker and Brevard 2017). A systematic review of mentorship programs (Lindsay, Hartman, and Fellin 2015) focused on facilitating transitions to postsecondary education and employment for youth and young adults with disabilities. That meta-study found that among studies that reported significant improvement in school or work outcomes, mentorship programs with significant outcomes were often structured, delivered in group-based or mixed formats, and longer in duration (longer than six months).

- **The importance of mentoring students of color at Minority Serving Institutions may also be overlooked.** A 2021 brief from the Rutgers Center for Minority Serving Institutions found benefits associated with mentoring for students of color as they persist academically, search for a sense of belonging on campus, and seek guidance to overcome the distinct challenges related to their identities (Febus 2021).
- **Incorporating mentoring into programs has shown promising results in encouraging historically minoritized students to pursue advanced degrees and graduate education,** impacting earnings in subsequent years (Kim 2023).

Models and Modalities of Mentorship

- **Formal mentorship programs can involve various structures: faculty and staff-to-student mentorship programs, alumni-to-student mentorship, and peer-to-peer mentoring models** (Budge 2006; Collier 2017). Mentorship programming can also be delivered in person or through technology.
- **Mentorship programs can be designed one-to-one (one mentor to one mentee) or as a group mentorship model.** “One-to-many” programs match a single mentor with a group of participants. “Multi-mentor” programs match two or three mentors with a group of participants. “Team” programs select two to three mentors with a group. “Unmatched” programs group a small number of mentors together with a larger number of participants; membership and mentor–mentee matches are somewhat fluid (Kuperminc and Deutsch 2021).

Across different models and modalities of mentorship, the following may be useful for colleges to consider when implementing or sustaining mentorship programming to advance equity.

- **Social support from peers in peer-to-peer programs is especially important for students of color navigating their college experience at Predominately White Institutions (PWIs),** where a lack of racial representation can impact persistence (Knepler et al. 2020).
- **Research on improving equity in apprenticeship highlights promising practices around mentorship in an industry context,** where mentors are designed to help new employees or apprentices get acclimated to the company (see Conrad et al. 2020 and Cheney 2019). For mentoring to counteract systemic barriers, utilize the following principles:
 - Assign mentors to employees at all levels so that everyone can grow and be aware of the opportunities available to them.
 - Companies can use data to monitor inclusivity that can shine a light on unconscious biases.
 - Each apprentice should have a mentor who can advocate for them.
 - Mentors should be carefully selected and trained to build positive relationships with their apprentices and provide positive feedback and assistance when needed. When a company engages all employees in consistently learning and upskilling, it builds a nurturing workplace culture.
 - Mentors at all levels also help when apprentices transition into higher-skilled jobs.
 - Companies are now designing more thorough onboarding programs that include mentoring. Some are providing mentors as well as sponsors. Sponsors can help with advocating on their mentees’ behalf, finding advancement opportunities, securing pay raises, and having a voice in the company.

Only a few studies have addressed questions of the effectiveness of e-mentoring programs adapted for online formats. These programs have been relatively under-investigated, particularly in the postsecondary context.

- **Recent evidence and research agendas are emerging related to technology-mediated, or “e-mentorship” programming, where mentorship is delivered at least partially through the use of technology** (see Tinoco-Giraldo et al. 2020 and Kaufman 2017).

A 2021 study by Knepler, Hamilton, and Tanenbaum assessed mentorship programs that were offered via three modalities (in-person, hybrid, and online), with different features and offerings across the modalities. The authors found that two-year hybrid and virtual mentoring programs are linked to an increase in persistence rates. Persistence among program participants increased 13 percent for students in the hybrid program and 15 percent for students in the virtual program for the 2015 cohort, although these results did not hold in the 2016 cohort. In the second year, student persistence among participants in the hybrid program was down 2 percent while persistence for students in the virtual program was up by 10 percent. The study also found that the virtual mentorship program was associated with positive impacts on two-year degree completion or transfer to another institution by 3 percent for the 2015 cohort. It was difficult to parse in that study whether students in a particular mentorship program did better because of the modality, because of the programmatic features offered (e.g., academic, financial, or emotional counseling, etc.), or because of the combination of the modalities and programmatic features that contribute to positive outcomes.

Implementation Considerations

Mentorship is a strategy focused on helping individuals navigate systems and providing them with personalized support. However, it does not address structural, systemic, and institutional barriers and roadblocks for students; for example, course requirements might be biased against students of certain backgrounds, or a college may not provide supportive services that are especially needed by certain groups of students. Improving outcomes for students requires both institutional and individual strategies. Mentoring programs should also be designed with input from students to ensure there is demand and the program components are responsive to their needs. When implementing mentoring programs, consider the following.

Are There Ways to Ensure that Mentors Reflect the Demographic Characteristics of Mentees?

Having mentors—whether staff, faculty, or peers—who either “look like you,” or have similar identities or experiences is important in fostering a sense of belonging between mentors and mentees and the institution (Conrad et al. 2020). At the same time, it is important to consider the burden that might be placed on people of color (whether faculty, industry professionals or students) serving in these roles. The “minority tax” describes the additional burden of time, resources, and responsibilities placed on faculty of color to support minority community, while hindering academic promotion (Gewin 2020; Rodriguez, Campbell, and Pololi 2015). This concept also applies to students of color who are trying to assist others and are not being equitably compensated for their additional responsibilities (Trejo 2020).

When Peer-to-Peer Mentoring Is Used, Will Student Mentors Be Fairly Compensated?

Unpaid peer mentoring models can create equity-related issues because typically, an underrepresented student is offering their time for free to help a peer when they could be compensated elsewhere. One study by Taylor and Black (2019) found that student mentees feel mentors should be paid. Twelve out of 13 participants involved felt that paid mentoring was an acceptable practice. One participant stated, “I just think I personally would want to be paid if I were a mentor. Just because it’s not that I do not value the relationship that I have had with my mentees, but I think it does take some time out of my schedule and some resources are used.” In addition, faculty and staff should be compensated for the extra time spent on creating and maintaining the mentoring program.

How Are Mentorship Activities Integrated and Aligned with Comprehensive Advising?

“Mentoring” describes a supportive learning relationship between a student and a mentor. Mentors are usually a faculty member, a student peer, or a professional with experience and knowledge in the student’s desired field. “Coaching” is usually more formal and structured, anchored in specific student learning or development goals. Karp and colleagues’ (2021) practice guide for effective advising describes some

considerations about determining whether mentoring, coaching, or another form of support is needed to assist in advising students. It outlines the following tips:

- Determine how mentors or coaches could be used to enhance the supports students currently receive.
- Decide who will deliver mentoring and/or coaching.
- Focus mentoring on topics that prepare students for advising.
- Carefully consider the format, frequency, and duration of mentoring or coaching.
- Provide mentors or coaches with initial and ongoing training.

Consider whether certain formats, such as in-person or online, make mentoring and coaching more accessible to specific students or groups of students, including commuter students, online students, and students with full-time jobs. Questions to ask include:

- Would students benefit from discussing certain topics in a one-on-one or a group format?
- How much time would students need with their mentor to build mutual rapport and trust?
- Are there certain time periods when students might need more frequent contact, such as end-of-semester or right before degree completion?

How Are Service Utilization and Outcomes Being Measured?

One study found over 50 definitions of what constitutes a mentor (Crisp and Cruz 2009). This can present a barrier to replication of programs if practitioners are implementing related but distinct interventions and are unable to point to which programmatic features lead to the best outcomes for students. The impact of different mentorship models can be difficult to parse out because of a lack of rigorous research and evidence (e.g., randomized controlled trials and comparison studies) that show how different approaches in postsecondary education lead to different outcomes. Regardless, data should be used to consistently track student progress throughout their program (see Knepler, Hamilton, and Tanenbaum 2021). Data that can be tracked include:

- enrollment,
- persistence,
- receipt of supports,
- other engagement with mentorship services, and
- student satisfaction with services, if available, assessed via check-in surveys or calls/meetings with the mentorship coordinator.

Does the Format, Frequency, and Duration of Services Match the Students' Expressed Desires and Needs? How Can Colleges Anticipate Cost and Capacity Issues with Providing Intensive Mentoring Services?

A positive relationship between the mentor where they provide the mentee “with the agency, support, and confidence to solve problems on their own so that they can succeed in college” is ideal (Knepler, Hamilton, and Tanenbaum 2021). This requires intensive time on the part of the mentor, mentee, and any institution staff who may be supporting the program.

The most effective mentorship programs involve:

- sufficient funding and time committed participants,
- comprehensive supports,
- frequent, close communication with students, including check-ins between the mentor and mentee,
- a consistently maintained relationship between the mentor and mentee, and
- training, development, and mentorship opportunities (Conrad et al. 2020), which also extends to ensuring mentors are trained, supported, and have the opportunity to provide feedback on their experience.²

Additional Resources

Mentoring Toolkits and Practice Guides

Annie M. Wofford, Adrianna Burton, Kimberly Dennin, and Reginald T. Gardner, “[Equity-Minded Mentoring Toolkit](#),” (College Park, MD: Inclusive Graduate Education Network Equity in Graduate Education Resource Center, accessed July 16, 2024).

- This toolkit focuses on mentorship of graduate students in three modules: (1) Understanding Equity-Minded Mentoring: Setting the Stage and Inviting You to Engage Equity-Minded Mentoring, (2) Navigating Expectations and Strengths as Mentors and Mentees, (3) Mentoring Roadmaps: Renegotiating the Changing Seasons of Mentorship.

Ashley Conrad, Kathleen Fitzpatrick, Karoline Jarr, Janay McClarin, Ricardo Romanillos, Martina Sharp-Grier, and Ben Williams, “[Equity in Youth Apprenticeship Programs](#)” (Gap, PA: National Alliance for Partnerships in Equity, 2020).

- This toolkit discusses and acknowledges the three equity challenges in youth apprenticeship: Access, Belonging, and Continuous Improvement while also providing reflection exercises.

What Works Clearinghouse, Institute of Education Sciences, “[Effective Advising for Postsecondary Students: A Practice Guide for Educators](#)” (Washington, DC: National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance [NCEE], Institute of Education Sciences, US Department of Education, 2021).

- This report features recommendations around effective advising with specific programmatic examples and challenges.

Examples of College Mentorship Programs

- The [City University of New York \(CUNY\) Black Male Initiative](#) is a university-wide student development initiative with more than 30 campus programs focused on increasing matriculation, retention and graduation rates of underrepresented students, particularly men of color. The initiative model includes a peer-to-peer mentoring model.
- The [CUNY School of Professional Studies Urban Male Scholars \(UMS\) program](#) is designed to provide culturally competent peer mentoring training for students who are men of color, supported by a grant from the Black Male Initiative.
- [Lehman College’s Online Learning Student Peer Mentoring Program](#) is a mentoring program for students taking online courses at Lehman College, a four-year institution.

- **University of Minnesota College of Continuing & Professional Studies offers the [CCAPS Mentor Program](#)**, which connects CCAPS alumni and other industry professionals with CCAPS mentees/students who share similar areas of professional and educational interests and goals.
- **University of Texas offers a [Work-Study Student Mentorship Program](#)** that matches work-study students who are eligible to work as a mentor, tutor, or provide advisement at their higher education institution with other students at the university. Mentor students can also work at a local nonprofit to provide these services to local high school students.

Notes

- ¹ “Advancing Racial Equity in Hybrid and Online Career and Technical Education (CTE) Programs: A Summary of Equity Action Plans in the CTE CoLab Initiative” captures the work of a previous cohort, which ran from June 2021 to April 2023. It can be found at the CTE CoLab website, <https://ctecolab.org>.
- ² For examples of professional development resources, see “The Professional Development Mentor Program,” from College of the Canyons, accessed May 2024, and “Professional Development for Mentors” from Mentoring Matters, accessed June 2024.

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Julia Payne is a research associate in the Income and Benefits Policy Center. Her research focuses on workforce development strategies and policies to support low-income mothers and student-parents. Her work supports qualitative and quantitative research on topics including youth career pathways, apprenticeship, equity in career and technical education, equity in economic recovery, and opportunities to better support low-income families.

Shayne Spaulding is a senior fellow in the Income and Benefits Policy Center, where she helps lead the Building America’s Workforce cross-center initiative. Her work focuses on workforce development, postsecondary education, and employment. She has spent more than 25 years in the workforce field as an evaluator, technical assistance provider, and program manager. Her research has examined the public workforce system; community college innovations; employer engagement in workforce programs; services to parents, youth, and noncustodial fathers; people with criminal records; performance measurement in workforce programs; apprenticeships; and strategies for supporting workers in alternative work arrangements. Spaulding is the managing director for the CTE CoLab.

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