

A Service-Learning Mentoring Program Model

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Abstract

Nationally, minorities lag behind whites in college matriculation and graduation. This may be due to academic issues, low motivation, inability to finance college, or other reasons that have not been properly assessed or addressed. Minority high school students can benefit from service-learning mentors that help them identify any barriers and improve their readiness to attend and succeed in college. A service-learning mentoring program sought to engage minority high school students in preparing for college and future careers.

Introduction

The American Council on Education reported “students of color continue to make significant gains in college enrollment, but still lag behind their white counterparts in the rates at which they pursue a higher education” (American Council on Education, 2005, p. 1). Their 2006 report found that minority enrollment rose by 50.7 percent between the 1993-04 and 2003-04 school years to total more than 4.7 million students, whereas the number of white students remained relatively flat, growing by only 3.4 percent, to 10.5 million (Hayes, 2006). Despite the increase in minority enrollment, they are still underrepresented in institutions of higher education. And although there have been many scholars, academicians, and policymakers suggesting ways to ameliorate this problem, low minority college matriculation persists. This problem has a negative impact on the world of work, as minorities are not prepared to enter careers that require higher education. Low minority enrollment in disciplines such as science, technology, engineering, and math for example, further perpetuates the lack of diversity in these career fields.

Closing the college matriculation gap must become a high priority for colleges and universities. Institutions of higher education must become more deliberate in developing programs that improve the matriculation rates of minorities. Preparing high school students for college entrance utilizing academic curriculum and campus-based programming can be very promising. Service-learning has been implemented at hundreds of institutions nationally and internationally to address community issues, and the author has had great success with this pedagogy in the past. What makes service-learning an appropriate teaching methodology is its ability to build the practical skills of the individual student, inform the institution of higher education of the positive outcomes of civic engagement, and expand the potential of the community to remedy its own problems (Komives & Woodard, 2003). For this reason, a pilot program titled Enhancing Minority College and Career Preparation Service-Learning Mentoring Program (EMCCaP) was designed and implemented by the author via a graduate-level course within the Department of Workforce Education and Development at Southern Illinois University-Carbondale.

Community Need

Southern Illinois University Carbondale is in a college town, and many of the local middle school and high school students see the University as a representation of typical college life. The minority population of the two city high schools, Carbondale Community High School (CCHS) and Trinity High School, is 36% and 2% respectively. A small percentage of this minority student population attends a 4-year college, including SIUC, limiting their career options that require a 4-year degree. Although each high school has guidance services that support students as they prepare for life after high school, the minority population does not pursue higher education in large numbers. A greater number of minority students may not aspire to attend 4-year institutions

because there are not many minority students (19%) on the local SIUC campus with whom they can identify. The low college matriculation of minority high school students may also be a reflection of their lack of readiness to attend college.

If students do not obtain higher education, whether in their community or elsewhere, there will be negative economic effects. These citizens will not be able to positively contribute to the economic growth of their communities. In order to explore and address the community need, the author secured a service-learning grant from Illinois Campus Compact, a state member of the national Campus Compact. The \$4000 grant was funded by the State Farm Foundation to develop a service-learning mentoring program to partner local minority high school students with graduate Workforce Education and Development students at SIUC in order to address low minority college matriculation. The Enhancing Minority College and Career Preparation Service-Learning Mentoring Program (EMCCaP) began in the summer of 2006, and a partnership was established between the author (an assistant professor) and a teacher at CCHS.

Program Participants

Illinois Campus Compact named the author a Faculty Fellow and the CCHS teacher a Teacher Fellow during the grant period. Both of these educators were responsible for the organization and management of the EMCCaP Program, and they collaborated monthly to ensure parents, high school students, and graduate students were informed and prepared for their roles in the program.

The Department of Workforce Education and Development (WED) at Southern Illinois University Carbondale (SIUC) is designed to prepare undergraduate and graduate students for careers in teaching and non-teaching roles in education, business, industry, government, and other fields. WED provides theoretical and applied knowledge and skills, opportunities for experiential learning, and various independent study courses to develop students for instructional, training and development, and supervisory/managerial roles in the public and private sectors. Five WED graduate students were recruited by the author to register for a course titled Special Investigations: Minorities in Higher Education. This independent study course explored issues of access to higher education and resources, disparities in educational attainment, and institutional and structural racism that impacts minorities' preparation for and entrance into institutions of higher education. A service-learning component was integrated into the course to allow the graduate students to work one-on-one with high school students in order to gain firsthand knowledge of some of the causes of low minority college matriculation as well as assist them with college readiness. This reciprocal relationship helped them to both gain a deeper understanding of the issues and address the community need, which is one of the main goals of service-learning (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Furco, 1996; Jacoby, 1996).

The high school participants were recruited by both the faculty fellow and teacher fellow. Each graduate student mentored two high school students of the same gender. The program participants included two African American male graduate students, three African American female graduate students, four African American male high school students, and five African American female high school students (one female dropped out of the program after deciding upon her college of choice before the program began). The high school students included five freshmen, one sophomore, and three juniors.

Program Activities

The EMCCaP Program activities consisted of the following: one-on-one mentoring; visits to Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU's); group reflection/discussion meetings; partnered volunteer work; and fun events. All of the high school students and mentors were required to participate in these activities, and each participant signed an agreement that committed them to consistent engagement in the mentoring program. Each graduate student was required to donate 80 hours of service between the summer and fall semesters (July-

December, 2006). The majority of the hours were spent in one-on-one interactions with the high school mentees, which included college and scholarship searches, goal setting and articulation, visits to meet professionals in the field of their interest, meetings with SIUC staff and faculty, attendance at SIUC open house events, and practicing the ACT/SAT. Some of the mentors also brought their mentees together with others to have study groups. They even recommended their classmates as tutors for the high school students who needed extra academic support. Others allowed the high school students to spend the night at their homes (with parental approval) to play games, devote more time to homework and test preparation, and connect with their fellow high school classmates.

The entire group of program participants, including mentors and mentees, some parents/guardians, the author, and the teacher fellow traveled to Nashville, Tennessee and Atlanta, Georgia to visit HBCU's. The trip to Nashville occurred during the summer on the weekend. The trip to Atlanta was taken during the fall semester on a Friday that was not a scheduled school day. All of the travel expenses were paid with the grant funding, including meals, transportation, and lodging. High school students were exposed to predominantly African American college campuses so that they could observe large numbers of minorities attending college and graduate programs as well as learn about college admissions requirements, college life, and career preparation. The institutions visited included Tennessee State University, Meharry Medical College, Fisk University, Spelman College, Morehouse College, and Clark Atlanta University.

Once a month, six times altogether, all program participants were required to attend reflection/discussion meetings. Graduate and high school students were asked to discuss their experiences with their mentors/mentees and reflect upon the learning that occurred during their interactions. Some of the meetings were used to develop skills in college and major selection, choosing public/private universities, and finding scholarships. One of the male mentors facilitated two workshops during two separate meetings, one on time management and the other on utilizing the American College Testing (ACT) website to prepare for the ACT. During another one of the meeting times, the students participated in a conference call with an African American SIUC alumnus who became a NIKE, Inc. employee, and he discussed business etiquette and the importance of pursuing higher education. At the end of each meeting, the high school students were asked to reflect on what they learned that day and discuss their plans for future learning with their mentors.

All of the participants were required to participate in at least two volunteer activities together. The mentor and mentees, as well as the Faculty Fellow, volunteered at community events together, where they distributed school supplies to children at a Back-to-School Bash at the end of the summer, played games with children at a local Halloween Party, and served food to international students at a holiday party. If participants were not able to attend the aforementioned events, they were allowed to donate service at Carbondale Community High School sporting events as concession stand workers and/or as concession workers at the sports arena of SIUC. Finally, program participants enjoyed some extracurricular events together. Tickets to an SIUC men's basketball game were donated to the mentoring program by a University employee, so all participants were invited to attend. During one of the HBCU visits, all of the participants (including the parents/guardians) attended a homecoming football game, which was not funded by the grant. The program participants and parents were invited by the employer of one of the mentors to attend a free bowling party. At the end of the program, all of the participants, including parents/guardians, were invited to attend a dinner, where they received a video of the program activities and certificates of completion.

Service-Learning Impacts

The high school students, mentors, and parents completed both formative and summative evaluations. After the first college visits, an evaluation that included open-ended questions and a short checklist was completed by nine high school students, five mentors, and four parents. The open-ended questions asked about their expectations of the trip, most enjoyable aspects of the trip, and new things learned about college. One hundred

percent of the participants stated that they received what they expected from the college visits trip. The top three enjoyable aspects of the trip included: (1) speakers/guides at the colleges; (2) the history/stories of the HBCU's or the HBCU's themselves; and (3) college environment/facilities. The top three things learned were: (1) history of HBCU's; (2) financial aid/scholarship application process; and (3) tuition and cost of living on campus. The checklist was completed by the high school students only. The responses included actions that they planned to take to prepare for college. The one statement that was identified by all nine of the students was look for scholarships on the internet. Three statements were selected by eight of the nine students: look up the colleges I visited for more information; talk to a high school counselor/teacher/parent about my schedule . . . to change/add math, science, or other courses; and talk to my parents about what I learned. Seven of the nine students selected, begin studying/practicing the ACT/SAT test.

The summative evaluations consisted of a questionnaire completed by the high school students, journals completed by the graduate student mentors, and letters submitted by parents. The questionnaire asked questions about increased knowledge of college and careers. Eight of the nine students completed the questionnaire, and each of them stated that they had increased their knowledge of both college preparation and career requirements. All of the high school students planned to continue working with their respective mentors. One student stated, "She keeps me on track when I mess up. She helps me with my homework and gives me great advice." Other students said, "He is a good person to talk to" and "I need her help with future plans I have [for] my career!"

The graduate students submitted reflection journals in the Minorities in Higher Education course. They reported an enhanced knowledge of the issues minorities face when preparing for and pursuing higher education as a result of their service-learning mentoring activities and college visits. They also described an increase in their career development and human resource development skills, oral communication skills, and interpersonal skills with diverse groups. Some of them discussed confirmation of career goals. The students who aspired to enter careers working with youth reinforced their commitment to these fields. And one graduate student utilized his mentoring experiences to shape his graduate research paper on the role of formal and informal mentoring, and he became more dedicated to developing mentoring programs as a career.

Parents were asked to write letters discussing the impact of the program on their teens. These personal testimonies were most impressive. Their satisfaction and appreciation for the mentoring program was high. They were grateful for the opportunity to visit prospective colleges that target minority student needs. A female high school student's parent wrote, "Traveling with the group of students and mentors has opened my eyes as well as [hers] to the history and culture of black colleges." Most of the parents believed that their teens were better able to articulate college goals and express their college needs and expectations. They were also happy their teens were initiating conversations about college and asking more college-related questions. One parent said her son "has a much clearer picture of what he wants to study, knows which questions to ask when evaluating college, and can better visualize being in college." All of the parents were interested in extending the program to continue college exploration and ensure their teens matriculate into institutions of higher education.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The Enhancing Minority College and Career Preparation Service-Learning Mentoring Program proved to be beneficial to both the high school students and the service-learning graduate students. A true reciprocal relationship was developed via one-on-one mentoring, college visits, reflection/discussion meetings, partnered community service, and fun activities. Both the high school students and graduate students gained positively as a result of participating in the program. The high school students increased their knowledge of and developed skills for college preparation, planned to continue exploring financial aid/scholarship information, enhanced their awareness of career expectations, and were interested in maintaining their relationships with

their mentors. The graduate students developed a deeper understanding of the college matriculation gap between minorities and whites and issues of access and educational attainment. They were able to engage minorities in college and career exploration, which otherwise may not have occurred. The graduate students also developed skills that will benefit them as students and employees.

The EMCCaP Program serves as a model for institutions of higher education across the country. Funds needed to replicate this type of service-learning mentoring program are minimal, yet the learning outcomes and skill development possibilities are high. Although a grant was received to implement EMCCaP, none of the funds were needed to partner students or participate in the most of the activities; the funds were used mainly for travel expenses (which can be secured through fundraising activities with partnered mentors and mentees) and celebration materials. This can be a very inexpensive program with great potential for addressing the minority matriculation gap.

Any discipline can integrate the service-learning activities described above. Certain subjects, however, are already designed with the applicable content. This program model can be duplicated via several required teacher education courses, for example. Most, if not all, teacher education departments require courses in cultural foundations of education, social and historical issues in education, and/or social and cultural influences on learning. These courses lend themselves to exploring the gap in minority college matriculation via service-learning. The National Collaborative on Diversity in the Teaching Force (2004) recommended utilizing these types of courses and stated, "Without understanding the historical, social, and political underpinnings of how disenfranchised groups have been systematically excluded from receiving a fair and equitable education, there will continue to be a shallow approach to understanding diversity issues" (pg. 9). The overarching goal is to ensure students explore issues of race, access, equity, and diversity in education, as well as promote college and career preparation to high school students as a means to address the issues.

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