April 1997

Mentoring Programs for African American College Students in Predominantly White Institutions: Relationships to Academic Success

Marybeth Gasman
Indiana University-Bloomington

Mentoring Programs for African American College Students in Predominantly White Institutions: Relationships to Academic Success

Marybeth Gasman
Indiana University-Bloomington

"When adapted to historically underrepresented groups in the college setting, mentoring is thought to transmit skills, values, and attitudes, as well as to provide a positive link to the institution."

In most cultures, wiser or more experienced people have played significant roles in guiding the personal and professional decisions of those who are younger and less experienced. Although most of these relationships develop naturally through personal association, some have become institutionalized. For example, the university-level tutorial exists in Europe to the current year. Oxford University has faculty serving as mentors who live at the college with students and instruct them in all areas of university life—academic, social, and personal.

Outside the academic setting, apprenticeship may be seen as a mentoring relationship. The best artists, dancers, painters, and the masters of crafts from silver-smithing to carpentry have long obtained their training as apprentices or students of the experts in the field. Thus, the mentoring relationship becomes part of their formal education. In recent years, mentoring has become a popular method for incorporating previously disenfranchised groups—women and minorities—into organizational structures. When adapted to historically underepresented groups in the college setting, mentoring is thought to transmit skills, values, and attitudes, as well as to provide a positive link to the institution. Can a relationship that has traditionally been used to transmit learning also be used to mend racial injustice?

Many African American students are unprepared for and unable to cope with the prejudice they encounter upon entering college. According to a study of 384 African American students in predominantly White colleges by Willie and McCord (1972), many students expect less prejudice and more social integration than they experience in the college environment (Allen, 1989; Astin, 1982; Green, 1989; Smith, 1989, Fleming, 1984). Steele (1995) suggested that "Black students know that the stereotypes about them raise questions about their intellectual ability ... they can feel that their intelligence is constantly and everywhere on trial."

Some African American students enter college communities where they are part of a very small minority population. This phenomena is especially difficult to cope with if the students were raised in a predominantly African American community. The students must enter an unfamiliar academic setting as well as an "alien social and physical environment that they, their family, and their peers" may never have experienced (Saufley, Cowan, and Blake, 1983). Language, traditions, and values are no longer those of the student's

community but of the larger White community.

Recently, many institutions have started to develop mentoring programs to increase opportunities and academic success rates of minority students. These programs provide an adult figure who plays a significant role in easing the student's transition from the high school and home environments to the college environment. Two basic components provide the foundation for mentoring programs: first, the mentor transfers skills and behaviors to the student; second, a social and emotional interaction takes place to make the transfer of knowledge and skills possible (Redmond, 1990).

Mentoring programs also address the needs of the institution itself. When a student leaves an institution because of a negative experience, he/she communicates this experience to potential students. This may make the college or university appear insensitive. Mentoring programs give students the impression that faculty, staff, and administration care about their needs.

This presentation will briefly review the literature pertaining to mentoring programs and examine the relationship between the mentoring of African American students and their academic success as measured by G.P.A. and retention rates. It will focus on the purpose, goals, and outcomes of five different mentoring programs. In addition, the presentation will provide key information on developing and maintaining successful mentoring programs.

PRESENTER
Mary Beth Gasman is a doctoral student in higher education and law at Indiana University-Bloomington, where she also completed a master's degree in higher education. Her interests include the mentoring African American students, the history of historically Black colleges (HBCUs), legal issues related to HBCUs, and the presidency of Charles S. Johnson at Fisk University.