

**Elevating Student Engagement Through Peer Mentoring:
Increasing Student Success**

Talia Fernandez and Victoria Torres

A Project Proposal for the Learn Through Discovery Projects Hatchery

California Polytechnic State University, Pomona

Mary Kunmi Yu Danico, PhD

Department of Sociology

Abstract

This study's focus is to analyze the effectiveness of peer mentoring programs and to what extent they impact students' academic success. This study investigated the impact peer mentoring programs have on both those who served as peer mentors (peer mentor alumni) and those who were mentored. According to scholarly literature, peer mentoring programs increase a sense of belonging, academic and social integration, and social and cultural capital. Since previous literature has primarily focused on the experiences of mentees, or students who seek out assistance through peer mentoring programs, this research included the experiences of peer mentors to fill the gap in literature. This paper also examines how peer mentoring programs impact underserved and underrepresented minoritized (URM) students.

Table of Contents:

Introduction	4
Literature Review	5
Methodology	10
Findings	13
Conclusion	25
References	26

This study allows for a better understanding of the impact a peer mentoring program at Cal Poly Pomona has on students seeking out peer mentors and students serving as peer mentors. Since Cal Poly Pomona is a minority serving institution (MSI), Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI), and an Asian American, Native American, Pacific Islander, Serving Institution (AANAPISI), success outcomes for underserved, and underrepresented minoritized (URM) students are examined. Previous research shows that peer mentoring reduces dropout rates, facilitates academic and social integration, provides moral support, guides students towards helpful resources and academic opportunities, and advises students in whatever areas necessary to promote their academic success (Colvin & Ashman 2010; Morales et al. 2015). Yet when examining previous research on peer mentoring programs, there are limited studies that focus on the impacts of mentoring on underserved and underrepresented minoritized (URM) students. There were also limited studies found on the impacts that mentoring programs have on those who serve as peer mentors.

To fill the gap in literature on the impact of peer mentoring programs on students serving as peer mentors, this study examines how former peer mentors (peer mentor alumni) were affected by different sociological factors within a peer mentoring program. Peer mentor alumni from California State Polytechnic University, Pomona's peer mentoring program were assessed in this study. Drawing from Urie Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems theory, which is the development of a person based on the interactions and influences within their environment, peer mentor alumni outcomes can be explained (Härkönen 2001). Therefore, the different sociological factors within the peer mentoring program that influence or affect peer mentor alumni are assessed. The influencing sociological factors include: the peer mentoring program's faculty

mentors, the program's pedagogical practices, and interactions with peers and department faculty.

How Peer Mentoring Programs Increase Student Success

Peer mentoring programs that pair students from historically underserved and underrepresented communities with high-achieving upperclassmen, who have undergone similar experiences or who have similar backgrounds, have seen great success (Rios-Ellis 2012). Peer mentors are able to use their own insights about the college experience to provide their mentees with the tools necessary to overcome the social, emotional, and academic challenges that college presents (Turner 1998). Peer mentoring programs have shown to increase student engagement, social and academic integration, sense of belonging, and contribute to student success (Bichy and O'Brien 2014; Booth et al. 2016; Yomtov et al. 2017; Spiridon et al. 2020).

Furthermore, data on peer mentoring programs demonstrate how promotion of successful academic and social outcomes counteracts students' feelings of social isolation and disengagement, while simultaneously decreasing drop-out rates and increasing students' social capital (Moschetti et al. 2018). Scholars Ovink and Veazey (2011) specifically, demonstrate how an undergraduate intervention program, a Biology Undergraduate Scholars Program's (BUSP), assisted URM students with retention/graduation and achievement. While retention and graduation rates have historically been a marker of success, student success should not be limited to academic success. Therefore, understanding how peer mentoring programs impact students beyond academics is just as important to understand for better preparing students for their career success.

Sense of Belonging As a Contributing Factor to Student Success

Sense of belonging, also referred to as sense of social belonging, has been linked to increased student success as well (Walton and Cohen 2011; Ovink and Veazey 2011; Brunnsma et al. 2017; Spiridon et al. 2020). Sense of belonging refers to the social support that students perceive on their college campus. Additionally, retention theory explains that college students' sense of social belonging and involvement in formal academic and social systems greatly impacts their decision to remain in college (Strayhorn 2008; Turner 1994). Research has shown that students of color do not feel a strong sense of belonging on their college campus and are less likely to be involved on campus because of this (Strayhorn, 2008).

In accordance with retention theory, this puts students of color at risk of not completing their degree. Daniel Solorzano (1998) cites marginality as the main factor impacting the sense of belonging amongst students of color, and he defines this as a “complex and contentious location and process whereby people of color are subordinated because of their race, class, and gender”. Ron Wakabayashi captures the sense of marginality felt by students of color by stating that “we (students of color) feel like we are guests in someone else’s house, that we can never relax and put our feet on the table” (Turner 1994). The “guest status” that students of color are assigned prevents them from truly feeling involved, connected, and served on their college campus. Overall, a sense of belonging is especially important for URM students since structural factors reinforce inequality through marginalization (Walton and Cohen 2011). While sense of belonging has not been primarily or solely pointed as a contributing factor for student success, it has been shown to increase social integration, academic performance, and improve students’ health (Walton and Cohen 2011).

Social and Cultural Capital for Peer Mentors

Social and cultural capital has also been shown to improve student outcomes, especially for underrepresented and minoritized (URM) students (Ovink and Veazey 2011; Brunsmas et al. 2017). Students specifically build social and cultural capital through socialization, knowledge, skills, and experiences, which enhance their capabilities to succeed in their academic and professional environments (Ovink and Veazey 2011; Smell and Newman 2020). Furthermore, student servicing programs, such as mentoring programs, allow students to build the capital necessary, and develop the skills and competencies necessary for underserved students to succeed in their future careers (Ovink and Veazey 2011). Overall, peer mentoring programs increase peer mentors' social and cultural capital, which better equips them to successfully navigate graduate study or their careers.

Impact of Pedagogical Practices

Scholars Booth, Merga and Roni (2016), wrote about their experience as peer mentors. They highlighted how networking, practicing leadership skills, gaining hands-on research experience and hands-on teaching experience, increased students' doctoral candidacy and career preparation for higher degree by research (HDR) students (Booth et al. 2016). Scholars, Rahill et al. (2016) analyzed how hands-on teaching experiences better prepared students for careers within education or helping professions such as counselors, psychologists, and social workers. Rahill et al. (2016) also point out how teaching cultural proficiency framework, or competency-based education, better prepares students to practice competently, ethically, and justly in a field revolving around diversity and social justice. Moreover, scholar Payne Hiraldo (2019) discussed how self-awareness is important for student affairs professionals to have so that they do not contribute to systems of oppression. Allowing the voices of marginalized identities to be heard by putting underserved and underrepresented students in leadership positions puts

Critical Race Theory (CRT) into practice (Hiraldo, 2019). Overall, these studies illustrate how pedagogical practices increase student success, especially for underserved and URM students.

Challenges for URM Students

Latinx, Asian American and Pacific Islanders, and Black students represent a growing population of college students, yet these minoritized groups remain underrepresented amongst college graduates. Dennis, Phinney, and Chuateco's (2015) research shows that Latinx and Black students are less likely to graduate due to lack of academic preparation, lack of social support, being first-generation college students, lack of sense of belonging on their college campus, and/or other social and cultural factors. Latinx students, specifically, are less likely to be prepared for college than their White peers because they are more likely to attend predominantly minority schools in less affluent areas, are underrepresented in advanced placement courses, and are overrepresented in remedial classes (Strayhorn 2008).

This leaves Latinx students and other minoritized students having a difficult time adjusting to college coursework and/or feeling insecure about their ability to complete college-level courses. Furthermore, a National Association of Student Personnel Advisors' (2012) study found that low-income, first generation college students of color use academic advising and academic support services at a lower rate than their continuing-generation peers due to structural and cultural factors. Low-income, first-generation college students of color work more hours per week and are less-likely to live on or near campus, which leaves them with less time to be involved in campus clubs or organizations and to utilize campus resources (NASPA 2012).

In terms of cultural factors, asking for help is perceived as weakness or failure within many minoritized communities (Bassett 2021). This leaves many first-generation students of

color unwilling or unknowing how to ask for help because it is heavily stigmatized within their communities (Bassett 2021). Underserved and underrepresented students are in need of greater institutional support to create an environment that is more receptive, supportive, and understanding of the many challenges that they face. Higher education institutions are often ill-equipped to assist underrepresented minoritized college students as they overcome these structural and cultural barriers, yet peer mentoring programs can work to bridge the gap between institutions and their underserved students.

What Underserved and URM Students Need To Succeed

Peer mentoring programs provide faculty mentorship for students serving as peer mentors. Therefore, literature focusing on the impact that faculty mentorship has on students, especially of underserved and underrepresented backgrounds, is important to assess. According to scholars Brunnsma et al. (2017), adequate mentorship from faculty is one of the most important resources for minority students, which graduate students of color tend to lack. Therefore, having mentorship and role models is critical for graduate students of color, especially for women of color (Brunnsma et al. 2017). Scholars, Ovink and Veazey (2011) and Smell and Newman (2020) indicate how mentorship, guidance, and support prepare students for graduate school and increase their candidacy into graduate programs. Specifically, underrepresented minoritized (URM) students can gain social and cultural capital through socialization experiences with faculty mentors in educational enrichment organizations. With adequate faculty mentorship and additional guidance and support with graduate school and/or career preparation, underserved and underrepresented students can gain social capital and a sense of belonging. Furthermore, through pedagogical practices students can gain personal and professional development skills, knowledge

and hands-on learning experiences, and hands-on teaching experiences, which will further enhance their graduate school and career candidacy.

1 Methodology

The purpose of this research is to gain a deep understanding of the impact that the peer mentoring program has thus far had on former peer mentors (peer mentor alumni) and College of Letters, Arts, and Social Sciences (C.L.A.S.S.) majors who have sought out peer mentors (mentees). Additionally, we sought to understand the impact that peer mentoring has had on the sense of belonging and academic success of students of color within the sociology and psychology departments at Cal Poly Pomona.

Findings of this research study will help inform and influence scholars, educators, and universities, on the benefits of peer mentoring programs; Including the challenges that peer mentors and mentees from first-college generation and URM backgrounds have faced.

1.1 Methodology for Peer Mentor Study

As a participant observer, I was interested in understanding to what extent the program increased student success for peer mentors. Therefore, interviews with peer mentor alumni and faculty mentors were conducted to examine the sociological factors within the program that increased student success. Peer mentor alumni and faculty mentors were interviewed synchronously (in real time) over zoom, recorded using a voice memo phone application, and were transcribed using Microsoft Word Transcription. Transcriptions were also manually checked for typed errors. Qualitative data was organized in a Microsoft Excel Spreadsheet.

This study originally used a quantitative methodological approach via asynchronous (not in real time) surveys. Surveys were conducted with peer mentor alumni and faculty, staff, and administrators of a formerly joint psychology and sociology department in which the peer

mentoring program was under. However, conducting this study during a pandemic made it difficult to recruit participants. Not having a peer mentor alumni association also made recruitment for peer mentor alumni difficult since most Cal Poly Pomona emails had become non-existent. Another challenge was that only a select number of peer mentor alumni are on social media or following Cal Poly Pomona's department pages. To gain a better understanding of how the peer mentoring program impacted peer mentors, interviews with peer mentor alumni and faculty mentors, including the founder of the program were conducted. Since online surveys had several missing responses, the response rate dropped by more than half. Therefore, only findings on qualitative data are discussed in this paper. However, survey data did help guide the interview questions.

Peer mentor alumni were recruited through Facebook posts, Facebook messenger, personal emails (if available), and snowball sampling. Peer mentor alumni in this study were recruited from peer mentor cohorts between 2006 to 2020. Using thematic analysis, benefits that peer mentor alumni gained were analyzed and coded according to social and cultural capital themes. Social capital was operationalized by professional socialization experiences, such as with program faculty mentors, department faculty and peers, and interactions with peers and mentees, within the sociology and psychology department and the College of Letters Arts and Social Sciences (C.L.A.S.S.). Cultural capital was operationalized by knowledge, experiences, and professional skill sets acquired through the peer mentoring program's pedagogical practices.

Faculty mentors who led the peer mentoring program were recruited via Cal Poly Pomona emails. Since different faculty members have led the peer mentoring program throughout its existence, faculty who led the peer mentoring program, including the founder of this program were also interviewed. While the program's founder was also a faculty mentor in

the program, a different set of interview questions were provided. Interview questions with the program faculty mentors, with the exception of the founder, consisted of the program's pedagogical practices. As an academic department peer mentoring program, peer mentors had to enroll in 2-3 courses (formerly 3 quarters/recently 2 semesters) within a full academic year. Interview questions with the program founder consisted of questions about the evolution of the program's pedagogical practices and how she perceived it impacted peer mentors.

Overall, this case study of Cal Poly Pomona's peer mentoring program, provides insight into the different surrounding factors that contributed to increasing student success. Universities are continuously looking for ways to increase retention and graduation rates. However, most literature focusing on how to increase student success does not center its focus beyond retention and graduation strategies and rates. Therefore, this research provides a deeper analysis of how a peer mentoring program increases student success during undergraduate study and post-baccalaureate degree, especially for students of underserved and underrepresented backgrounds.

1.2 Methodology for Mentee Study

In order to measure the impact that peer mentors have on minoritized students' sense of belonging and academic success, a quantitative methodological approach was employed. Surveys were administered to sociology and psychology students who were enrolled during the Fall 2021 semester. Because we were still primarily online (due to the COVID-19 pandemic and distanced learning), our primary method of recruitment consisted of sending emails to sociology and psychology faculty to encourage them to offer extra credit to students who completed the survey. Thanks to the support of sociology and psychology faculty a total of 256 responses were collected. Students' were asked about their demographic information, awareness and usage of

peer mentoring programs, their sense of belonging at Cal Poly Pomona, and their likelihood to succeed academically.

Sense of belonging was measured by students' responses to questions regarding their involvement in campus clubs and organizations (including greek life, honor societies, nonacademic clubs, etc.), involvement in research or internship opportunities, if they have friends on campus, the sense of support felt from peer mentors, and the sense of support felt from campus community. The measurement of sense of belonging was developed using Strayhorn's (2008) analysis of sense of belonging and how it relates to students of color as well as Turner's (1994) retention theory. According to both Stayhorn (2008) and Turner (1994), sense of belonging is also an indicator of students' likeliness or unlikeliness to succeed academically. Students' academic success was quantified by measuring students' likelihood to pass their classes and complete their degree.

Additionally, information regarding the services and support offered by different peer mentoring programs at Cal Poly Pomona. Data was collected from the programs through analysis of their websites and brief questionnaires given to the programs' coordinators and/or peer mentors via email. This was done to better understand which minoritized or underserved group each peer mentoring program offers and their approach to best serve their students.

Faculty Mentors and Pedagogical Practices

The peer mentoring program faculty mentors were interviewed and asked to discuss the program's pedagogical practices. Faculty mentors were also asked different questions regarding their perceptions of the program and impact on previous peer mentors thus far. Interview questions were intended to provide insight of the program's impact on peer mentors, including if

they perceived it to have helped prepare peer mentors for life after Cal Poly Pomona. Findings indicated that the peer mentoring program's pedagogical practices increased peer mentor alumni's social and cultural capital. Two-unexpected outcomes were revealed when analyzing interview transcriptions for the faculty mentors. The two-unexpected outcomes were demanding labor and student-program match.

Interview data indicated that the pedagogical structure of the peer mentoring program consisted of a combination of traditional and applied pedagogical practices. While the peer mentoring program founder designed the program's course curriculum, the other faculty mentors incorporated supplemental course readings of diverse narratives and invited guest speakers of different professional spaces, which put cultural proficiency framework into practice. The program's traditional pedagogical approach consisted of course readings and open discussions. The applied pedagogical approach consisted of role-playing potential peer-to-peer advising scenarios and becoming informed and familiar with campus resources and social support services through participant observations. Moreover, the peer mentoring program puts critical race theory into practice by intentionally recruiting students of diverse social and cultural backgrounds. Having a racially and culturally diverse cohort of peer mentors, allows students of URM identities and of first-generation college student status to integrate both onto campus and with their department major. The peer mentoring program also put cultural proficiency framework into practice by encouraging peer mentors of underserved and underrepresented identities to advocate for themselves and others.

Peer mentors also became familiar with department faculty, which increased their social capital. Peer mentors hosted office hours, workshop events, and social gatherings for C.L.A.S.S. majors. Through these experiences, peer mentors practiced communication skills, leadership

skills, cultural competency, and many other skill sets, which increased their cultural capital. Therefore, the program's pedagogical practices increased student success outcomes for peer mentor alumni by providing them with the knowledge and skill sets applicable in academic, and professional and personal settings, which translates into cultural capital.

When asked if they felt the peer mentoring program prepared peer mentors for life after Cal Poly Pomona, faculty mentors stated perceiving the program had helped prepare peer mentors for life Cal Poly Pomona through the knowledge and skills they gained, as well as through the letters of recommendation they provided them with, if and when peer mentors invested in their relationships with the faculty mentors. For instance, one faculty mentor explained how they perceived the peer mentoring program helped prepare peer mentors for life after Cal Poly Pomona saying,

“I think it translates to things like how to navigate interviews and trying to get a job and networking with people. Um I think your post-Cal Poly career, and careers in general, a big component of that is being able to cultivate relationships.”

Common themes found when analyzing faculty's perceptions of the program included alleviating the advising load for department faculty and helping acclimate students onto the department and college culture. However, an unexpected outcome was the demand for labor. For instance, one faculty mentor said,

“I remember feeling like it was a lot of emotional labor like you know because you get so close with these students and you mentor these students so closely that's a different kind of teaching that, that sort of weighs on you....” “.... and it was overwhelming and so I think that's, I think that's hard because it's like you know that's the strength of the program too”.

While the faculty mentors enjoyed and learned from their experiences as faculty mentors, they noted suggestions for the program including having more faculty support by providing more rotations among faculty mentors that lead the program. Having more faculty involvement would

help alleviate the pressure of the leading faculty and allow them to balance other responsibilities and manage their workloads.

Another unexpected outcome was “student-program match”, meaning that the program should match, or fit, the needs of students so that students are able to understand and manage their expectations. More specifically, the peer mentoring program is a match for students who have a genuine interest in, and are committed to, helping students. For instance, some faculty mentors mentioned that some students had dropped out of the peer mentoring program in past cohorts, with one faculty explaining,

“It's taking any consideration that you essentially want to counsel people. You know, work with people and you're invested”.

Another faculty explained why she believed a student dropped out of the program saying,

“We had sort of a substantial research component the first term. He (the peer mentor who dropped out) didn't, he didn't really care for research, and I think he felt like it was more of a commitment than he wanted”.

This indicates how important it is not only for the peer mentor candidates to be a good fit for the program, but for the program to be a good fit for them.

Overall, interview data from interviews with faculty mentors demonstrated that the peer mentoring program's pedagogical practices increased overall student success during undergraduate study and after.

Founder and Faculty Mentor of the Peer Mentoring Program

The founder of the peer mentoring program was interviewed separately from the other leading faculty of the program. The founder led more than half of the peer mentor cohorts. The interview questions for the founder asked about the structure of the peer mentoring program, the purpose, and the expectations she had for the program, the peer mentors and C.L.A.S.S. majors.

This interview also examined how the peer mentoring program's structure fluctuated and evolved across the peer mentoring program's existence. The interview findings indicated that the founder of the program initially designed the program with a focus centered on assisting student majors.

However, she explained,

“I realized that the peer mentors were actually benefiting more than the mentees themselves. And as I was getting requests to write tons of letters of recommendations for different things, I wanted to begin to instill skill sets that I thought could help them afterwards”.

Although, when asked if the program met the expectations that she originally had for it, she mentioned, “I think the mentees do benefit, but not in the high impact type of way”. These findings illustrate that because the peer mentoring program is a high impact program, students serving as peer mentors gain social and cultural capital. Moreover, the structure of the peer mentoring course evolved overtime by implementing the needs of the students serving as peer mentors. The program has implemented research experience into the course, providing them with opportunities to enhance their curriculum vitae, increase their skill sets and their confidence. Furthermore, having a faculty mentor in the program also provides peer mentors with outside opportunities of networking with other department faculty as research assistants.

Peer Mentor Alumni Outcomes

The interviews with peer mentor alumni included questions about their demographics, educational degrees, current educational status (indicating whether they are enrolled in graduate study), college generation status, and immigrant generation status. Interview participants were also asked what knowledge, skills, and tools they gained from the program, what they perceived as the strengths and weaknesses of the program, what challenges they faced in obtaining the

career they had envisioned for themselves, and if they felt the peer mentoring program prepared them for life after Cal Poly Pomona.

Qualitative data indicated that the majority of peer mentor alumni participants were a person of color, including Hispanic/Latino/a/x, Asian American/Pacific Islander, and mixed race, with just over half being of URM backgrounds. The majority of peer mentor alumni participants were also female, first-generation college students, and of second-generation immigrant identities (having immigrant parents and being U.S. born citizens). Peer mentor alumni indicated gaining academic, professional, and personal development through the skills and knowledge they gained in the program. Through thematic analysis, interview data revealed common themes, such as communication skills, public speaking skills, listening skills, collaboration skills, organizational skills, cultural competency, and empathy. Skills which translate into forms of cultural capital.

When explaining how the peer mentoring program impacted them for life after Cal Poly Pomona, most peer mentor alumni mentioned how it helped them academically, professionally, and/or personally. For instance, one peer mentor alumnus participant explained how the program helped her professionally saying,

“It reinforced my desire to work with students. So even though the career path that I'm currently trying to take on is with K through 12 students. Working with college students was a really great experience for me..”.

A second peer mentor alumnus expressed how the program provided skills applicable in different areas saying,

“Being in the peer mentoring program, I feel like helps you gain skills in college that you need in life, in careers, and up to what we do in our everyday basis.”.

A third peer mentor alumnus expressed how the program impacted her professionally and personally in life saying,

“Yeah, I think so. Like I think there's like especially like in the job that I'm in now, like I think there's a lot of things that are applicable like that. I learned in the program that you know I can use and I can use even in the future, like if I were to change career paths or, you know, just even, just being a good person like being a good friend like, active listening, you know, being empathetic, etc.”.

A fourth peer mentor alumnus credited the program for her success saying,

“Oh, I think I credit the peer mentor program for a lot of my success and just I feel that I've gained a lot from it. I'm, I'm so super thankful and I'm grateful that I even pursued it.... I really think it shaped my like shaped my not only my goals towards my career..”

When assessing the peer mentoring program's strengths and weaknesses, common themes emerged. For the program's strengths common themes included that it provided community/friendships/support network, various skill sets, knowledge and skills of cultural proficiency/competency, collaboration, and a cohort model. Common themes for the programs' weaknesses included lack of guidance/structure with marketing and fundraising strategies for workshops/social events and lack of hands-on experience with servicing students in workshops and/or office hours.

Interview findings also indicated that all peer mentor alumni graduated with their bachelor's degree. More specifically, a little less than half pursued graduate study, with a quarter of them still enrolled in graduate school. Almost three quarters of peer mentor alumni who have completed their degree and are currently working are working in their field of study, although some mentioned their careers are related to their major but was not originally their intended field of study. These findings highlight how important it for universities to focus on career preparation, rather than solely on retention and graduation rates. However, it should be noted that while some peer mentor alumni reported challenges post-baccalaureate completion, all peer mentor alumni respondents reported that the skills acquired through the peer mentoring program

were applicable in either graduate school or their current jobs/careers. From one point, this highlights that peer mentors were impacted by the program through academic, personal, and professional skill development, which was beneficial and applicable in all social environments. From another point, it highlights that peer mentor alumni faced challenges post-baccalaureate degree completion with obtaining the careers of their choice. For instance, one peer mentor alumnus specifically exemplified the complexity of navigating the process of pursuing work in her field of study, post-baccalaureate completion, by saying,

“the biggest challenge is finding a job that like pays a good wage with a sociology degree. I bounced around to a lot of different jobs. I started at a nonprofit which um, not surprising to anybody, did not pay very well and it was a lot of over work..”.

A second peer mentor alumnus mentioned challenges pursuing his career, post-baccalaureate degree, saying,

“I mean, first, it's the competition for sure. It's other people that you know have the same vision as you and want to help out as much as you do or even more so. That's, that's always the biggest challenge.”.

A third peer mentor alumnus, who pursued her masters in Germany, expressed societal challenges, such as dealing with microaggressions and feelings of not fitting in. She also mentioned challenges of being a first-generation college student. With challenges being exacerbated in the UK due to the majority of her peers having human cultural capital, which Smith (2007) explains as the embodiment of skill sets and knowledge bases, she explains having an even more difficult time obtaining her career. Smith (2007) indicates that there is a distinction between human capital (home culture) and institutional cultural capital (culture of the school, which is the location in which it's acquired. Therefore, since students gain social and cultural capital within the college institution, competition against their more privileged counterparts

(White, non-first-generation college students, having prestige and money) will remain a challenge. However, institutional social and cultural capital does give them an advantage that they otherwise would not have.

While Cal Poly Pomona's joint psychology/sociology peer mentoring program's primary focus is to train peer mentors to guide, assist, and support fellow college peers, the founder of the program integrated the needs of peer mentors into the pedagogical practices. Therefore, the peer mentoring program does increase peer mentors' candidacy into graduate study and as job seekers within their careers. However, because graduate study and career preparation is considered more of a latent function of the program, students serving as peer mentors who are interested in graduate study often find themselves engaging in more hands-on learning and hands-on teaching opportunities through networking with faculty members.

Overall, qualitative data on peer mentor alumni illustrates that the peer mentoring program at Cal Poly Pomona positively affected students through different sociological factors. The sociological factors which increased student success were the pedagogical practices, interactions with fellow peer mentor cohort members and the faculty mentors of the program. The peer mentoring program positively impacted peer mentor alumni academically, professionally, and personally. More specifically, interviews with peer mentor alumni demonstrated that the peer mentoring program allowed peer mentors to gain peer advising experiences, counseling skills, leadership skills, and a support network/community. Through informal interactions with faculty and peers, peer mentors naturally became more engaged within the department, which increased their social capital. Through pedagogical practices, including hands-on learning and critical race theory and cultural proficiency framework practices, peer

mentors gained professional skill sets and knowledge, which increased peer mentor alumni's cultural capital. While the peer mentoring program increased student success outcomes for peer mentor alumni during undergraduate study and post-baccalaureate degree, universities should consider adding an additional course or program for students which primarily focuses on graduate study and career preparation, such as connecting them with internship opportunities and preparing them for interviews.

Impact of Peer Mentoring on Students

The survey questions posed to current sociology and psychology students enrolled during the Fall 2021 semester aimed at gaining a better understanding of the impact that peer mentoring programs have had on their sense of belonging and academic success. There are a vast array of peer mentoring programs available that cater to traditionally underserved, marginalized, and/or specified communities. For example, the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) peer mentors serve low-income, first-generation college students by helping them locate financial support and community building resources. The ARCHES (Achievement, Retention, and Commitment to Higher Education Success) program peer mentors support students with disabilities in specific areas of concern, such as: organizational strategies, decision making skills, and general study skills. Or the Sociology Department Peer Mentoring Program's goal is to support and create a sense of community for sociology majors by providing office hours, academic workshops, and social events. That is just three examples, but there are many additional peer mentoring programs available at Cal Poly Pomona as well. When students were asked about their awareness of one or more peer mentoring programs on campus, over 50% of students reported that they knew of at least one.

However, only 10.2% of students stated that they had visited a peer mentor. There are many possible explanations as to why over 80% of respondents had not visited a peer mentor. The first and most notable reason being that the surveys were administered during Fall 2021 semester, meaning that a majority of classes at Cal Poly Pomona were online due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Zoom-fatigue or the inaccessibility of peer mentoring programs (i.e. unreliable zoom links or conflicting zoom meetings) can be cited as reasons why students were unable or unwilling to seek out peer mentors.

Additionally, a vast majority of respondents identify as Hispanic/Latinx (76%), first-generation college students (70%), or both Latinx and first-generation college students (58%). Existing research states that these populations (first-generation, Latinx college students) are less likely to seek out help due structural and cultural factors. This includes the stigmatization of asking for help, time conflicts due to work or familial responsibilities, and/or not knowing how to navigate college resources or who to ask for help (Bassett 2021; NASPA 2012).

The 10% of respondents who had visited peer mentors, although not statistically significant, provided insight as to why they seek out peer mentors. The demographic makeup of these students is similar to that of the total sample, with 77% being of Hispanic/Latinx descent and 81% being first-generation college students. This shows that Latinx and/or first-generation students are the primary users of peer mentoring resources, yet there are factors that prevent more Latinx and/or first-generation students from seeking out peer mentors for assistance. As mentioned previously, there are a wide array of peer mentoring services available at Cal Poly Pomona, such as community building, social events, disability resources, tutoring, workshops, and so much more. However, the data shows that the most prominent reasons that students visited peer mentors was for help registering for classes (46%) and homework assistance (11%).

Those are two of the many resources that peer mentors are able to provide, but a vast majority of students are missing out on the other services that they are able to provide.

Sense of Belonging Amongst Students

Sense of social belonging is a primary indicator of students' academic success and underrepresented minoritized students are at a greater risk of low sense of social belonging due to structural and cultural factors as well as institutional shortcomings (Strayhorn 2008; Turner 1994). However, research surrounding peer mentoring has shown that these programs provide underserved student populations with the skills, knowledge, and experiences necessary to succeed academically (Smell and Newman 2020). Respondents, a majority of whom are first-generation and/or Latinx college students, were asked about their sense of social belonging at Cal Poly Pomona.

With the measures of sense of social belonging being involvement in campus clubs or organizations, sense of support from peers and faculty, etc., students' responses indicated that a majority of sociology and psychology students at Cal Poly Pomona do not have a strong sense of social belonging. Only 20% of students stated that they are involved in campus clubs and/or organizations (i.e. greek life, academic clubs), about 40% reported that they feel supported by their peers and professors, and 35% disclosed that they have friends on campus. Retention theory would argue that a majority of students are at-risk of not completing their degree.

The Future of Peer Mentoring Programs

It is important to emphasize that this data was collected during distanced-learning, a global pandemic, and periods of overwhelming zoom fatigue, so many underserved and underrepresented students were experiencing additional challenges and stressors. The peer mentoring programs at Cal Poly Pomona are well-equipped to assist these communities.

Therefore, there needs to be a greater focus on reaching traditionally underserved populations. Connection with orientation services, the Office of Student Life and Cultural Centers, and other on-campus organizations would allow peer mentors to reach a greater, more diverse student population. Additionally, universities should integrate more hands-on learning and hands-on teaching practices including peer mentoring leadership roles, research assistant roles, and internship opportunities. Institutional support is necessary for creating equitable opportunities for students, especially those of traditionally underserved backgrounds. Government funding would help with the sustainability of the peer mentoring program through increased outreach and awareness of the program for students seeking to enroll as peer mentors as well as students seeking peer-advising and support. Furthermore, institutional support would help with incidental expenses (ie. workshops and social events), as well as with faculty mentor rotations. Overall, increased institutional support for peer mentors and for underrepresented minoritized students is essential for student success. Institutional support will henceforth allow peer mentoring programs to work at their highest capacity in turn allowing them to effectively support their student populations.

References

- Bassett. 2021. "Big Enough to Bother Them? When Low-Income, First-Generation Students Seek Help From Support Programs." *Journal of College Student Development*, 62(1), 19–36. <https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2021.0002>
- Bichy, Cassie, and Eileen O'Brien. 2014. "Course redesign: developing peer mentors to facilitate student learning." *The Learning Assistance Review*, Vol. 19(2):43-57.
- Booth, S., Merga, M., & Roni, S. M. 2016. "Peer-mentors Reflect on the Benefits of Mentoring: An Autoethnography." *International Journal of Doctoral Studies*, 11, 383–402. <https://doi-org.proxy.library.cpp.edu/10.28945/3603>
- Bowman, N., & Denson, N. 2014. "A Missing Piece of the Departure Puzzle: Student-Institution Fit and Intent to Persist." *Research in Higher Education*, 55(2), 123–142. <https://doi-org.proxy.library.cpp.edu/10.1007/s11162-013-9320-9>
- Brunsma, David L, Embrick, David G, & Shin, Jean H. 2017. "Graduate Students of Color: Race, Racism, and Mentoring, in the White Waters of Academia." *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity*, 3(1), 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2332649216681565>
- Härkönen, U. 2001. "The Bronfenbrenner ecological systems theory of human development." *Google Scholar*. https://scholar.google.com/scholar?cluster=17909960766975431142&hl=en&as_sdt=0.5
- Hiraldo, Payne. 2019. "Future Scenario: Praxis in Critical Race Theory in Higher Education and Student Affairs". *Google Scholar*. <https://scholarworks.uvm.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?>

[article=1339&context=tv](#)

Ovink, Sarah M., and Brian D. Veazey. 2011. "More Than "Getting Us Through:" A Case Study in Cultural Capital Enrichment of Underrepresented Minority Undergraduates." *Research in Higher Education*, 52(4):370–394.

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11162-010-9198-8>

Rahill, J. Guitele et al. 2016. "Assessing the Development of Cultural Proficiency Among Upper-Level Social Work Students". *Journal of Social Work Education*. 2016, VOL. 52, No.2, 198-213. <http://sx.doi.org/10.1080/10437797.2016.1152134>

Rios-Ellis, B., Rascón, M., Galvez, G., Inzunza-Franco, G., Bellamy, L., & Torres, A. 2015. "Creating a Model of Latino Peer Education: Weaving Cultural Capital Into the Fabric of Academic Services in an Urban University Setting." *Education and Urban Society* 47(1): 33–55. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013124512468006>

Smell, A., and Harmony Newman. 2020. "Multi-Tiered Mentorship Models: Increasing Learning Outcomes of Underserved Populations." *Journal of Applied Social Science*, 14(1): 23–39. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1936724419898869>

Smith, Buffy 2007. "Accessing Social Capital through the Academic Mentoring Process, Equity & Excellence in Education". *Routledge Taylor & Francis Group*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10665680601088465>

Spiridon, Elena, Kaye, Linda K, Nicolson, Rod I, Ransom, Heather J, Tan, Angel J. Y, & Tang,

Bryan W. X. 2020. "Integrated learning communities as a peer support initiative for first year university students". *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 50(7), 394–405.]=<https://doi.org/10.1111/jasp.12668>

Strayhorn, Terrell Lamont. (2008). "A Hierarchical Analysis Predicting Sense of Belonging Among Latino College Students." *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education* 7(4), 301-320.

Turner, C. S. V. (1994). Guests in someone else's house: Students of color. *Actions. The Review of Higher Education*, 17(4), 355-370.

NASPA (2012). Detroit: National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, 1963. Print.

Walton, G., & Cohen, G. 2011. "A Brief Social-Belonging Intervention Improves Academic and Health Outcomes of Minority Students." *Science*, 331(6023), 1447-1451. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/29783880>

Yomtov, Dani, Scott W. Plunkett, Rafi Efrat, and Adriana G. Marin. 2017. "Can Peer Mentors Improve First-Year Experiences of University Students?" *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*, 19(1):25–44. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1521025115611398>