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Making Mentoring Work: A Case Study of the Intersections of Peer Mentoring at a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI)

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ABSTRACT

First year, university transfer students experience challenges typically addressed with mentoring. Peer mentoring provides a culturally relevant approach to reduce disparities in educational achievements. This study seeks to understand the experiences of peer mentors and the impact on their relationships with first-year transfer students attending a Hispanic Serving Institution. Using a case study approach, our research finds that peer mentors were ill-equipped to handle challenges associated with having a transfer student mentee. Our findings suggest training requires improvement of peer mentor-mentee pairings with due consideration to the dynamic issues caused by incongruency in age or gender, lack of relatability to or lack of proper knowledge for mentees with backgrounds differing the mentors, and mentors experiencing imposter syndrome.

Keywords: best practices, cultural relevance, higher education, Hispanic serving institutions (HSIs), imposter syndrome, peer mentoring, transfer students

INTRODUCTION

Higher education is quietly shifting funds away from a critical population: new students (Heirdsfield et al., 2008). This shift comes at a time when many first-year students face increasingly difficult transitions to college life. At predominantly white institutions, a persistent achievement gap continues, wherein racially underrepresented students appear to underperform at rates that distance them from their White peers (Musoba et al., 2013). This lack of achievement is especially amplified during students' first year or transfer year in college. Addressing the achievement gap among racial groups demands a plethora of support from practitioners and learners. This support can come in many forms including tutoring, emotional support, guidance, mentoring, etc. (Heirdsfield et al., 2008). While valuable and important to maintain existing support systems, they often fall short in addressing the academic and nonacademic needs of students. Shortcomings include limitations in fostering genuine interpersonal connections and addressing feelings of intimidation. While mentorship has proven effective, it may not always provide a comprehensive solution for student success (Menges, 2016). Culturally relevant peer mentoring holds the potential to dismantle achievement gaps and foster equitable outcomes for students of all racial backgrounds (Paris, 2012).

In this study, we offer a few solutions to help mitigate the disparities in peer mentoring by analyzing participant experiences regarding university led peer mentoring services. Though peer mentoring is a structure that has existed in higher education since the 1700s, it needs to be revisited, reevaluated, and if necessary, redefined (Colvin & Ashman, 2010). Consequently, we used our analysis of the participants' experiences to recommend practitioner approaches that might address challenges we uncovered related to peer mentoring practices at Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs), and beyond. For the purposes of our work, we acknowledge the definition of mentoring as the guidance and support from an experienced person, who shares their knowledge and insights to help individuals grow and develop (Bryant-Shanklin & Brumage, 2011). Similarly, peer mentoring entails the guidance of an experienced person, within which the authority that often carries an intimidating stigma is removed. However, a peer mentor may share similarities with their mentee including, but not limited to, age, race, gender, major, experience, and background.

This paper explores the characteristics of peer mentoring program at an HSI located in the southeastern part of the US, with a particular interest in understanding the experiences of peer mentors. We are conscious that peer mentoring approaches tend to vary based on the field in which it is being implemented. A robust program educates its participants on its expectations, with a certain level of flexibility, which clearly distinguishes the roles of the

mentors. Doing so also articulates the mentoring goals so that both peer mentors and mentees understand their ultimate takeaways from the program (Scholz et al., 2023). Thus, in the current work, we emphasize the critical roles of diversity, equity, and clear communication in creating effective peer mentoring programs. Further, the aim of this work is to deepen the peer mentor-mentee relationship through an in-depth exploration of shared experiences and their impact on the success of transfer students at an HSI. By examining the intricate dynamics of peer mentoring, this research seeks to foster workable ideas on creating an inclusive educational environment, highlighting the essentiality of a well-structured peer mentorship system in supporting student success. As a result, we asked the following research questions: *What are the mentoring experiences of peer mentors? How can the shared experiences of peer mentors alter the preparation of mentors supporting the success of transfer students?*

LITERATURE REVIEW

Mentoring vs. Peer Mentoring

In this case study, we considered the meaning of mentoring in order to differentiate between mentoring and peer mentoring. Mentoring entails the sharing or transfer of information and exchanges of experiences (battle scars), at times, through which a lifelong relationship is rooted (Feng et al., 2024; Scholz et al., 2023) between a mentor, a more experienced individual, and a mentee, a less experienced individual in a given domain. Ragins and Kram (2007) stated that mentoring is a life changing process which can facilitate the transformation of an individual, group, and community. In this study, we acknowledge that there are numerous forms of mentoring, including informal and formal (Feng et al., 2024). Regardless of the type of mentorship implemented, the core of mentoring is the relationship between the mentor and mentee. Though it is evident that mentorship works (Crisp & Cruz, 2009; Houde, 2008; Marshall et al., 2021), it is important to understand how it is best used to optimize the success rate of transfer students in higher education, given the growing Federal funding opportunities at HSIs.

Provided that a solid and mutual relationship is the core of mentoring, a series of factors must be considered when providing mentorship to learners in higher education, especially for transfer students. It is of great importance that the mentors are well versed in the fields of interest and are acculturated such that they can resolve issues that might arise during the initial phase of the established relationship (Crutcher, 2007). Ideally, mentors are motivated to provide mentoring to those in their ingroups, meaning mentees who share similar backgrounds and identities.

Mentoring addresses two important aspects of higher education: student development in the field and psychosocial growth in the strange environment, provided the student has just transferred or enrolled in the

institution of choice (Chang et al., 2014; Persson & Ivanaj, 2009). Consequently, mentors need to "help others prepare for education (HOPE)", a term coined by Crutcher (2007, p. 21). Thus, the mentees' identities, life experiences (personally and professionally), and funds of knowledge, the collection of knowledge that is shaped by an individual's social, historical, and cultural interactions within their environment, should be considered when matching a mentor with a mentee, formally (Abarca et al., 2024). Mentoring can be cumbersome, formal or informal, and the approaches to formal mentorship alter depending on the field of study, which can hinder the genuineness of the mentor-mentee relationship. Hence, we focused on peer mentoring, which could possibly provide a level of genuineness and substantial support through HOPE. In the next section, we explore a variety of definitions of peer mentoring to form our own. We consider the different aspects of peer mentoring to substantiate its implementations and impacts. As a result, we reframe the definition of peer-mentoring for this study.

Redefining the Frameworks of Peer Mentoring

According to the literature, there is no consistent definition of peer mentoring because the structure of peer mentoring has evolved along with the definition (Chang et al., 2014; Rieske & Benjamin, 2015). After conducting a thorough search of the literature on peer mentoring, we found this same sentiment is echoed by Lane (2020), who also found a lack of consistency in defining peer mentoring. Although There are varying ways to define peer mentoring, there are also many commonalities in the definitions. For instance, some authors describe peer mentoring as a relationship (Marshall et al., 2021; Moschetti et al., 2018), a pedagogy (Aarnikoivu et al., 2020), or a "buddying up" system (Caget et al., 2021), that is reciprocal in nature (Aarnikoivu et al., 2020; Cage et al., 2021; Rieske & Benjamin, 2015). In this mentorship relationship, the peer mentor is more experienced, and the mentee is less experienced (Marshall et al., 2021; Moschetti et al., 2018; Yomtov et al, 2017), because the mentee is a new student to college (Aarnikoivu et al., 2020; Cage et al., 2021; Rieske & Benjamin, 2015) or a transfer student, new to university life. The advantages of peer mentoring include lower intimidation, higher approachability, and more trustworthiness compared to faculty mentors (Marshall et al., 2021).

The peer mentor and mentee are either close in age or they can vary across age groups and even disciplines (Kosoko-Lasaki et al., 2006; Marshal et al., 2021; Yomtov et al., 2017). This differs from classical mentorship because the mentee is a younger adult and the mentor is an older, more experienced adult (Chang et al., 2014). This is imperative to note because literature has highlighted a population of students in higher education who are older, more experienced, and no longer considered the 'traditional' college students; instead, they pursue college education as adult learners after a period

of time (Heirdsfield et al., 2008). Therefore, peer mentors are typically upper-class students, and mentees are underclass students (Lane, 2020). Across most definitions, there is a clear consensus that peer mentoring serves as a form of support for the mentees (Aarnikoivu et al., 2020; Cage et al., 2021; Marshall et al., 2021; Moschetti et al, 2018; Núñez et al., 2015b; Rieske & Benjamin, 2015). Also, in this framework of peer mentoring, mentees are challenged by their peer mentors, learn coping skills, receive advice from their peer mentors (Moschetti et al., 2018; Núñez et al., 2015b), are provided with resources to navigate academic challenges following the transition period (Aarnikoivu et al., 2020; Cage et al., 2021; Rieske & Benjamin, 2015), and improve in academic performance and academic and social integration (Moschetti et al., 2018; Murphy, 2022; Yomtov et al., 2017).

For the purpose of this study, within the framework of higher education, we define peer mentoring as the mutual peer mentor-mentee relationship in which the peer mentor possesses adequate experience to support the mentee in their endeavors, both academically and psychosocially. Peer mentors would have a reasonable gap in experience between themselves and their mentees and have at least three of the following valued characteristics: age, identity, culture, worthiness, competency, and willingness.

Peer Mentoring in College Campuses and Universities

The most common reasons for dropping out of college are loss of friendships, withdrawal from university activities, and the loss of scholarship or money used for tuition (Wangrow et al., 2021). Essentially, there is a lack of social capital and sense of belonging when these students are not properly integrated into university life, which can lead to attrition. There are several adjustments that need to be addressed when considering the success of students in college. First, when a student transitions to a higher education institution, there is a need to establish the role of the college student and to develop a sense of belonging at the university because "belonging and academic performance are strong predictors of retention" (Collier, 2022, p. 38). Strayhorn (2018) defined sense of belonging as perceived social support, sensation of connectedness, experience of mattering, or feeling cared about and important to others on campus. He also connected the idea of a sense of belonging to be incredibly important to the success of students, especially first-year students, on college campuses.

Second, a social support network needs to be developed even though the students have spent little time on the campus (Collier, 2022). Peer mentors can serve as a form of social capital for students who struggle to access it on campus (Moschetti et al., 2018). Social capital consists of information-sharing networks, social norms, values, and expected behaviors that can help students navigate academic settings to achieve success (Strayhorn, 2008).

This may be difficult for various subgroups of students, but especially for first-generation, minority students. In this case, peer mentoring would be considered important because students who lack social capital are the least likely to apply to or attend college, and if they make it to college, they are at risk of low academic engagement and lack of persistence (Moschetti et al., 2018).

The third, fourth, and fifth issues consider the challenges that students face with information processing overload as a result of the volume of information they are expected to take in regarding expectations from universities, how to behave as college students, how to navigate college campuses, and how to find resources to help them with problems (Collier, 2022). To combat these issues, universities should have a formal peer interaction structure in which they encourage students to engage in activities such as peer mentoring, learning communities, and first-year courses to foster a sense of belonging, increase retention rates, and provide support for students to aid in their transition to college life (Lane, 2020; Marshall et al., 2021; Murphy, 2022; Rieske & Benjamin, 2015; Wangrow et al., 2021). By our definition, peer mentors fill the gap of providing mentees with resources, encouraging them to partake in university activities and events, and acclimating to college life (Lane, 2020; Rieske & Benjamin, 2015).

The last issue is if the student is nontraditional, they face additional challenges due to lack of available resources and higher education familiarity (Collier, 2022). Peer mentoring provides benefits to various subgroups of individuals, such as practical information acquired from peer mentors, increased resilience, and increased awareness about organizational structures (Aarnikoivu et al., 2020). Research also indicates that participation in these programs is correlated with higher GPAs, completing a higher number of credits, on average, in the first year, and improved sense of belonging (Collier, 2022; Marshall et al., 2021). Additionally, peer mentoring program support is strongly valued, viewed as allies, and helps students make higher quality decisions. It also promotes increased confidence, knowledge, use of campus resources, and how to make the most out of opportunities in college (Collier, 2022; Núñez et al., 2015a). Peer mentors also promote favorable academic and social outcomes, negate feelings of isolation and disengagement (Moschetti et al., 2018; Yomtov et al., 2017), and drastically improve relationships with their peers and instructors (Kosoko-Lasaki et al., 2006).

Peer Mentoring at Minority Serving Institutions

Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs) are characterized as institutions that have large enrollment percentages of African American/Black, Hispanic/Latino, Native American, and Asian/Pacific Islander students (Flores & Park, 2015). MSIs include Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs), Tribal Colleges

and Universities (TCUs), and Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander Serving Institutions (AANAPISIs). Examples of these MSIs include Howard University (HBCU), Aurora University (HSI), Ilisagvik College (TCU), The Brooklyn College (AANAPISI). This current case study was conducted at an HSI, which Title V statute of the Higher Education Act (1965) identifies as 2- and 4-year institutions with a student population of at least 25% Hispanic students (Ek et al., 2010; Murakami & Núñez, 2014). The identity of an HSI is developed based on geographic location that consists of a large Hispanic population, institutional leaders' commitment to serve the needs of Hispanic students and maintaining the federal definition of MSI to receive federal funding (Flores & Park, 2015).

In United States (US) higher education, there is a persistent Eurocentric, male-centered worldview that is mirrored in the normative structures and practices of the institutions, including those at HSIs (Ek et al., 2010; Núñez et al., 2015b). This leaves students that fall out of the dominant culture feeling marginalized, alienated, isolated, unsupported, and unwanted by everyone around them, including peers and faculty (Strayhorn, 2008). Therefore, this makes it difficult to form a sense of belonging on campus. Strayhorn (2018) researched the sense of belonging at an HSI and the factors that positively influenced this feeling, including academic and social integration and experiences and perceptions of diversity. More specifically, he found that participating in academic support programs, such as peer mentoring, helped increase a sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2018).

Regarding the ever-present Euro-dominant culture in higher education, Ladson-Billings (2021) established the concept of culturally relevant pedagogy as a framework for practicing that supports and empowers minority students rather than make them feel inferior. She encouraged practices for those in positions of authority to shape their instructions that are responsive to the students' cultural orientation to establish stronger relationships, respect cultural differences in the classroom, place a value on a diversity of knowledge, and provide various opportunities to demonstrate learning (Garcia et al., 2021). In a study that explored the impact of peer mentoring experiences on the peer mentors' competency beliefs related to several items, including culturally responsive teaching, Garcia and colleagues (2021) found that peer mentors expressed how it helped them to develop different strategies to serve the mentees. The study demonstrated how peer mentors could benefit from receiving training regarding culturally responsive teaching.

Another factor that was explored in relation to peer mentoring at HSIs is again, social capital. In a study that sought to increase social capital and feelings of university connectedness, peer mentors were viewed positively and seen as a form of emotional and academic social capital (Moschetti et al.,

2018). Mentees also reported increased integration and connectedness to the university, which was significant compared to the sample of students who did not receive mentoring. Peer mentoring is a prime example highlighted that would strengthen the embedded forces for all students but are especially important for underrepresented student groups (Wangrow et al., 2021). However, this study only focused on the results of first-generation Latino students after receiving peer mentoring, thereby future studies should focus on expanding to other races and ethnicities of mentees in HSIs.

Peer Mentoring with Transfer Students at an HSI

In a quantitative study, Núñez and colleagues (2015a) found that students from non-White backgrounds were more likely to enroll in a 2-year HSI and reported that they were more at risk of factors such as dropping out, having children, and prioritizing full-time employment over full-time enrollment. Despite these risk factors, the students enrolled in these HSIs reported an intention to transfer to a 4-year institution. The phenomenon of transitioning students is not new to literature. As Umbach (2018) described, transitional or transfer students were identified as those who choose to enroll in community colleges for at least their first year and then transfer to universities, given the rise in cost of attendance and admission standards. This population of students was perceived as a risk factor because they were considered new to university life novices to senior institutions, and there was a paucity of data recording the effects on academic performance. There were studies suggesting transfer student shock, suggesting the transfer student's grades decline in their first year, however, due to the inconsistency of transfer student experiences, this theory was disregarded (Flaga, 2006).

In addition to academic performance, transfer students experience psychological distress. Transitioning into university life has been reported to be attributed to a strain on wellbeing, specifically psychological wellbeing which determined the success of transition (Cage et al., 2021; Flaga, 2006; Lane, 2020). A longitudinal study conducted in the US, which measured the psychological wellbeing of transitioning students, reported heightened psychological distress and decreased psychological wellbeing midway through the first year and little improvement at the end of the year (Cage et al., 2021). It was believed that some students did not recover from having a depressed psychological well-being. Other studies reported a loss of their former identities, social networks, and sense of place while forming a new identity (Cage et al., 2021), leading to an increase likelihood of attrition.

Student retention and successful transitions to university have demonstrated an importance for sense of belonging and community. Ek et al. (2010) reiterated this notion about sense of belonging being an important factor for Latino undergraduate students because it contributes to the way a student thinks about themselves and their role in the community, thus the

more a student feels they belong, the better they are able to function and participate within university life. Cage et al. (2021) conducted a qualitative study that explored the needs of transitioning students and found that students emphasized a need for coping skills to enhance independence and academic demands, student led support networks (mentoring), the need for universities to adopt a culture of inspiration not competition and extended transitional periods beyond conventional timepoints from the start to graduation. Although the challenges associated with being a transfer student are evident, there is a lack of new information regarding peer mentors and their experiences peer mentoring transfer students in HSIs within the last decade.

Experiences of Mentors

While the topic of this case study is peer mentoring, we also want to find out what the experiences of peer mentors are and how they shape their practices to support transfer students. As it stands, there is a paucity in the literature about the experiences, role, and responsibilities of mentors in the dyadic peer mentoring relationship (Marshall et al., 2021; Rieske & Benjamin, 2015). The responsibility of the peer mentor role varies on the written job description. The universal expectation of peer mentors is to engage students in their transition into the university and involvement in the community (Rieske & Benjamin, 2015). Another responsibility is personal and professional development such as training that occurs prior to starting the new academic year via classes, retreats, or workshops. For example, peer mentors in Southern California had to undergo summer training which was comprised of ten hours of topics related to the following:

> Professionalism, confidentiality, student leadership development skills, how to organize group activities, fostering effective communication with mentees, creating good relationships with students with disabilities, goal setting exercises, working with students from diverse populations, utilizing the community of mentors, developing positive coworker relationships, and creating a safe and welcoming environment for undocumented students. (Moschetti et al., 2018, p. 378).

We found literature regarding how to be a good peer mentor, which indicated that the individual must possess qualities such as academic strength, leadership, strong interpersonal and soft skills, and knowledge relevance (Heirdsfield et al., 2008; Rieske & Benjamin, 2015). In addition to these skills, peer mentors are expected to develop self-esteem and healthy behaviors that can be strengthened through participation in workshops and training. Marshall et al. (2021) highlighted the interpersonal skills peer mentors should possess, including working with people from different disciplines and with different personalities, improved rapport building, increased self-efficacy and confidence, more compassion and empathy, and feeling of satisfaction from

watching their mentees grow. Peer mentors also used this opportunity to network with faculty and career professionals to form stronger connections to the professional world, improve public speaking and professional writing, experience a stronger identification in the role of leader, and confidence to take on more responsibility (Chang et al., 2014; Heirdsfield et al., 2008; Marshall et al., 2021). Furthermore, peer mentors gain technical and academic skills including time management, organization, communication, confidence in information sharing, active listening, and teaching skills (Marshall et al., 2021). Another skill peer mentors learned was recognizing warning signs of a mentee that was struggling (Moschetti et al., 2018). If students were identified as struggling, it was the duty of the peer mentor to intervene and help the student improve and address their needs as best as possible.

Although the skills gained from serving as a peer mentor are plentiful, it is not clear whether peer mentors are paid for their roles after training. Some research indicates it can be a paid position, while others report it being a volunteer position. Other challenges reported may be due to the lack of understanding of the role and definition of peer mentor, including expectations. This uncertainty can lead to anxiety, lack of confidence in the role, and even negative impressions, because peer mentors feel they are not needed or that the mentees doubt the credibility of the mentors. Additionally, an expectation of this role is to meet with their mentees weekly, which can be a personal approach of the peer mentor, either face-to-face, email, text, or phone calls (Heirdsfield et al., 2008). This may cause difficulties for the peer mentor when the relationship with their mentee is not reciprocated (Seery et al., 2021). Further, it can be challenging to work with mentees who lack motivation and are not engaged (Marshall et al., 2021). This frustration escalated when the peer mentors felt they could not establish a relationship with the mentee, which could lead to feelings of failure (Heirdsfield et al., 2008). Marshall et al. (2021) also emphasized that peer mentors are undergraduates themselves, and the role of peer mentorship can feel more time-consuming than anticipated when they are still learning to navigate their own challenges as well as their mentees' challenges with university life.

Due to poor social and academic capital, transfer students face many obstacles that hinder their developments. They have a harder time immersing themselves within the academic environment and struggle to develop a sense of belonging. These challenges can be mitigated by having a mentor who connects with the mentee personally, academically, and socially. However, mentoring is not as effective as it was once believed to be, especially serving the modern learners of higher education. We consequently must shift to peer mentoring to better serve the marginalized, underrepresented, and nontraditional students at our institutions.

RESEARCH METHOD

We used a case study methodological design. The decision to adopt a case study methodology for this research project was driven by its exceptional ability to facilitate a comprehensive examination of the subject matter through an in-depth evaluation of lived experiences of the phenomenon in question. In his seminal work, Yin (2010) articulated that the primary objective of utilizing a case study methodology is to acquire profound insights into complex phenomena within their real-world contexts. This approach is instrumental in fostering a nuanced understanding of contemporary issues, emphasizing the significance of detailed analysis in uncovering the intricacies and dynamics inherent in specific cases. This capability was the predominant reason the research team opted for a case study approach, underscoring its relevance and applicability in addressing the research objectives.

Therefore, relying on a case study design allowed the researchers to evaluate an enormous amount of qualitative evidence in order to adequately respond to the following research questions:

> **Research Question 1:** What are the mentoring experiences of peer mentors?
>
> **Research Question 2:** How can shared peer mentoring experiences inform the preparation practices of mentors supporting transfer students?

Participants

The study's site is designated as a Hispanic Serving Institution. Interview, observation, and training data were collected from college peer mentors who work at Big State University and presented in Table 1. Eligibility to participate in the study required that respondents satisfy the following criteria: 1) selected by the university and identified as academic mentors, 2) enrolled as full-time undergraduate students, 3) be at least eighteen years old, and 4) willing to be interviewed about mentoring transfer students. Further, the primary geographic location of the post-secondary institution was a metropolitan setting (Winston, 2010).

Data Collection

We conducted qualitative, semi-structured interviews with six participants to understand their perceptions of peer mentoring experiences with respect to transfer student populations. For this project, a single case study methodological approach was utilized to capture two critical points of information. First, interviews were conducted to understand the perspective of participants' work as mentors in a peer mentoring system. Secondly, participants were asked to share their perspectives regarding peer mentoring practices to highlight what they did to support, or not support, students for which they were assigned to mentor. Utilizing a case study design allowed

the researchers to capture important perspectives associated with the modernity of peer mentoring in the field of higher education. Further, we utilized the functions of case study design as it pertained to the various ways in which we could capture and analyze data to complete this work.

Table 1
Study Institution by Size and Type

Category	Description
School Name	Big State University
Enrollment Size	≥ 25,000 students
Institutional Classification	Public
Number of Peer Mentors	6

Note. This table demonstrates the institutional demographics involved in our study. The information is listed using a pseudonym which was used to protect the anonymity of the study's institutional site. Presented in the table above, it shows that we only had six peer mentors that participated in our study.

Participant Demographics Table

The research was initiated after receiving approval from the university's institutional review board (IRB). Purposive sampling was employed as a technique in this study (Etikan et al., 2016). Purposive sampling was used because it enabled us to pick individuals who have specific experiences that are relevant to our study's aims, which is to understand the perceptions and experiences of college peer mentors who mentor transfer students at an HSI. Participants agreed to participate in peer mentoring training sessions, be interviewed about their experiences, and allow the researchers to observe their interactions with their assigned mentees. Seventeen peer mentors were invited to participate in the study, and six self-selected to take part. Data were collected through interviews and observations of the mentors during their training. While all participants self-identified as African American, this was not a deliberate selection criterion for the study. Study participants were recruited using an email recruitment letter. Each potential participant was screened to determine their eligibility to participate in the study. This manuscript shares the voices of six of the study's participants, including in-depth information about their peer mentoring experiences, which is presented in Table 2. All six participants 6 identified as Black/African American, 3 were male, and 3 identified as female.

Table 2
Interview Participants' Demographics

Participant Name	Race	Gender
Participant X	Black/African American	Female
Participant D	Black/African American	Female
Participant C	Black/African American	Female
Participant E	Black/African American	Male
Participant N	Black/African American	Male
Participant J	Black/African American	Male

Note. Table 2 displays demographic information associated with the study participants. The demographic composition of the participants provides scope to explore our research topic through an intersectional lens.

Data analysis: Intersectionality

Crenshaw's (1989) seminal work served as a foundational theoretical framework for our advanced analysis. In our study, we drew upon her concept of intersectionality, which reimagines the individual identities within the context of intersecting multiple identities. To comprehend intersectionality within the participants' lived experiences, we sought to contextualize these experiences within the broader backdrop of the students' shared experiences. Crenshaw (1989) introduced the term 'intersectionality' to convey the idea that individuals may possess multiple marginalized identities that intersect. She argued that defining a person solely by their race, gender, or economic status is insufficient in fully understanding their lived experiences.

In light of Crenshaw's work and our research question, we reframed our narrative. Instead of examining student participants through single labels, we adopted an intersectional lens. That is, we acknowledged the race and gender of participants as indicated in the participant demographic table. This approach helped us structure strategies for fostering a sense of belonging on college campuses.

Coding and Analysis

Research interview data were transcribed from audio to text and stored electronically in Otter AI, a software program designed to capture live audio and generate written transcriptions. Within this study, Patton's approach was utilized for data processing and interpretation (2002). The data was structured so it could be used to provide an analysis of the case and to generate new information about what peer mentors learned from their mentoring experiences with transfer students (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Prior to doing data analysis, it was important to arrange the data based on the information provided by participants. The primary investigator of the research study

reviewed and transcribed the data to identify themes and patterns in the participants' responses. Following that, the data was coded, labeled, and categorized as depicted in Table 3. Following this step, similarities within the categories were identified and analyzed to gain a broader meaning of the participants' responses.

After the primary investigator analyzed the transcribed data to identify key quotations, themes, and patterns, the data was classified, labeled, and then grouped into specific themes. To establish credibility, data interpretations were shared with participants to affirm validity (Nowell et al., 2017). In addition, categories were established, and patterns were interpreted regarding their broader significance (Patton, 2002)

Positionality

As four Black researchers conducting research on peer mentoring at a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI), we approach this work with a unique perspective that is partially informed by our personal and professional experiences, cultural background, and research interest. Relatedly we are keenly aware of the historical and systemic injustices that have affected minoritized students seeking support in higher education settings. Nevertheless, we utilize this research space to amplify the lived experiences of the participants we recruited and interviewed.

RESULTS

Patton (2002) stipulates that practices and approaches are the primary stages in the data analysis and interpretation procedure. Due to the transcription and categorization of the audio recordings of the interviews, researchers were able to examine the cases and acquire new information regarding peer mentoring experiences of mentees who mentor transfer students (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Even though peer mentoring is a practice for student success that fosters an engaged sense of belonging and contributes to graduation, the findings indicate that peer mentor training was lacking to support a specific niche population of students, namely transfer students. Specifically, in our study, the peer mentors and their mentees were diverse in age, gender, lived experiences, international status, and transfer student status. Completing a peer mentoring training that only covered the basics of peer mentoring created a gap in the connection of success of transfer mentees and their peer mentors. Therefore, if peer mentors cannot relate to or do not know specific information regarding a mentee, this can hinder the integration into the university, create a lack of sense of belonging, and low academic and social capital, possibly result in attrition.

The timing of the shared findings is crucial, as there is an ongoing interest in bolstering the success of transfer students in postsecondary settings. Prior to offering recommendations in the discussion section, we

present three main themes in Table 3 that were interwoven and were demonstrated as the major challenges in the participants' experiences: (a) knowledge of peer mentoring; (b) developing mentoring relationships; and (c) imposter syndrome in peer mentoring.

Table 3
Thematic Codes

Theme	Sub-themes	Example quotes
Knowledge of Peer Mentoring	Skill, knowledge, instructions, rules	"We were trained to be a mentor to another student, like try to help them but not tutor them, but some of the things they asked to get help on surprised me"
Developing Mentoring Relationships	Mentoring friends, working with opposite sex, age	"It's difficult to build relationships."
Imposter Syndrome	Self-doubt, failure	"I feel like I'm not a good enough mentor" "I want to be a good mentor but after doing it I worry that I not really that good at it"

Note. Table 3 depicts the coding and thematic analysis of our data analysis process. The first theme is knowledge of peer mentoring, which is broken into four sub-themes: skill, knowledge, instructions, and rules. The second theme is developing mentoring relationships, which is broken into three sub-themes: mentoring friends, working with the opposite sex, and age. The third theme is imposter syndrome, which is broken into two sub-themes: self-doubt and failure. For each theme, we provided a corresponding quote from a peer mentor.

Theme One: Knowledge of Peer Mentoring

Participants were requested to share their experiences regarding transfer student mentoring. Initially, participant responses evoked reactions centered on job responsibilities. For example, Participant J stated, "I adhere to the provided instructions." In this sense, the participant, like others, placed a great deal of emphasis on process knowledge and used terms such as training to characterize the peer mentoring formula with which they were taught. Other responses to the inquiry included "I assist them" and "I am responsible

for ensuring they are aware of all campus offices." Some even elaborated on their knowledge by asserting, "In my training, I was taught to develop relationships with mentees." However, when asked to clarify how their knowledge helped them support transfer students, the process of assisting the researchers in understanding the peer mentors' knowledge became evident. Many of them felt the peer mentoring training was beneficial, but it was difficult to contextualize the training for the population they were assigned to support. Participant X shared the following:

> *I remember my first session with my mentee. I had our agreement out and was ready to go through the list that the office provided mentors. I waited around for several minutes looking for my mentee, when I realized the older guy waiting at the front of the library hovering over coffee was my guy. He looked to be the age of an uncle. His name, Jamie (pseudonym), was on my paper, but I kept wanting to call him by his last name out of respect. He was a veteran and here I was a college student two years out of high school, also an opposer of any wars, taxed with helping someone who kept calling me kiddo.*

The perspective of Participant X regards the limited knowledge of peer mentors: “My mentee asked about free bus passes, I just knew about the campus bus because I used it to get from the campus to my off-campus dorm, but I have a car.” Another peer mentor noted the major difficulty in connecting with the mentee, given a number of circumstances, one of which was cultural differences, Participant N explains:

> *My mentee was an international student. A lot of what he asked had to do with the number of credit hours he had to take to maintain his status as a regional student. At first, I told him that going to the office of international students was where he would find the most help. We looked up the times, and then I shared with him the best route to take to get to the building which was tucked away in the middle of nowhere on campus. Then he asked about working off campus and getting a job. I mean, every question made me feel like he needs more support than what I could offer him. Over time, his absence from our scheduled meetings began to show me that he saw my mentoring as unhelpful. I knew this because when I emailed him about missing appointments, he said that he’d rather spend his time talking to people that knew the answers and not to people that could direct him to the answers.*

Theme Two: Developing Mentoring Relationships

Individuals received instructions to develop mentoring relationships with mentees as part of the preparation for peer mentoring. Multiple peer mentors held the aforementioned value, but in discussing their experiences, they appeared to acknowledge the complexities of forming relationships. In

some cases, developing relationships with mentees came naturally to peer mentors who were accepted as mentors for the program, based on their willingness to support students, attend professional development sessions, and be compensated and evaluated on mentoring. Participant D elaborated and said:

> *I worked as a campus orientation leader. When freshmen came for the summer, I introduced them to the Big State way. So, it was natural that I would get selected to mentor. I know the school, I know where students should go to get help, and I know how to talk with people and not at them. I'm the kind of person that finds a friend among strangers.*

In this way, participants connect past experiences to their preparation for peer mentoring, emphasizing skills such as communication and relationship building to demonstrate that they knew how to establish rapports. However, developing mentoring relationships appeared to depend on the level of comfort of the participants, the degree of connection with the mentee, or both. Participant C explained:

> *I walked into the Starbucks on campus, excited to be paired with one of the football players. I am a girl and when he saw me, he only wanted to discuss hanging out. I had to figure out how to get this guy to follow our mentorship agreement without getting myself into a compromising position with him, especially because he regularly invited me to come to his room for sessions or would text me late at night to see what I was up to.*

Forming connections was not difficult, yet it was challenging in the context of peer mentorship. Participant E made the following point:

> *I had to mentor a person that I went to high school with. I started my first two years of college at the university. But they didn't. In fact, I didn't realize it was a former high school person that I knew until I saw their face. We talked about our town and our high school. It was perfect. But you know when I got into the mentor role, it felt like they didn't want to receive the information from me.*

This sentiment was expressed: "It's difficult to build relationships. Sometimes I wonder whether we were taught how to form relationships."

Theme Three: Imposter Syndrome

During the interviews, participants frequently conveyed self-doubt through personal narratives. This self-doubt was not due to inadequate preparation but emerged during practice implementation. Additionally, the requirement to report hours spent delivering services made it difficult for them to manage expectations and avoid feelings of failure. The ways participants expressed impostor emotions are detailed in Table 3.

A common thread of self-doubt emerged from the personal narratives shared by participants. While all participants expressed this feeling, two distinct modes of expression surfaced. Participants X, N, J, and C articulated their self-doubt with a sense of fixity, as seen in statements like, "I feel like I'm not good enough," suggesting they believed they inherently lacked the necessary qualities or skills to be effective mentors. In contrast, Participants D and E, while also expressing self-doubt; "I worry that I am not good enough", revealed an aspiration for growth and improvement, hinting at the possibility of change and a desire to become better mentors. These findings suggest that imposter syndrome manifested in two distinct forms: a static, fixed belief of inadequacy and a more dynamic perspective that acknowledged both self-doubt and the potential for growth. Overall, the findings highlight the challenges faced by participants, who serve as peer mentors to college transfer students at an HSI. These challenges are worth discussing due to their impact on transfer student success in postsecondary settings.

In the discussion section, we explain the importance of the findings and their relationship to the reviewed literature. We further consider the significant implications of our findings by formulating pragmatic recommendations that speak to both research methodology and the conceptualization of the experiences.

DISCUSSION

This study sought to explore the mentoring experiences of peer mentors and how those shared experiences can inform the preparation practices of mentors supporting transfer students. Thus, we want to accentuate our definition of peer mentoring as follows: the mutual peer mentor-mentee relationship in which the peer mentor, possesses adequate experience to support the mentee in their endeavors academically and psychosocially (especially for Black and/or transferred students at an HSI). We considered the need for a reasonable gap in experience and at least three of the following characteristics being valued: age, identity, culture, worthiness, competency, and willingness.

Through our findings, it is evident that peer mentors' experiences vary. The results indicated that while training was helpful, it did not adequately equip peer mentors to address the challenges associated with the relationship between themselves and their assigned mentees. The results of this study align with literature as participants reflected on how helpful training was at setting a foundation for peer mentoring practices and developing necessary soft skills, as demonstrated by researchers who pursued similar subject matters (Heirdsfield et al., 2008; Marshall et al., 2021; Moschetti et al., 2018; Rieske & Benjamin, 2015). In this study, Participant X was ill-

equipped to handle the dynamic between them and their mentee because of the age difference. Participant X struggled to maintain their position of authority of respect with his mentee, who was older and continued to refer to the peer mentor as "kiddo." In addition, the findings suggest complexities in relationship building, boundary setting, and managing emotions of peer mentors. Heirdsfield et al. (2018) described how frustration can lead to feelings of failure when they cannot establish a relationship with their mentee. In combination with feelings of failure, mentors can experience imposter syndrome, and in this study, participants had trouble managing the expectations of being a peer mentor and feelings of failure and self-doubt.

These findings are in line with research conducted by Marshall and colleagues (2021), where they emphasized the challenges of peer mentors including learning their role, relating to mentees, and getting their mentee engaged. According to the findings, a challenge peer mentors have is anxiety, lack of confidence, and negative impressions in their role as mentor and reports of the role being very time consuming. These feelings are attributed to the mentee not feeling like the relationship is beneficial for themselves, as we saw with participant N, the mentee's absences increased because the peer mentor did not have the information the mentee needed. Moreover, the findings reveal a pervasive ambiguity regarding the roles and expectations within the peer mentor-mentee dynamic. This is highlighted by the experience of participant C, where the mentee sought assistance beyond the traditional scope of mentorship, indicating a misalignment in expectations between mentors and mentees.

This study acknowledges limitations in the design and execution of the peer mentoring program under investigation and how it impacted the experiences of peer mentors, particularly in fostering the mutuality inherent to successful mentor-mentee relationships. A primary shortcoming arises from the method of pairing peer mentors and mentees, which was conducted without sufficient consideration of compatibility or background knowledge. Peer mentors were assigned mentees with minimal information beyond basic identification details, as exemplified by the experience of participant X. This lack of initial insight hindered the peer mentors' ability to fully comprehend and engage with the unique challenges faced by their mentees, such as those encountered by an international student, illustrating a disconnect due to unrelatable circumstances and lack of racial diversity.

CONCLUSION

It is important to reiterate the impact of existing Eurocentrism in all institutions, including HSIs (Ek et al., 2010; Núñez et al., 2015b), which can already cause students to feel disconnected and marginalized (Strayhorn, 2008). Most students with non-White backgrounds had a greater likelihood of enrolling in a two-year HSI with the intention to enroll in a 4-year HSI as a

transfer student, and researchers reported risk factors including attrition and prioritizing full-time employment and childbearing over full-time enrollment (Núñez et al., 2015a). Transferring comes with its own set of challenges including but not limited to, successful integration and distress of wellbeing. Peer mentoring was highlighted as one of the many ways to reduce these risk factors by increasing the students' social and academic capital (Strayhorn, 2018), especially for underrepresented groups (Wangrow et al., 2021). While there is a surplus of literature on peer mentoring and the benefits of being a mentee, there is a gap in the literature on the experiences of peer mentors. Our study explored those experiences and practices of peer mentors in an HSI serving non-traditional, transfer students.

IMPLICATIONS

The results of our study aligned with the handful of existing literature focusing on peer mentor experiences. Our findings include a poor sense of belonging, failure to successfully integrate transfer students at the HSI, and transfer students at risk of dropping out of college. These results, while alarming, have practical implications for peer mentoring programs that would benefit mentees, such as how to improve peer mentoring practices and relationships, especially for peer mentors. As the purpose of peer mentoring is to reduce attrition, increase sense of belonging, and integrate transfer students, the experiences from our participants made it clear that they were ill-equipped to handle the challenges of non-traditional transfer students that are not addressed in training. The intersections of gender, race/ethnicity, and age were apparent barriers for successful peer mentor-mentee relationships, thus having lower successful integration at the HSI. Additionally, the impact of these obstacles left peer mentors struggling with imposter syndrome and inadequacy. As the participants noted, training is helpful; however, they are not sufficient, especially when serving transfer students who fall out of the margins of a traditional college student at an HSI.

Recommendations for Mentorship Programming and Further Research

A recommendation for future research is to research and explore how culturally relevant practices shape the practices of peer mentors to develop various strategies to serve the specific needs of mentees (Garcia et al., 2021). It was evident in the study that some peer mentors were out of their comfort zone when they felt they could not provide accurate information or relatability to their mentees. Using the experiences of the peer mentors in our study, we strongly suggest some informality to be implemented in peer mentoring programs. This would help incorporate the mutual aspect of the relationship that is necessary. How can this be done? The group of peer mentors and mentees should be introduced in a roundtable format as well as on paper, which delineates their characteristics and experiences. Henceforth, both peer

mentors and mentees would select three individuals they believe would be a good match for them. This procedure acknowledges what all participants value in each other, an aspect that seems to be missing from the experiences of our participants. Another recommendation would include taking a survey at the end of training and the program that takes into consideration the experiences of the peer mentors for ways to improve the program.

We also recommend a wider range of diverse participants for future research, to examine a more diverse range of experiences with other peer mentors and their mentees and to better design peer mentoring training programs that includes a focus on relational connection between the peer mentoring pairs as it relates to our findings. Take notice that we focused solely on the account of the peer mentors in our study. Another direction for a future study could be to consider the experiences of the mentees at HSIs.

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