

# CMSI RESEARCH BRIEF

## Realizing Potential and Achieving Possibilities: The Value and Benefits of Mentoring at HSIs and HBCUs

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### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Miranda Febus is a recipient of the Villanova University Presidential Graduate Fellowship for Underrepresented Students and is a recent graduate of Villanova's Higher Education program in the Department of Education and Counseling. Her career ambitions include creating and fostering

higher education environments that welcome students from all backgrounds to assure underrepresented students feel safe and comfortable on campus. As an aspiring Chief Diversity Officer, she has a strong interest in cultivating learning and working environments that promote and sustain diversity, equity, and inclusion. Her research interests include the sense of belonging for underrepresented local students attending universities in their own neighborhoods that often have a stigma or reputation for being unsafe. Miranda was a part of the 2020 John Smartt Summer Scholars cohort. To learn more about the John Smartt Summer Scholars program, visit our website: <https://cmsi.gse.rutgers.edu/jsss-program>.

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

*Despite the misconception that minoritized students at Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs) may not experience similar struggles to their peers attending Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs), these students do face challenges at MSIs, such as experiencing microaggressions or not having adequate academic support (Bridges et al., 2008; Sanchez, 2019). Because these challenges are often overlooked due to the perceived benefits of MSIs, the importance of mentoring minoritized students at MSIs may also be overlooked. Therefore, this brief considers the value and benefits of mentoring for Latinx students at Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs) and Black students at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). Through a review of the academic, post-college, and personal benefits of student mentoring for Black and Latinx students at the MSIs, this brief will highlight the benefits of mentoring for students of color as they persist academically, search for a sense of belonging on campus, and seek guidance to overcome the distinct challenges related to their identities.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Although there is an abundance of research surrounding the importance of mentoring (Gallup, 2014; Gallup, 2018; Huerta & Fishman, 2014; Newman, 2016; Strayhorn & Saddler, 2009), less research has explored the importance of mentoring for students of color at Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs). While mentoring is undoubtedly important for students of color at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) where they may face isolation, mentoring is just as essential for these students in environments where they are the racial and ethnic majority (Kincey, 2007; Nance, 2019). Nance (2019, p. 3) maintains that minoritized students still need “extra support to navigate higher education at MSIs.”

Mentoring could be even more beneficial at MSIs, where students of color may have an easier time finding mentors from the same backgrounds as them. According to a Strada-Gallup alumni survey, “mentees seek mentors with similar experiences and backgrounds, and...minority students often seek mentors of the same race/ethnicity and find information more helpful when their mentor is of the same race/ethnicity” (Strada, 2018, p. 6). Particularly, at HBCUs, which employ the majority of the nation’s tenured Black faculty and confer a majority of their degrees to Black students, “HBCU faculty members still maintain a firm commitment to racial uplift through teaching and mentoring” (Gasman et al., 2006, para. 13). At HBCUs, 56.3 percent of faculty were Black as of 2015 (Esmieu, 2019; National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). Likewise, the availability of Latinx faculty at HSIs is critical for student mentoring (Contreras, 2017; Milem, 2003; Santos & Acevedo-Gil, 2013). At HSIs, 18.4 percent of faculty were of Latinx background as of 2015 (Esmieu, 2019; National Center for Education Statistics, 2018).

In this research brief, I will specifically explore the experiences of Latinx students at HSIs and Black students at HBCUs to answer the broad research question related to the value and benefits of student mentoring at MSIs. In addition, I will explore potential benefits of Latinx and Black students’ sense of belonging due to mentoring relationships at HSIs and HBCUs. I will also explore the various benefits of student mentoring for colleges and universities, higher education as an institution, and communities.

Lastly, I will provide recommendations and best practices for readers hoping to implement mentoring programs within their institutions and for college students looking to make the most of their college experience. I will end this research brief by providing some directions for future research.

## LATINX STUDENT MENTORING AT HSIs

HSIs are postsecondary education institutions that enroll at least 25 percent of undergraduate students who identify as Hispanic. In turn, the institution is eligible for federal discretionary funding to serve these students. The vast majority of HSIs were not initially founded with the idea of serving Latinx student populations specifically. However, in the 1980s, “leaders at the federal, state, and institutional levels recognized that a small set of institutions enrolled a large percentage of Latino students” and sought to provide these institutions with the means to increase access for Latinx students and improve the quality of education they were receiving (Santiago, 2006, p. 6). In Fall 2018, there were 539 HSIs, serving 3,167,698 students in total (Excelencia in Education, n.d.). With 1,442,110 Latinx students enrolled full-time at HSIs, these institutions accounted for 67 percent of all Latinx undergraduate student enrollment in Fall 2018 (Excelencia in Education, n.d.).

Generally, there are some challenges that Latinx students face at HSIs. For instance, Latinx students at HSIs face racial microaggressions from peers, staff, and faculty that contribute to hostile campus environments, particularly at emerging HSIs or HSIs with smaller numbers of Latinx enrollment (Sanchez, 2019). Also, Latinx students experience feelings of invisibility or as if they do not belong on campus, especially in light of physical and social segregation in spaces on campus, including very little interaction with their White peers (Sanchez, 2019). Fortunately, mentoring can provide several layers of support, including academic assistance, post-college and career guidance, and personal support, for these students to overcome any challenges or obstacles they may face at HSIs.

## Benefits of Mentoring Latinx Students at HSIs

### ACADEMIC

- Knowledge of Campus Resources
- Understanding Classwork
- Understanding Majors
- Earning Higher Grades
- Academic Persistence

### POST-COLLEGE

- Skill Development
- Interest and Confidence to Pursue Careers
- Career Awareness

### PERSONAL

- Provided Support
- Feelings of Being Cared For
- Notifications of Campus Events
- Connection to Ethnic Backgrounds

### Academic Benefits

Mentoring and peer mentoring in particular has proven to be tremendously valuable and beneficial for the academic success of Latinx students attending HSIs. In a study that compared 458 Latinx students with mentors and 86 Latinx students without mentors, Moschetti et al. (2018) found that peer mentors provided fellow students with resources, in addition to helping them understand their class materials, earn higher grades, and understand their academic majors. Further, in a study that sought to understand how 10 nontraditional Hispanic students described academic persistence, Arbelo-Marrero and Milacci (2018) found that students supported their academic persistence by forming peer and

mentor networks. Peers were able to demonstrate to their mentees that persistence was possible, in addition to providing them with valuable school policy information and campus resource knowledge (Arbelo-Marrero & Milacci, 2018).

### Post-College Benefits

Mentoring for Hispanic students at HSIs provides students with necessary and essential transferable skills and post-college guidance. Jin et al. (2019) evaluated the implementation of experiential learning and research mentoring within the Training in Environmental Research and Academic Success (TIERA) program at The University of Texas at El Paso and found that students, 80 percent of whom self-identified as Hispanic, developed professional, technical, and soft skills, in addition to a stronger interest in solving environmental issues and pursuing a STEM career. Also, although their sample size was not large enough to yield statistically significant results, Rodríguez Amaya et al. (2018) explored the impact of student demographic characteristics on their undergraduate research experiences through four constructs, including research experiences, mentoring experiences, awareness of research opportunities and activities, and perceptions on research, and found that mentors fostered confidence amongst their mentees for pursuing specific STEM careers and provided additional awareness of such careers.

### Personal Support

Research indicates that mentoring at HSIs also provides Latinx students with incredible personal support at college. Moschetti et al. (2018) found that students described their peer mentors as available and supportive, making them feel cared for at the university. Also contributing to campus connectedness, mentors were reported to have notified their mentees about campus events (Moschetti et al., 2018). Lastly, in light of personal support, mentoring at HSIs allows Hispanic students to connect with their ethnic backgrounds. Arbelo-Marrero and Milacci (2018) noted that students formed mentor networks with people who they identified with and engaged in these relationships within their cultural context. This engagement “increased their social capital and funds of knowledge” (Arbelo-Marrero & Milacci, 2018, p. 226). In other words, engaging in mentor networks with other Hispanic people allowed students to gain more networking connections and increase relevant skills.

Additionally, but not exclusively related to HSIs, Laden (1999) highlighted the Puente Project, a program implemented by California community colleges that emphasizes Latinx students' cultures and helps to socialize them to college through mentoring, counseling, and curriculum. Notably, Laden (1999, p. 72) found that mentoring programs that encourage students to explore and identify with their cultural backgrounds, such as the Puente Project, grant their students the advantage of a "stronger sense of ethnic identity." This advantage is crucial in the face of culture shock, which many underrepresented minorities may experience, even at MSIs, due to being historically marginalized from higher education as an institution.

## Summary

Overall, there are immense academic, career, and personal benefits of student mentoring at HSIs. For instance, mentored students have more higher career goals and more self-confidence (Laden, 1999). Also, mentored students have acknowledged the numerous benefits of mentoring, including additional academic assistance, mentors who they can approach and relate to especially in a peer mentoring program, additional emotional support, and advice for adjusting to and taking advantage of the college environment (Moschetti et al., 2018).

## BLACK STUDENT MENTORING AT HBCUS

HBCUs are institutions of higher education that were founded prior to 1964 with the intention of providing education to African American students, although any student of any racial and ethnic background may enroll. Between the end of the Civil War and the mid-1960s, HBCUs provided the only option for Black Americans to receive a higher education. The Higher Education Act of 1965 "established federal programs 'to overcome the effects of discriminatory treatment' by providing HBCUs with adequate resources and funds to strengthen the education of Black students in the United States" (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019a, para. 3). As of fall 2018, the U.S. had 101 HBCUs, which enrolled 223,163 Black students among 291,767 students in total (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.; National Center for Education Statistics, 2019b). Eighteen percent of Black undergraduate students receive their degrees from HBCUs (Center for Minority Serving Institutions, n.d.).

Similar to challenges that Hispanic students face at HSIs, Black students have also faced some obstacles at HBCUs. For example, it has been reported that Black students at HBCUs tend to be less satisfied overall with their college experiences than Black students at PWIs (Bridges et al., 2008). Also, first-year Black students at HBCUs reported their campus environments to be less supportive in light of academic support in comparison to Black students at PWIs (Bridges et al., 2008). Fortunately, more current data suggests that Black students feel supported at their HBCUs, especially by faculty (New, 2015). Mentoring, sometimes in the form of faculty support, can help to alleviate some of these issues that Black students at HBCUs face through academic assistance, post-college and career guidance, and personal support.

## Academic Benefits

Research has yielded evidence of the significant value and benefits of mentoring for Black college students' academic success at HBCUs. In a paper that described the North Carolina Health Careers Access Program, which prepares minority students for STEM and pre-health careers at an HBCU in North Carolina, Thompson-Rodgers et al. (2018) found that students are offered the opportunity to learn about test-taking skills, time management, stress management, how to study, and tutoring during formal staff-to-student mentoring. Mentors also ensure that students are maintaining their GPAs, attending classes, and using campus resources if necessary (Thompson-Rodgers et al., 2018). Students are able to participate in peer mentoring, in which a junior student assists a freshman with study skills (Thompson-Rodgers et al., 2018). In addition, the director of the program also mentors students by helping them to make positive academic choices (Thompson-Rodgers et al., 2018). Overall, Thompson-Rodgers et al. (2018) found that mentoring at HBCUs for student preparation of medical school admittance is essential because it prepares students for academic discipline and celebrates their accomplishments.

In an article that examined student mentoring by faculty, who assist students with navigating through to graduate school, Golden et al. (2017, p. 487) reported that faculty mentoring remains a "positive influence that assists students in advancing their educational pursuits." Golden et al. (2017) also found that mentoring is a helpful way to allow students to examine and overcome obstacles at HBCUs in order to make research

accomplishments and achieve post-graduate welfare. Furthermore, in a study conducted to determine if mentoring has an impact on the experiences of education doctoral students at HBCUs, Garrett (2006) reported that students found their mentors to be helpful in multiple ways. For instance, mentors were reported to assist with research, provide information regarding relevant research, and offer helpful feedback on student research, in addition to discussing program progress and soliciting student input related to teaching and research (Garrett, 2006).

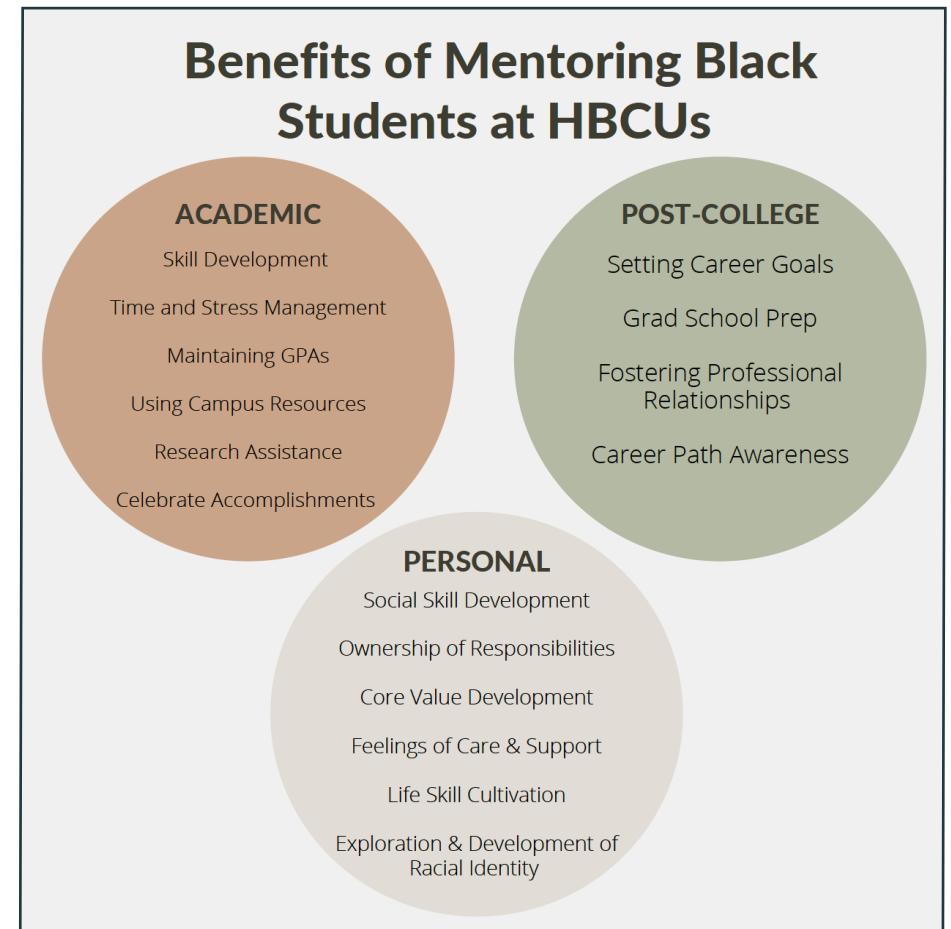
### Post-College Benefits

In addition, mentoring at HBCUs provides Black students with vital transferable skills and post-college guidance. Thompson-Rodgers et al. (2018) reported that student mentoring at HBCUs in preparation of medical school admittance is important because it prepares students for professional training in an environment surrounded by practitioners and scholars. In addition, junior peer mentors often help with setting career goals, whereas the director of the program assists with graduate school preparations in his mentoring role (Thompson-Rodgers et al., 2018). Mentoring is crucial at HBCUs to aid in professional development and help students on their way to medical and health careers (Thompson-Rodgers et al., 2018). Also, Golden et al. (2017, p. 489) report that, “Mentoring that occurs at HBCUs is a significant factor in equipping motivated students, regardless of their backgrounds, with the tools needed for success in the workforce and for advanced educational pursuits.” According to Garrett (2006), students reported that their mentor helped them foster professional relationships and gave them information regarding possible career paths.

### Personal Support

Mentoring at HBCUs also provides Black students with critical and significant personal support in college. Thompson-Rodgers et al. (2018, p. 25) stated that the objective of peer mentoring programs is to “provide guidance and positive influences to first-year students.”

Junior mentors assist in the personal growth of their mentees, help improve their social skills, and listen to their problems and offer solutions, often becoming friends in addition to their positions as role models (Thompson-Rodgers et al., 2018). In their mentor role, the director



encourages students to own their responsibilities, develop core values, appreciate diversity and good peer relationships, and cultivate life skills (Thompson-Rodgers et al., 2018). Also, Garrett (2006) reported that mentors cared about their mentees and provided them with personal support. Additionally, mentors respected their mentees’ ideas, advocated for their mentees, “were sensitive to their needs, and held their best interest at heart” (Garrett, 2006, p. 324).

Further, HBCUs provide opportunities for Black students to explore and develop their racial identity, which is further encouraged by mentors. Exploring student and staff reflections of their diversity and inclusion

experiences at an HBCU, Greenfield et al. (2015) discuss how such experiences contributed to racial and ethnic identity development. “As HBCUs celebrate the spirit of a shared cultural identity, the notion of highlighting diversity within the Black community offers an exciting and enriching opportunity for students to better understand the contours and unlimited possibilities of identity” (Greenfield et al., 2015, p. 45). Mentors can encourage students to explore new aspects of their identity while in college in order to grow personally, as shared by the narrative of one participant (Greenfield et al., 2015, p.44): “When I first left Seattle for [my HBCU], a mentor said to me, ‘It’s time to leave the nest and let those wings grow.’ My wings have definitely grown, and it’s a direct result of being away from home, being in the South, and most importantly being at an HBCU that allowed me to grow and find for myself who I truly am.”

## Summary

Overall, there are great academic, career, and personal benefits of student mentoring at HBCUs. For instance, mentored students benefitted from increased self-confidence, more positive attitudes, the development of practical skills, clearer views of their futures, more focus on their career goals, stronger chances of applying to medical and professional school, and increased chances of employability (Thompson-Rodgers et al., 2018). Mentored students also benefited from developing the capability to realize their potential and achieve their possibilities (Golden et al., 2017).

## OVERALL STUDENT SENSE OF BELONGING

Research indicates that students feel a stronger sense of belonging to their institutions when they have mentors. According to Moschetti et al. (2018, p. 383), students found that their “peer mentors helped them feel more connected to the university.” Latinx students, who had mentors, reported feeling more integrated into the university community, feeling like they played an active part within the university, feeling positively connected to their university, and having someone they could rely on for emotional and academic support than students without mentors (Moschetti et al., 2018). In addition, according to Arbelo-Marrero & Milacci (2018, p. 228), “Connecting Hispanic college students with Hispanic peer mentors has the potential to create a greater sense of belonging for students on their campuses and helps them to become more familiar with their

surroundings, especially for first generation and at-risk college students.” At Howard University, an HBCU where undergraduate students in the pre-medical program are “mentored by medical school faculty and students on a consistent basis,” a sense of belonging and confidence was built through this prompt connection with the professional community (Howard University, 2017; Thompson-Rodgers et al., 2018, p. 21). In addition, Levon Esters, director of the Mentoring at Purdue program at Purdue University, discussed the ways mentoring can help provide a sense of belonging for Black students at HBCUs (L. Esters, personal communication, August 11, 2020). Although Black students may attend HBCUs for the purpose of being in a space where they belong, he noted, students sometimes may still have trouble developing a sense of belonging quickly enough to thrive and succeed.

## Additional Benefits of Mentoring Latinx Students at HSIs and Black Students at HBCUs

### SENSE OF BELONGING

- Integration into University Community
- Playing a Role in the Community
- Feeling Connected
- Connection with Professional Community

### HIGHER EDUCATION

- Establishment of Mentoring Programs
- Academic Retention
- Graduation Persistence
- Pursuit of Graduate School

### SOCIETY

- Strengthening Bonds between Town & Gown
- Persistence in STEM Fields
- Becoming Humanities Professors
- Support on the Path to Becoming Educators
- Representation of Leaders of Color



In these cases, “having someone provide mentorship, some advice, those sorts of things, is going to be invaluable to a student,” said Esters.

## INHERENT BENEFITS TO INSTITUTIONS

The benefits of mentoring Latinx students and Black students extends to colleges and universities as well. Laden (1999) noted that mentored students go on to establish mentoring programs at other colleges and universities. Some community college Puente Project students who transferred to a four-year institution established mentoring at their university to continue helping students who also wanted to transfer out of community college to their four-year institution (Laden, 1999). Jin et al. (2019) also found that during the time the learning experience and research mentoring program was implemented, retention rates at the university nearly doubled, which reflects well on the university as a whole.

Golden et al. (2017) also agreed that mentoring aids in student retention rates as well as graduation rates. Moreover, mentoring benefits higher education as a whole. Jin et al. (2019) found that mentored students were more likely to pursue graduate school, which bodes well for the permanence of higher education, especially in cases where minority students pursue advanced degrees.

## COMMUNITIES AND SOCIETY

There are also great benefits to communities and society where higher education mentoring is established. Laden (1999) found mentored students in her study pursued the task of strengthening bonds between their higher education institutions and local businesses by hosting a community-building breakfast for members of the college and the community. In addition, as Jin et al. (2019) and Rodríguez Amaya et al. (2018) show, mentoring improves Hispanic students’ persistence within STEM fields, leading to more Latinx representation within the sciences, technology, engineering, and mathematics areas. In a research brief exploring the contributions of HBCUs to the STEM workforce, Gasman and Nguyen (2016) found that the environment of HBCUs, which encourages students to support one another, is conducive to the promotion of STEM degree attainment through peer mentoring. Again, mentoring to support Black and Latinx students on their paths to working in STEM fields helps them to succeed and leads to more representation in these fields.

Also, Mawhinney and Petchauer (2018) discuss the role of mentoring beyond STEM fields, particularly for the education of Black teachers at HBCUs: “Teacher education programs at HBCUs have worked diligently to institute formal mentorship programs in order to support education majors” (Mawhinney & Petchauer, 2018, p. 383). Discussing the form of mentoring called “other parenting,” in which mentors essentially take on familial responsibilities, Mawhinney and Petchauer (2018, p. 390) demonstrate how both formal and informal mentoring supports students on their path towards becoming teachers, in addition to teaching them how to navigate challenges such as “racist colleagues and oppressive institutional structures.” Martinez (2018) discussed the HSI Pathways to the Professoriate Program, which provides Latinx scholars the support they need to persist through graduate school and become professors

within the humanities. Such support includes “faculty and graduate student mentorship, a focus on the graduate school application process, opportunities to conduct and present research, funding for research and graduate school applications and dedicated staff to support students within the program” (Martinez, 2018, p. 3). Without such mentorship to support these students on their paths to becoming educators, Black and Latinx children may not see the representation vital for them to believe they can achieve similar goals.

## CONCLUSION

Ultimately, mentoring at HSIs and HBCUs has vast benefits for many constituents of the higher education community. For Latinx and Black students, mentoring offers many opportunities to thrive academically, prepare for life post-graduation, and grow personally. These students also often benefit from developing stronger cultural ties or racial identities. Also, mentoring can provide students with a greater sense of belonging to their university community. Mentoring benefits higher education by encouraging students to remain in their institutions in pursuit of degrees, to pursue advanced degrees, and to establish peer mentoring programs. Further, mentoring benefits communities in the establishment of strong ties between colleges and the towns they are a part of. Lastly, mentoring of Latinx and Black students benefits society as a whole by leading to more minority representation in various fields from STEM to the humanities. With more students graduating into important roles in society, young minoritized children can know that they are capable of achieving their potential, too.

I can personally attest to the great value of mentoring for minoritized students. As an Afro-Latina master’s student with a student affairs professional mentor in my university, I have enjoyed a wonderful year of mentorship and benefited greatly from this relationship in terms of making many connections, earning great experience, and receiving extra support in my academic work.

As an undergraduate commuter student, I seamlessly transitioned into higher education with the help of my wonderful upperclassman peer mentor. The following year, I followed in my mentor’s footsteps and took



on the most meaningful task of inviting incoming commuter freshmen into the world of college. To this day, I am still great friends with the mentors I had, my fellow peer mentors, and my mentees.

## PRACTICAL RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Students who want to make the most out of their college experiences should seek the resources of a mentor. Students should be prepared to find mentors even before they step foot on campus (Lambert, 2018). Mentors can challenge students and provide guidance and support to help them grow and succeed in college (Lambert, 2018).
2. Mentors should ensure that they are meeting the needs of their mentees by helping them establish and realize post-graduate plans and take the time to know their mentees outside of the academic sphere (Garrett, 2006). Many students of color have expressed dismay that their mentors do not have a personal interest in their development or that they use their mentees as a source of unpaid labor (Garrett, 2006).

Mentors should establish a working mentor-mentee relationship in which both parties' benefit.

3. Colleges and universities can increase the likelihood of students of color finding mentors by investing in the diversity of their faculty (Lambert, 2018). Because some students of color may have a harder time seeking the resources of a mentor (Lambert, 2018), faculty diversity can ensure that students of color can find professors who look like them to serve as mentors and who they can trust to guide them through college.

4. Colleges and universities looking to implement mentoring programs should seek the help of their alumni (Busteed, 2014). Alumni can provide a rich source of mentors who have already navigated a particular institutional environment. Alumni of color can be particularly helpful for students of color in navigating challenging situations or offering helpful advice.

5. Colleges and universities should develop mentoring programs and initiatives that discuss issues relevant to students of color (L. Esters, personal communication, August 11, 2020). Students can feel more comfortable when they openly discuss issues that they experience on a daily basis. Intersecting these issues with mentoring can encourage students to go to their mentors when they run into obstacles and seek advice for overcoming these obstacles.

of racial injustice and police brutality experienced by the Black community this summer and the ongoing fight for DACA recipients, Black and Latinx students may need additional support as they navigate through college against a backdrop of injustice.

## RESEARCH RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Future research might consider the role of mentoring in an online setting given the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has removed the in-person element of many institutions. Students may need additional support as college shifts to online platforms and they struggle to adjust.

2. Future research should examine the value of online mentoring in comparison to in-person mentoring and absence of mentoring. Online mentoring can prove to be very valuable in terms of saving time by meeting for quick weekly Zoom chats or exchanging occasional supportive emails.

3. Future research might consider the impact of mentoring in supporting students of color as they combat challenges of social justice. With the rise

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