

EDUCATION

Project MALES: Understanding the Impact of a Decade of Mentoring

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Abstract

Project MALES is a research-based mentoring program at the University of Texas at Austin. The purpose of this study is to share the outcomes of an evaluative study that seeks to understand the impact that mentoring has had on the educational attainment of mentors of color throughout the last decade. This study shares the voices of alumni of the program and highlights how the program has developed to serve their needs towards graduation.

Introduction

Project MALES (Mentoring to Achieve Latino Educational Success) is a multi-faceted research and mentoring initiative founded in 2010 at the University of Texas at Austin (Saenz et al., 2015). Project MALES encompasses three interrelated initiatives with a national, state, and local impact. Nationally, it oversees an ongoing research agenda focused on understanding the experiences of Latino males across the education pipeline. Statewide, it convenes a P-16 Consortium, Texas Educational Consortium for Male Students of Color, composed of school districts, community colleges, and four-year institutions, guided by the need for educational success of male students of color in six major urban areas in Texas. Locally, the Project MALES Student Mentoring Program serves as a state-wide model by connecting middle and high school males of color at school districts across the Central Texas community with UT Austin undergraduate and graduate student mentors.

As part of a wide-reaching research agenda, this study uses exploratory qualitative methodology to understand the experience of over 300 mentors over the last decade. We use a case study design (Yin, 2018) that encapsulates the experiences of mentors, majority Hispanic, at an emerging Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI). Through the gathering of data through individual interviews and focus groups, we will share the findings through the frameworks of Hispanic servingness (Garcia et al., 2019) and Critical Mentoring (Weiston-Serdan, 2017). Our study reveals three emerging findings. The first findings suggest that engaging in culturally relevant training can have an impact on the critical consciousness of student mentors. The second finding suggests that students who engage as mentors engaged in community work as a development of their civic mindedness. Our last finding suggests how programs like Project MALES can enhance a students' sense of belonging, especially at large, emerging, HSIs. Overall, our findings suggest the voiced need by students for more culturally inclusive programming.

Literature Review

At its core, the Project MALES Student Mentoring Program empowers its undergraduate mentors through programming grounded in practices that cultivate a sense of belonging, a heart of service, and the humanization of their experiences within a newly minted Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI). Connecting the work to research, studies on Mentoring within K-12 have explored how similar practices have an impact on the humanization of students through their mentoring (Watson et al., 2016), resulting in positive outcomes (Jackson et al., 2014). However, there is a dearth of research that has explored the internal development of mentors, their agency, and the outcomes of participating in a mentoring program as an undergraduate student. Emerging studies have centered on the experiences of mentors and revealed how their involvement with mentoring programs has helped their development, shaped their leadership skills, and positioned them to be community change agents (Brooms et al., 2018). However, there continues to exist a gap in the literature capturing the experiences of mentors, particularly those of first-generation, low-income, and of historically marginalized backgrounds. In consideration of the few studies that examine the development of undergraduate mentors of color, we aim to add to the literature that captures the experiences from their youth mentoring while enrolled at a four-year HSI with historically predominantly white serving roots. This study examines the impact of mentoring programs, such as Project MALES, particularly around the personal development of its undergraduate mentors over the past decade through their youth mentoring experiences and success at the University of Texas at Austin to further inspire the emergence of similar mentoring models and scholarship.

Conceptual Framework/Theoretical Framework

We use Garcia and colleagues' (2019) Conceptual Framework for Understanding "Servingness" in Hispanic-Serving Institutions to understand how Latinxs are being served through these institutional programs. Garcia and colleagues' (2019) conceptualize servingness as (1) outcomes, (2) experiences, (3) internal organizational dimensions, and (4) external influences. We borrow its data collection strategy for understanding how an emerging HSI is serving the educational needs of Latinxs students and how programming within this institution is enhancing academic and nonacademic outcomes for this population of minority students. Moreover, this framework is used to explore undergraduate education, which Garcia and colleagues' (2019) argue could be further diversified.

This model challenges traditional approaches for measuring success, often grounded in White Eurocentric cultural norms, which typically involve metrics such as admission's tests, retention, and graduation rates, and other institutionalized measures (Garcia, 2018; Garcia et al., 2019). As such, this theoretical framework suggests that there are other ways for examining how HSIs serve their students while promoting an organizational culture that is inclusive of Latinx students and students from and with other marginalized identities. Garcia's approach includes but is not limited to considering the availability of culturally relevant student organizations, race and ethnic conscious curriculum, faculty of color (particularly Latinx faculty), and institutional commitment to equity and inclusion, which we use to examine the programmatic factors of the Project MALES Mentoring Program.

Expanding on Garcia and colleagues' (2019) framework, this study takes a step further by looking at how intentional structuring of programs can have a direct impact on servingness and the experiences of Latinx/a/o students. Moreover, it adds to the experiences and knowledge of the people and programs at HSIs and how they are not only shaping the institutional identity (Garcia et al., 2019) but also what it means to serve Latinx students. Lastly, we expand servingness by providing an example of how institutions and institutional programming can serve their Latinx student population while also expanding their commitment to the local community and highlight the impacts that these service-oriented practices have on students.

Lastly, we also use Weiston-Serdan's (2017) Critical Mentoring to examine and understand decades-worth of mentoring experiences and development of our undergraduate mentors through Project MALES. Weiston-Serdan's (2017) framework of Critical Mentoring is conceptualized based on intersectionality, culturally relevant practices, and youth empowerment. Critical Mentoring is about supporting youth empowerment through critical approaches to identity development and restorative practices and gaining work and school experiences in legitimate ways. Ultimately, Critical Mentoring pushes forward a critical consciousness toward helping individuals identify and work as a collective towards transformation through mentoring spaces (Weiston-Serdan, 2017). Therefore, youth mentoring experiences play a vital role in helping mentors and mentees transform communities and society at large. We aim to expand on the Critical Mentoring framework by looking into the development of mentors who have engaged with youth and engaged with culturally relevant and critical mentoring curriculum.

Methodology

This study employs a case study methodology. Case studies allow us to investigate "a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context" (p. Yin, 1994, p. 13). For this inquiry, we are interested in understanding how participation in a mentorship program for boys and young men of color influences the experiences of undergraduate students of color attending a Predominantly White Institution (PWI), which as of last year was designated a Hispanic Serving Institution. We were intentional in capturing their experiences with regard to their sense of belonging, and civic engagement. Moreover, case studies allow researchers to bound their inquiries based on a particular interest and context (Merriam, 1998). This study was bounded by the higher education institution which this study takes place at, and the participants needed to identify as current or former mentors in the Project MALES Student Mentoring program who identify as BIPOC and as undergraduate students at the time of serving as a mentor.

Data collection consisted of a survey questionnaire and interviews. The primary purpose of the survey tool was to capture demographic data and gauge mentors' initial perceptions of the impact from their participation in the Project MALES Student Mentoring Program. The survey tool was distributed to current and former mentors which will yield data representing a decade's worth of mentorship. Participants who responded to the survey were able to opt-in to participate in an interview that deeply explored their experiences as mentors in the program. As part of our data collection strategy, semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants in the Spring of 2022 using a virtual platform. Conducting interviews virtually allowed for recording of video and voice for data collection and transcription purposes. Their interviews were recorded,

transcribed verbatim, and coded using a deductive approach. Initial codes included a sense of belonging, civic engagement, academic and professional aspirations. Inductive codes were also found as the transcripts were coded.

Preliminary Findings

Critical Consciousness

A common theme that emerged from the interviews was the sharing of the development of students' critical consciousness through their participation. When sharing about their experience in one of the aspects of their involvement that helped beyond their participation serving as a mentor, one of the participants shared: "Helping us identify better who we are as people, and I think because of the [mentoring training] course and learning how people think differently... helps me better myself as a person and contribute to society".

Other participants shared how engaging in mentoring in work made them realize the importance of understanding different challenges for others from marginalized communities and themselves. For example, a second participant shared: "Project MALES equipped us with understanding. Okay [mentees] are in East Austin, they're going through something, the education pipeline".

These reflections demonstrate how programs help develop awareness in terms of critical issues, whether in educational settings, the community, society, or beyond. Many of the participants shared how engaging in topics of mentoring changed their perspective and even their actions and striving to be understanding of the challenges of themselves and others.

Civic Mindedness

Participants shared how their engagement as mentors has influenced their personal and professional aspirations that reflect a civic mindedness through a commitment to impacting their communities in various ways. When reflecting on how Project MALES has influenced his career goals and aspirations, one participant explained how his experiences as a mentor have led him to leadership opportunities along with a sense of responsibility for being an active participant in the community after graduating. He shared:

Being a leader and touching on having a heart of service. Even post-college, it reminds me that, despite having work, despite having life happen, I always remind myself that I want to give back to wherever, whatever community I'm in somehow, make an impact for, not just take but give back.

Another participant reflected on his desire to translate his experiences as a mentor into his professional aspirations. His youth mentoring experiences made him realize the importance of the work he was engaging in and influenced his future professional aspirations to continue working with youth within schools, and to further the Project MALES mission post-college. They share: "The work that we do and the importance of it motivates me because my goal is always to be a teacher, to be a reflection to these young kids who don't have somebody to look up to".

Considering both of these participant responses, experiences with mentorship may contribute to how undergraduate students conceptualize their own roles and responsibilities as civic actors and community members. This finding highlights the ways in which mentors are conceptualizing the impact of mentoring internally, the significance of critical mentoring, and how their experiences with Project MALES influence the ways that mentors extend this work beyond their college careers.

Sense of Belonging

Participants discussed how the mentoring program helped them establish a community on-campus, which allowed them to foster a sense of belonging. This holds specific implications for students of color at a predominantly white institution (PWI). For example, one participant described experiencing imposter syndrome—a phenomenon commonly experienced by marginalized students within higher education institutions (Holden, et.al., 2021).

Coming into college...you can feel a little bit of anxiety, nervous, you get the imposter syndrome because we feel we don't belong and Project MALES gives people that space, to give students a space of belonging and through the meetings, through the discourse you learn things and even going to sites at these schools...I think Project MALES and the experience I had with them gave me a confidence boost...you feel a sense of purpose and, as you navigate the

campus, at least for me, I felt a confidence boost because I am not so confident within myself, so with Project MALES, they gave me that space of one, sense of belonging and two, built my confidence in who I am as a person.

Creating this sense of belonging through the Project Males mentorship program within the context of an emerging HSI with historically predominantly white serving roots was echoed by our second participant, who shared how his racialized presence within the institution directly informed his feelings of isolation on campus. In his own words:

I come from South Texas, the Valley to where we're 99% Hispanic, and coming to an institution...where it's predominantly white, I felt my color, I felt my skin. And before Project MALES, there wasn't a place where I felt like I belonged. And finding Project MALES and staying in contact with all these people, people who look like me, people who speak like me, really...certified that I belong here, but reassured me that I am here for a reason, that I can do it.

While both participants expressed feelings of discomfort and disconnection from their own campus, the Project MALES Student Mentoring Program provided a space where they could create an on-campus community by connecting with other undergraduate students along with graduate students, many of whom reflected the ethnic and cultural backgrounds of our participants. Additionally, both participants connected their experiences with having an on-campus community with the mentoring program to support their academic progress throughout their undergraduate journeys. These reflections underscore the need to further examine and magnify successful mentoring models that not only provide an on-campus community for undergraduate students but foster a sense of belonging for marginalized students in particular.

Significance of the Study

The study lends insight and a unique opportunity in understanding the educational success, youth mentoring experiences, and personal development of undergraduate mentors in decades worth of mentoring. Through our study findings, it is clear our undergraduate mentors engage in transformative youth mentoring experiences that bring forth reflections of educational success and personal development. Specifically, a development of critical consciousness and civic-mindedness are two themes emergent from our initial interviews. Through their mentoring experiences, participants indicated that their involvement with Project MALES fostered and cultivated a community within the institution. Additionally, their engagement as mentors influenced their personal and professional aspirations. Mentors were found to continue being leaders not only throughout their educational experience at the institution but outside and within their communities. Therefore, it is pivotal to continue to investigate and understand the educational success and positive personal development of Project MALES mentors to further inspire similar mentoring models and expand on existing mentoring literature.

Suggestions for Practice and Research

Our study expands on the knowledgebase of critically grounded mentoring programs and the impact that these programs can have on students of color who serve as mentors at large, HSI emerging institutions. The findings of this study suggest that institutions can help their students of color in multiple capacities. Foremost, these institutions can develop the personal and professional identities of their students of color by engaging them with culturally validating and community focused programs which can help not only their collegiate success but the trajectory of their professional lives. Moreover, our studies suggest that these types of programs are being sought out by students of color as many are embarking in new spaces that may not reflect their home towns or backgrounds. Lastly, our study suggests that mentoring programs can be directed to have an impact not only on the mentees, but all participants including mentors which historically have not been part of the primary foci.

Our study also brings suggestions for further research. As mentioned, there is still a growing need to further explore the experiences of mentoring and the benefits of serving as a mentor. This study serves as a fundamental study to further explore how mentoring can benefit mentors and their academic and interpersonal development and provide opportunities to learn skills that can serve post-degree attainment. Ultimately, there is still more research that needs to be conducted focusing on programs at HSIs that are aiming to support students intergenerationally.

Conclusion

This study encapsulates the experiences of a sample of Project MALES mentors and their voices. The experiences of these students highlight the importance of Hispanic Serving Institutions to implement programming that is grounded in community,

cultural validation, and empowerment through service. Additionally, it sheds light into the often-overlooked experiences of mentors and how mentoring is beneficial for not just the mentees but others involved as well. Overall, this study strives to demonstrate how crucial mentoring can be for students of color and how programs can serve as models to other institutions in practice and in research.

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