RURAL LEARNER SUCCESS DATA NOTE SERIES

Critical Mentorship Strategies for Supporting Rural Community College Students

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Mentoring is a high-impact strategy for supporting student success and is particularly important for rural community college students, who often face heightened structural and systemic inequities, highlighting the need for mentorship approaches tailored to their unique needs and strengths. This data note analyzes the descriptions of 587 mentorship programs at rural-serving community colleges, and highlights practices described at 44 mentoring-focused programs that can help address the specific needs of their students by applying critical mentorship approaches. We identify two key practices: Building Empowering and Inclusive Mentorship Spaces, which foster student reflection, agency, and advocacy to challenge power structures, and Cultural Identity and Community Engagement, which highlights cultural heritage, identity, and community partnerships to support student success. We pose reflection questions for practitioners applying these key practices, and invite readers to share practical insights, challenges, or strategies that have worked in their mentorship program(s) on our Rural Learner Success OER Commons platform.

INTRODUCTION

Rural-serving community colleges play a critical role in providing access to higher education for marginalized and underserved populations (Crisp, 2010), creating opportunities for students who might otherwise be excluded due to geographic, socioeconomic, or cultural barriers. While rural-serving colleges are uniquely positioned to address the diverse needs of their communities, they also face significant challenges, including limited resources due to systemic underfunding and entrenched institutional inequities, as well as a student population whose needs may differ from those of their urban counterparts (Rush-Marlowe, 2021). These challenges highlight the need for rural-serving community colleges to implement geographically and culturally relevant practices to support rural student success effectively.

Mentorship has been recognized as an important strategy for supporting student success, particularly for racially minoritized students and those from low-income backgrounds (Apriceno et al., 2020; Brooms & Davis, 2017; Estrada et al., 2018). Additionally, it has been highlighted as an essential tool for promoting success in rural educational settings (Brandehoff, 2023; Nelson, 2019; Sims & Ferrare, 2021). Effective mentorship promotes retention and persistence by fostering a sense of belonging and academic engagement (Crisp, 2010; Kezar et al., 2023). However, traditional mentorship models, often designed with urban contexts in mind, may fail to address the unique spatial and systemic barriers rural students face. These models, which focus on academic support, may overlook the structural inequities that affect rural students and reinforce hierarchical power dynamics and neoliberal values like competition and individualism (Hillman, 2016). Without intentional

efforts to challenge these oppressive structures, mentorship programs risk being ineffective or even perpetuating harm (Albright et al., 2017; Hillman, 2016). This critique is particularly relevant for rural community college students, a demographic that remains underexplored in mentorship research.

In contrast, a critical mentorship approach actively challenges the status quo by addressing long standing systemic barriers and rejecting deficit-based narratives about marginalized youth. It seeks to move beyond transactional relationships, emphasizing intentionality, reciprocal relationships, and holistic student development (Liou et al., 2016). This approach centers on empowerment, equity, and inclusivity, working to dismantle, rather than reinforce, oppressive systems (Albright et al., 2017; Brooms et al., 2021; Sánchez et al., 2021). Weiston-Serdan (2017) further argues that critical mentorship practices reject the expectation that students conform to dominant ideologies and prioritize liberatory processes that foster critical consciousness and drive collective transformation.

This data note, grounded in a critical mentorship framework, examines how mentorship programs at rural-serving community colleges integrate principles such as systemic awareness, cultural relevance, identity, intersectionality, and empowerment. Through this lens, we highlight how these programs can equip students to succeed while addressing the broader inequities within higher education. Additionally, we offer reflective questions throughout this data note to encourage practitioners to develop strategies that specifically meet the unique needs of rural students.

Reflection: What are 1-2 barriers rural students face at your institution in achieving their educational goals, and how are mentors equipped to address these challenges?

METHODS

We searched via web scraping for mentoring across 444 rural-serving public two-year institutions[1] and found 587 programs across 301 rural public two-year colleges. We analyzed these descriptions and identified 105 that focused on mentorship as a central function rather than mentorship being one of several secondary foci.

We further analyzed the descriptions of these 105 programs line by line to identify key elements of critical mentorship (Weiston & Serdan, 2017; York, 2023). Then, we looked for patterns and themes that emerged from the data (Burkholder et al., 2019; Elliott, 2018). This process led us to identify 44 programs with a strong mentoring focus that included elements of critical mentoring. A large proportion of these programs were located in the Southeastern region of the United States. In addition to other factors, this was largely because the plurality of these programs were part of North Carolina's Minority Male Success Initiative (MMSI).

CRITICAL MENTORSHIP PRACTICES FOR RURAL COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS

Addressing the systemic barriers rural students face requires mentorship approaches that extend beyond traditional support structures. For rural-serving community colleges, a critical mentorship framework can acknowledge the structural inequities that disproportionately impact marginalized communities (Albright et al., 2017; Brooms et al., 2021). By incorporating culturally relevant, inclusive, and context-specific strategies, critical mentorship practices have the potential to challenge and dismantle oppressive systems (Albright et al., 2017; Brooms et al., 2021; Figueroa & Rodriguez, 2015; Liou et al., 2016; Sotto-Santiago et al., 2023; Watson et al., 2016) that often limit opportunities for rural students. Through these

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[1] The Rural Serving Index (RSI) is a metric developed by the Alliance for Research and Regional College (ARRC) to identify rural-serving institutions. To learn more about how this metric was developed and is used, please visit: https://www.regionalcolleges.org/project/ruralserving

approaches, rural-serving community colleges could contribute to creating more equitable educational experiences, providing students with tools to engage with and confront the challenges they encounter within higher education.

The following mentorship practices, drawn from the descriptions of programs from various rural-serving community colleges across the nation, illustrate how these principles can be applied. As practitioners explore these strategies, we encourage them to reflect on how they might be adapted within their institution or program.

Mentorship Practice 1: Building Empowering and Inclusive Mentorship Spaces

To counteract narratives that frame rural and community college students as academically or culturally deficient and in need of transformation to assimilate and be useful to existing power structures, programs we found applied these critical mentorship key practices:

1. **Time to analyze salient structures:** Cultivating spaces where mentees can identify and critically reflect on the origin and impact of existing power structures and how to address them personally and collectively.

2. **Asset-based approaches:** The mentor relationship emphasizes mentee strengths and assets while challenging deficit-based approaches and terminology.

3. **Fostering functional agency and advocacy:** Critical mentors further incorporate capacity-building, leadership, and advocacy opportunities that empower mentees to develop the skills and networks needed to advocate for themselves and meet their self-determined goals while challenging systemic injustice where possible. This approach shifts the power dynamic from one in which the institution is the sole agent compelling students to conform to one in which students themselves actively guide

their experiences and, at times, influence and transform the institution's structures.

Reflection: How can your mentorship program(s) provide students with opportunities to lead and advocate for their communities?

Mentorship Practice 2: Cultural Identity and Community Engagement in Mentorship

Programs that emphasize critical mentorship center the breadth and distinctiveness of rural students' identities. They reflect their cultural contexts and lived experiences while building on their strengths to navigate intersectional needs and challenges. Key practices that facilitate these functions include:

1. **Actively cultivating relevant participatory activities:** Collaborating with local cultural organizations to co-design mentorship activities that reflect students' cultural contexts. This approach contrasts with passively consuming culture-as-a-commodity by simply taking mentees to visit museums or attend events that are framed as cultural enrichment but are too generic or tangential to foster deep engagement or learning.

2. **Embracing cultural heritage and strength:** Encouraging students to explore and take pride in their cultural backgrounds, using heritage as a strength in their academic and personal growth. Research shows that for minoritized students, bolstering rather than replacing their heritage buffers them from the destructive and discouraging effects of cultural mismatch, leading to increased persistence and degree completion (Waterman, 2019).

3. **Building community partnerships:** Building partnerships with local community members to foster connections and involvement between students and their community. Community college students are often more likely to plan to remain in their communities after they accomplish their educational goals. For such

students, these connections can endure well beyond their time in the institution, impacting their outcomes and that of their community members. For example, one program partnered with a cultural center that serves a concentrated minoritized population in the community, along with employers and workforce development boards for a particular vocation. They developed a purpose-built mentoring program, modified the college's curriculum, and established career pathways, both for and with the minoritized community.

4. **Acknowledging students' identities:** Tailoring supports to specific identities and acknowledging intersectional needs (e.g., how race, ethnicity, gender, economic status, sexuality each influence the experience of the other aspects of identity) in program design and mentorship. For example, we identified existing programs at rural-serving community colleges that specifically target populations such as single parents, women of color, and men of color.

5. **Providing specific supports:** Offering resources that are responsive to the specific needs of student populations at their institution (e.g., providing childcare support and financial aid guidance) and connecting students to institutional, governmental, and community resources are essential. When connecting students to these resources, critical mentors find that making the introduction between the resource provider and the student increases the probability of engagement.

Reflection: How can mentorship programs at your institution incorporate local cultural organizations or community partnerships into their mentorship design?

REFLECTIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

While mentorship theory and recommendations for practice are often developed with university students at primarily white institutions, community college student populations are much more likely to include students from racially minoritized, low-income, and first-generation backgrounds, and both enroll in courses of study and thus require mentorship models that significantly depart from university offerings. Rather than implementing hierarchical models designed to usher along (or filter students from) a commonly prescribed trajectory based on emulating their mentor, rural-serving community college students are better served by education and mentorship led by each student's individual goals and experiences. Further, when a mentee's educational experience prevents them from their objectives or seeks to overwrite their identity, their mentorship experience can buffer from and help rectify these influences.

Mentorship must become a part of a cultural shift within institutions, aiming to address systemic barriers and create more equitable educational spaces where rural-serving community college students can thrive. In this data note, we highlight some examples of critical mentoring in rural-serving spaces, but there is a critical need to expand these practices across more rural-serving institutions. Building on these examples, we can implement more effective mentorship practices to better serve rural community college students and support their success. To assess and refine current mentorship practices, consider the following key strategies to ensure your program is inclusive, responsive, and impactful for rural students:

- Conduct a needs assessment to understand the specific challenges rural students face (e.g., transportation, childcare, lack of internet access) and consider ways that mentorship can help address these challenges.

- Provide mentors with training in trauma-informed care and cultural sensitivity to ensure they can build trust, validate student identities and experiences, and provide emotional and academic support (Monjaras-Gaytan et. al., 2021).

- Integrate mentorship activities that honor

students' cultural heritage and engage them with local organizations and community resources.

- Provide students with opportunities to develop leadership skills and advocate for change in their communities and institutions.

- Regularly evaluate the effectiveness and impact of your mentorship program by seeking feedback from both mentors and students and use this data to advocate for and implement mentorship support that better meets students' needs.

- Reflect on your own positionality (e.g., race, gender, socioeconomic status) and how it influences your approach to mentorship.

While not exhaustive, the key strategies and practices found in programs that take a more critical approach to mentoring in rural-serving community colleges provide valuable insight into how mentorship can be reimagined as a tool for systemic change. We encourage reflection on the strategies and practices in this data note and identify steps to make mentorship at your college more inclusive and responsive to the needs of rural students.

Share Your Insights: We invite you to share practical insights, challenges, or strategies that have worked in your mentorship program(s). Please visit our Rural Learner Success OER Commons using the QR code or link below to submit your thoughts and contribute to the ongoing improvement of mentorship practices at rural-serving community colleges. https://tinyurl.com/RuralOERCommons

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FUTURE WORK: We acknowledge there may be institutions that serve rural students and may consider themselves rural serving that are not captured in our sample as they did not meet the RSI score criteria we used. Future research might consider using alternative RSI definitions to potentially capture institutions and communities missed in this analysis.

If you are interested in participating in the next phase of our research project, please scan the QR code or email Mayra Nuñez Martinez, mnunezm@uw.edu. To read more about our project, please visit https://www.washington.edu/ccri/research/rural-learner-success/

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The CCRI team conducts research and development to generate actionable knowledge to advance equity in the field of higher education. CCRI — a program of Undergraduate Academic Affairs — focuses on studying the experiences of underserved student groups that use community colleges as their entry point to higher education and the role that institutions play in equitable student educational and employment outcomes. Their goal is to leverage this research to effect change in postsecondary education at all levels. To learn more about CCRI, visit https://www.washington.edu/ccri/, and LinkedIn, https://www.linkedin.com/company/ccri-uw.

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