

“We all need coins, you know?”: How college students view paid mentorship

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Abstract

Although not a universal practice, many U.S. postsecondary mentoring programs employ paid student mentors as part of a structured student-to-student (peer) mentoring model. Limited research has explored how student mentees view paid mentorship and if mentees can detect whether their mentor is paid or unpaid through mentor behavior. This qualitative study focused on in-depth interviews conducted with 13 first-year, first-generation mentees of Color attending a predominantly White institution in the U.S. South to learn how these student mentees view paid mentorship in relation to unpaid, volunteer mentorship. Findings suggest that student mentees feel mentors should be paid and that paid mentoring is a financial benefit in contributing to financing a peer’s education. Student mentees also indicated they could detect paid mentors through mentor behavior. Student mentees also thought that a mentor’s paid status might influence how they, mentees, interacted with the mentor, making a distinction between volunteer mentors who are seen as more caring and compassionate than paid mentors, who are viewed as merely performing mandatory duties, displaying what mentees felt was inauthentic behavior. This paper will address implications for research, practice, and paid and unpaid mentoring praxis.

Keywords: mentoring, higher education, college students, first-generation students, students of Color

Introduction

For as long as institutions of higher education have existed, mentoring programs, whether they are called that or not, have served a wide variety of educational stakeholders (Allen & Eby, 2007; Johnson, 2007). Mentoring programs have been invaluable sources of student, faculty, and staff support, as well as providing community benefits for other educational stakeholders inside and outside the campus (Crisp et al., 2017; Crisp & Cruz, 2009, 2010; Reddick, 2014). However, other postsecondary programming, there are inevitable costs incurred, including administrative overhead and travel expenses, communication and marketing plans, and recruitment and retention of mentors, mentees, and program personnel (Allen & Eby, 2007; Crisp et al., 2017).

Some mentoring research has addressed how to facilitate a cost-effective and highly efficient mentoring program in postsecondary contexts (Crisp & Cruz, 2009; Janssen, van Vuuren, & de Jong, 2014; Lee, Anzai, & Langlotz, 2006), but many of these studies focus on the mentor of the program and how to recruit, retain, and finance high-quality, effective mentors in specific postsecondary contexts (Austin, Covalea, & Weal, 2002; Janssen et al., 2014; Lee et al., 2006). However, no extant research has addressed implications, and how, for example, mentees in postsecondary contexts perceive paid mentorship. And, too, postsecondary mentoring programs may not have fully taken into account how their mentors and mentees adopt or alter their social, personal, or emotional behavior in a mentoring relationship if the mentee understands that their mentor is paid or unpaid.

Recent mentoring research has called for a greater emphasis on the mentee of the program, as the mentee is often the primary beneficiary of postsecondary mentoring programs, and many mentoring

programs measure their success and development by how mentees develop and succeed during their postsecondary careers (Black & Taylor, 2018; Reddick, 2014; Taylor & Black, 2018). Research has found first-generation college students and students of color may have the most to benefit from a mentoring relationship, including increased persistence, retention, and graduation rates (Inkelas et al., 2007; Luedke, 2017; Saenz, Ponjuan, Segovia, & Viramontes, 2015; Soria & Stebleton, 2012). For this reason, this study seeks to address gaps in the literature by exploring how first-year, first-generation mentees of color feel about paid mentorship, as mentoring programs across the country have paid their mentors to provide mentoring services to their appointed or self-selected mentees (Kyle, Moore, & Sanders, 1999; Terrion & Leonard, 2010).

This study seeks to answer three critical questions:

RQ1: How do first-generation mentees of Color feel about paid mentorship or their mentors being paid?

RQ2: Can first-generation mentees of Color detect whether their mentor is paid or not?

RQ3: If mentees can differentiate between paid and unpaid mentors, what behaviors do mentors exhibit that may reveal their paid or unpaid status?

By answering these questions, postsecondary mentoring directors can better understand how to train mentors through paid and unpaid mentoring structures and support their mentees, which can lead to greater levels of programmatic success for all educational stakeholders involved.

Methodology

Site and Sample

The research team conducted interviews in Fall 2017, Spring 2018, and Fall 2018 at a large, urban, and Southern, predominantly White institution, "Southmost University," a pseudonym. Southmost University seemed to be an appropriate site for this study; the research team initially wanted to better understand how marginalized students perceived their own mentorability (Reddick, 2014) and navigated a potentially unfriendly and unwelcoming climate while participating in a formal, university-sponsored mentoring program at a predominantly White institution (PWI).

To identify a sample, the research team contacted the director of student leadership programs at Southmost University to learn about the first-generation and student of color population participating in formal, peer mentor, University-sponsored mentoring programs at the institution. The research team then sent a call-for-participation email during the Fall 2017, Spring 2018, and Fall 2018 semesters to gauge student interest. Thirteen (13) first-year, first-generation students of color who were mentees agreed to participate in the study.

Table 1: Display matrix of interview participants (n=13)

Name (Pseudonym)	Race	Gender
Jax	Black	Man
Daisy	Asian	Woman
Cecille	Hispanic	Woman
Luciana	Hispanic	Woman
Elena	Hispanic	Woman
Steven	Asian	Man
Penelope	Black	Woman
Angela	Asian	Woman
Sofia	Hispanic	Woman
Tranh	Asian	Man
Isabel	Hispanic	Woman
Bella	Hispanic	Woman
Samuel	Asian	Man

Data Collection

The research team conducted interviews on the Southmost University campus and in a location familiar to the 13 participants. The research team asked semi-structured interview questions, allowing the participants to share as much or as little as they felt comfortable (Maxwell, 2013). In addition, the interviews were held in a focus group setting to allow the participants to feel part of a group instead of isolated (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014), also urging participants to build upon each other’s responses and provide collaborative insights and experiences.

The interview protocol included four questions meant to probe the participants’ (mentees’) own perceptions of paid mentorship. The questions addressed both the mentees’ perception of paid mentoring, whether they knew their mentor was paid, if they felt they could detect paid mentors, and what behaviors they believed differentiated paid and unpaid mentors. Deliberately, the research team omitted mention of first-generation status or racial and ethnic background, as the research team wanted to learn what identities were most salient to first-year, first-generation students of color on a PWI campus. The research team scheduled 90 minute interviews , although the interviews ranged from 60 minutes to 100 minutes in length depending on the depth of response from the participants.

Data Analysis

The research team individually analyzed the data and then collaboratively compared emergent themes from the data during the first round of coding. Each researcher used a clustering strategy to code the data, allowing similar participant responses to be grouped into coherent themes (Miles et al., 2014), surrounding the concepts of mentoring and mentorability (Black & Taylor, 2018; Reddick, 2014; Taylor & Black, 2018).

Once the research team completed the first round of coding, a second round of coding was conducted to pare down the number of themes to the most present and salient themes relevant to mentees and paid mentoring (Miles et al., 2014). In all, two main themes emerged from these two rounds of coding and thematic analysis, connecting participants’ perspectives to extant research and expanding the literature to address first-year, first-generation mentees’ of color feelings toward paid mentorship.

Findings

This study’s findings address all three research questions: mentee dispositions toward paid

mentoring; mentees' ability to detect paid versus unpaid mentors; and mentee perceptions of paid and unpaid mentor behavior.

Mentee dispositions toward paid mentoring: "We all need coins, you know?"

To answer this study's first research question, nearly all (12 of 13) of the first-generation mentees of color felt that paid mentorship was a completely acceptable and understandable practice, with Trinh asserting, "We all need coins, you know?" Isabel added, "I just think I personally would want to be paid if I were a mentor. Just because it's not that I don't value the relationship that I have had with my mentees, but I think it does take some time out of my schedule and some resources are used." Penelope acknowledged the investment that her mentor was making, explaining, "I'm totally fine. They're doing their job. They're taking time of their lives. They should get something," and four other mentees agreed.

However, the mentees' feelings toward paid mentorship—and many other mentees' feelings (Samuel, Steven, Elena, and Trinh)—were tempered by a potential mentee skepticism of paid mentors who may not be as committed to the mentoring relationship as volunteer mentors. Trinh continued by saying, "I like to overthink things, and I could definitely see how someone would think like, "Oh my god, they don't even care about me. They're just trying to make \$50 a week. They don't really care."

Additionally, some mentees suggested that financially incentivizing mentors may be the only way fellow students would seek employment as a mentor. Cecille explained that, "For me, I don't really think it's a problem [paid mentors] just simply because no 18- or 19-year-old in their right mind would offer to be a mentor." Angela added that, "I feel it's like an incentive for the mentors too because a lot of people have the opportunity to become mentors, but they don't take it because they don't see any motivation in doing so," with multiple mentees in agreement.

Mentees feel they can detect paid mentors, even if they don't know their mentor's paid status

Unequivocally, all first-generation mentees of Color felt they could tell if their mentor was paid or unpaid, yet several mentees were unaware that their own mentor was paid. This finding fascinated the research team, as the research team had assumed that the mentees knew that their mentors were paid as part of their formal mentoring program.

First, several mentees were unaware that their mentors were paid, and then they were made aware of this fact, Cecille said, "I didn't know they were paid," with Jax echoing Cecille and elaborating, "I didn't know they were paid, but I don't mind." Several other mentees agreed. However, Luciana was clearly taken off-guard by the question and had never considered paid mentorship: "Well, for me, I guess I haven't really even thought about that or even before you just ask the question...My mentor does get paid! I don't know." Here, the research team learned some mentees may be unaware of paid mentoring practices, and therefore, mentee behavior may be unaltered regarding their mentors' paid or unpaid status. However, mentees may not have altered their behavior in their current reciprocal relationship, as they were not aware of their mentors' paid status. Regardless of whether a mentee knew their mentor was paid, several mentees expressed feelings that a mentor being paid could influence their mentor's ability to be a good mentor.

Bella, in explaining her ability to detect paid mentors, said, "It sort of makes a difference as in someone who is genuinely there to help, or someone who's doing it for money," with Penelope elaborating by saying, "At some point, you would know if your mentor is being fake. You would know when someone is being not genuine." When asked about how long it takes for a mentor to reveal their "genuine" nature, Steven suggested he could feel a mentor's genuineness "I think after a year," while taking the time to compare his experiences with other mentees to "see how it's going." Given these findings, it was unclear whether mentees directly connected their mentor's paid status to the overall quality of the mentor, but mentees did feel that a mentor's quality—being a bad mentor, such as a

mentor “being not genuine”—may indicate a mentor’s paid status. This tension or confusion between a mentor’s paid status and their actual mentoring behavior will be elaborated upon in the Implications and Conclusion section of this study.

Mentees believed pessimism, lack of dedication and personalization, and complex jargon would distinguish paid mentors

In unanimous fashion (13 of 13), all first-generation mentees of Color detailed mentor behaviors to indicate to them that their mentor may be paid and not entirely dedicated to the reciprocal relationship. It is important to understand that mentees conflated paid status with mentors’ pessimism, a lack of dedication, and jargon usage. Yet, surely not all paid mentors are inherently pessimistic, lack dedication, and use jargon to explain the aims of the reciprocal relationship.

Penelope earlier asserted that she could tell when her mentor was being “fake,” and she suggested that “They [mentors] can only fake something for so long. You could tell between if a mentor’s actually very invested in their mentees. They don’t just do what they’re required to do, they go the extra mile.” This sense of an unpaid mentor’s dedication and personalized investment in one’s mentee rang true for other mentees, as Elena defined an unpaid mentor as, “Someone who genuinely cares and who would go out of the way to look for things that apply to you.” Samuel agreed and extended Elena’s response by saying:

I feel like if they [mentors] do get paid, they are not going to fully be open to you because of like, “I’m just going to get paid for an hour of this. They [the mentees] totally wouldn’t mind it if I give half of my effort into this conversation helping them.”

Here, it was clear that Samuel felt paid mentors may be less open and dedicated to their mentees, while Elena suggested that unpaid mentors may be willing to go “the extra mile” as Penelope offered.

Daisy and several other mentees felt as if paid mentors could exhibit pessimistic behaviors and suggested that some mentors could “go through training...and you can tell they’re being fake. Like they can just be really pessimistic and say, ‘I’m so sorry, I’m just really tired and I have this and that.’ Instead of actually mentoring you, they just use some of the time to let it all out.” Perhaps conflating the term “pessimism” with disinterest or lack of commitment, Daisy’s response spurred contradictory responses from two mentees, including Sofia. Clearly having different experiences in their mentoring relationship, Sofia asserted that, “I didn’t know about the whole paid mentorship, which I’m not opposed to it. They are taking the time and they put in the commitment to getting to know you and wanting to build a relationship with you and help you to know your resources and help you develop as a person.” It became clear that some mentees felt paid mentors might be less enthusiastic, less dedicated, and less personal than unpaid mentors, but for others, the mere presence of a mentor signaled that the mentor was willing to commit to building a reciprocal relationship.

Finally, Steven proposed that paid mentors may use elevated jargon when addressing mentees, indicating their paid status. Steven said:

Things like the language they use in a way. Sometimes there’s symbols and you can tell they love the job or they’re doing it voluntarily. It’s like jargon the student doesn’t understand. It’s like the person is getting paid for because it’s the first time, you know, you’re just being paid and then they’ll take the account of the student’s language. I mean, the language and the vocabulary.

Although not specific to language usage, Luciana stated that mentors “actually have qualities” and that they are not “just some random person,” indicating that mentees may feel that their mentors have been trained or that prospective mentors require training in order to become mentors. Perhaps Steven’s feelings toward mentor language was a product of how his mentor was trained, commenting on Luciana’s hinting at mentors’ “qualities.” Here, Steven and Luciana both expressed how a mentoring program’s training of mentors may influence how mentors interact with mentees, speaking to the

importance of mentor training in preparation of reciprocal relationships.

Implications and Conclusion

In answering all three research questions, implications for mentoring praxis emerge, given the insights provided by mentees regarding their perceptions of paid mentorship.

Nearly all (12 of 13) first-generation mentees of Color in this study indicated that paying mentors was not only fair to the mentors, but perhaps necessary to recruit and retain mentors. As first-generation college students and students of color may greatly benefit from postsecondary mentoring programs, institutional leaders and mentoring program directors should explore ways to facilitate greater numbers of mentoring programs and, potentially, paid mentors. Although mentees did indicate that they could detect paid mentors through mentor-exhibited behaviors, institutions and mentoring programs could ease mentors' financial burden of college by facilitating an on-campus, paid position, which could lead to both mentors and mentees persisting and graduating from the institution at higher rates.

Although mentees indicated that they could detect whether their mentor was paid or unpaid, many mentees were nonetheless not actually aware that they were currently participating in a mentoring program that paid its mentors. From here, mentoring programs should continue to investigate the feasibility of paid mentors and how a mentor's paid or unpaid status is communicated to their mentees. If mentees are open to working with paid mentors, as this study suggests, mentoring programs could communicate to mentees that their mentors are paid and explain why. This articulation may convince the mentee that not only do "we all need coins," but also that the program itself supports paid mentoring due to its potential financial and educational benefits for the mentor. This may also lead to the mentees commitment and viewing mentoring as a service instead of an obligation, possibly altering mentees' behavior depending on when they learn their mentor is paid and how they perceive that exchange of capital for academic services.

Additionally, if mentees feel they are able to detect paid mentorship through mentor behavior, mentoring programs could target those behaviors for professional development to increase the likelihood of a successful mentor-mentee pairing and subsequent reciprocal relationship. Mentees clearly indicated that they felt paid mentors may be more pessimistic, more lethargic, less dedicated, and provide less personalized guidance than unpaid volunteer mentors. If mentoring program directors explore both paid and unpaid mentoring structures, and if these programs learn that paid mentors really do exhibit the behaviors indicated by the mentees in this study, these mentoring program directors could focus more specifically on those behaviors that would better support the reciprocal relationship.

Mentoring researchers and practitioners should continue to explore both paid and unpaid mentoring structures and reciprocal relationships. While mentees understand the (potential) financial and time burden of working as a mentor, as this study found, mentees were clear about the perceived negative behaviors that paid mentors may demonstrate. Mentoring programs could explore the feelings and behaviors of their mentees and use their insights to improve the mentor-mentee pairing process and reciprocal relationship. And even though mentees indicated that "we all need coins," research tells us that all mentors and mentees need help and guidance along their postsecondary journey, and mentoring programs should answer the call to improve both paid and unpaid mentoring program effectiveness.

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