THE PROFESSIONAL MENTOR PROGRAM PLUS: AN ACADEMIC SUCCESS AND RETENTION TOOL FOR ADULT LEARNERS

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ABSTRACT
To promote the academic success of and to retain adult students of color, the Academic Services Unit at the University of Detroit Mercy (UDM), an urban Catholic university, in Detroit Michigan, has designed and implemented the Professional Mentor Program Plus, funded by the State of Michigan’s King-Chavez-Parks (KCP) higher education initiative, that fuses academic support programming, and mentoring, designed exclusively for adult students, into a proactive academic success and retention model. The program’s rationale, history, and findings from the 2003-04 year-end evaluation are presented, followed by the program’s future development plan.

INTRODUCTION
Historically, students of color have lower graduation rates, higher attrition rates, and more reports of academic challenges when compared with White students (Chavez & Maestas-Flores, 1991; Clewell & Ficklen, 1987; Grayson, 1998). For example, a four year study revealed that only 19.4% of African-American, 30.5% of Mexican-American, and 22.9% of Native-American students earned bachelor’s degrees. After nine years of study these figures rose to a modest 33.9% of African-American, 39.5% of Mexican-American, and 33.2% of Native-American students graduating with bachelor’s degrees. In comparison, in four years, 43% of White students earned bachelor’s degrees and 47.3% of them earned bachelor’s...
degrees in nine years (ACT, 1998; Grayson, 1998; Higher Education Research Institute, 1996). What these data suggest is that there have been only limited gains in the success rates for students of color in higher education institutions.

Tinto (1993) further identified several factors that contribute to the attrition of students of color in higher education settings. For example, Tinto found that academic and social integration are factors that influence students’ decision to stay in school or drop out. He also found that all groups of students bring to campus various characteristics, which include family support, financial support, pre-college achievements, academic abilities, athletic achievements, and other personal and professional attributes that greatly influence the students’ rate of persistence in higher education. In contrast to White students, however, Tinto found that when students of color enter college, they are often socially, financially, educationally, and economically disadvantaged as well. These trends over the past several years continue to challenge institutions of higher learning and those government-supported programs that attempt to ameliorate the trends. Thus, despite the continued development of recruitment and retention initiatives for students of color, there is a great need for more adult centered academic programs to assist students of color in meeting the personal and academic challenges they face as they attempt to earn academic degrees in U.S. higher education institutions today (see also Austin, 1984).

In this article, the authors will define mentoring in higher education, summarize the theoretical background on retention and mentoring in higher education, and highlight the history and components of the Professional Mentor Program Plus, a unique model designed by the Academic Services Unit at UDM, in Detroit Michigan, to assist adult students of color overcome the barriers they encounter, such as the lack of personal support and academic preparedness, in completing their bachelor’s degree. The findings from the program’s 2003-04 year-end evaluation will also be presented, along with the program’s future development plan.

**MENTORING IN HIGHER EDUCATION DEFINED**

Mentoring is a term linked to Greek mythology, where Mentor is the trusted counselor of Odysseus. The virtues of mentoring have withstood the test of time and have been found applicable to a variety of situations, including the undergraduate experience. To date, several researchers from the higher education and business sectors have offered a variety of definitions of mentoring. For example, Shandley (1989) describes mentoring from a higher education perspective as an intentional process involving interaction between two or more individuals. He further states that mentoring is a nurturing process that fosters the growth and development of the protégé. Moore and Amey (1998) define mentoring as a form of professional socialization that allows a more experienced
individual to act as a guide, teacher, and role model for a less experienced protégé. The aim of the relationship is to help the protégé develop his or her abilities and understanding in relationship to a given task or situation. Fagenson (1989) describes the mentor as someone in a position of power who gives advice. Phillips-Jones (1982) suggests that mentors simply influence people and help them to achieve their personal and professional goals. Lastly, Zey (1984) states that a mentor is a person that oversees the career and development of another person.

In higher education settings, two types of mentoring have been identified: formal and informal. Formal mentoring programs are designed to increase student enrollment and retention, as well as students’ satisfaction with their academic experience (O’Brien, 1989, Paratore, 1984). Informal mentoring is viewed as a spontaneous relationship, established by two or more individuals for the purpose of benefiting those involved. The extent to which informal mentoring is applied in higher education is unknown. However, evidence does suggest that informal mentoring positively influences the development of formal mentoring initiatives. Because many informal mentoring partnerships are reported to foster academic success, more formal mentoring models in higher education have been created (Jacobi, 1991).

**FORMAL MENTORING PROGRAMS**

Formal mentoring programs, in which mentors are assigned protégés, are rising in popularity in higher education settings as well as organizational settings (Cox, 1991; Shandle, 1989; Thomas, 1992). Cohen (1995, p. 9) describes formal mentoring as “the one-to-one relationship that evolved through reasonably distinct phases between the mentor and the adult learner.” A series of hierarchical phases is usually recommended for mentors and protégés to follow while building their relationships. Cohen’s (1995) steps include the following: first, the early phase, in which foundations of trust are established, second, the middle phase, where mentors help protégés establish goals; the third phase, where mentors interact with protégés in exploring their interests and beliefs and the reasons for their decisions; and the final phase, where mentors function as models, challenging protégés to reflect upon their goals while pursuing challenges.

Newby and Corner (1997) also stress the learning that occurs within the mentor/protégé relationship and state that the main idea underlying formal mentoring programs is to help the individual grow, learn, and overcome obstacles. Their prescription for establishing mentoring programs includes the following steps: 1) determine the readiness of the program and establish the goals for the mentoring program; 2) establish selection criteria for mentors and protégés; 3) train mentors and novices for success, 4) match the mentors and protégés; and 5) support mentor/protégé program planning. The implication of the steps in formal mentoring programs is that if they are followed as prescribed, good
mentoring will happen, resulting in successful outcomes for the protégés. However, there is a potential downside to formal mentoring (Newby & Corner, 1997). For example, an arranged mentoring relationship, like an arranged marriage, can fail if the mentor and protégé do not share enough common interests to form and maintain a healthy and successful relationship.

**NEED FOR AN ADULT MENTORING PROGRAM AT UDM**

Over the past several years, UDM administrators have been aware of the retention difficulties with first generation African-American students. According to the 2003 UDM demographic statistics, UDM has experienced a steady growth in its African-American (and other minority) student population over the past 20 years. Currently, 32% of the UDM’s student body is represented by minority students (UDM Campus Diversity Website, 2005), with the majority of those students being African American. The “at risk” group within the adult population at UDM also consists primarily of African-American students above 30 years of age. This population continues to increase, especially in the academic areas of liberal arts, education, and nursing. Many of these students in each of these areas have been placed on academic probation because of low test scores, and sometimes they discontinue these programs because they lack the necessary academic skills and support to meet the academic standards. The continuing rate of low test scores and dismissal has contributed to the students’ lack of confidence, self-esteem, and leadership ability, and has created the need for the Professional Mentor Program Plus, a new initiative, to address and end this trend.

**HISTORY OF THE UDM MENTOR PROGRAM**

A 1997 survey of students with academic difficulties documented the over-representation of adult African-American students in this group and identified a perceived lack of academic and personal support as a key factor. More specifically, students reported difficulty in balancing the demands of work, family, class attendance, and study time. Since this seemed to be exactly the sort of problem that mentoring programs were designed to assist with, university administrators decided to implement a program tailored to meet the needs of this adult student group at UDM.

Based on the survey results and on staff experience with the student body, it was decided that two groups of adult students could benefit from being served by a new, adult centered, mentoring program. The two groups of adult students are defined as follows: the first group of adult students would be found by their advisors to be at risk because of being placed on academic probation; therefore, they would be recommended by their advisor to participate in this program. The second group of adult students would be self-identified students who request to be
paired with a mentor for whatever reason, i.e., a lack of academic self-esteem, desire to improve leadership skills, a need for personal or academic support, or simply because they believe that the program will offer some benefits that give them an academic edge. Students within these two categories are more than 95% from metropolitan Detroit, 85% are female, and 15% are male. Eighty-five percent of the students are also adults between the ages of 27 to 45 years old.

THE DEVELOPMENT AND DESIGN OF THE PROFESSIONAL MENTOR PROGRAM PLUS

The Professional Mentor Program Plus was conceived in 2003 following the application for and receipt of a grant from the Michigan Department of Labor and Economic Growth. This Department had established the King-Chaves-Parks (KCP) Initiative and the Select Student Support Services (4S) Program, which was authorized by the Michigan State Legislature in 1987 (Select Student Support Services [4-S] Program Administrative Handbook, 2005). The legislative mission is to increase the graduation rate of academically and economically disadvantaged students of color currently enrolled in either a public or private four-year institution. It should be noted that the term “disadvantaged” is to be defined by the higher education institution seeking grant funding. The intent of the 4S Program is to provide seed money to cover staff salaries, and programs expenses (i.e., speaker honorariums, supplies, local travel expenses, and refreshments) in the amount of $150,000.00 over a three-year period, plus a required 30% institutional match, which is intended to be a catalyst for institutional change, stimulating more coordinated efforts within institutions, and permanently ensuring both short- and long-term measurable improvements in graduation rates of targeted students.

The Professional Mentor Program Plus staff consists of three members: a director, an administrative assistant, and an independent evaluator, who report to the Vice President of Academic Affairs. The program also relies on the services of UDM’s grant administrator and 30 volunteer mentors. The design of the Professional Mentor Program Plus has three components: 1) specific academic program mentor/mentee matching; 2) six mandatory professional development workshops that aim to teach students how to independently work through their academic and personal challenges, presently and beyond graduation; and 3) an intergenerational outreach component, where both mentors and mentees are provided an opportunity to participate in a mentoring experience through a partnership with a local middle school (Professional Mentor Program Plus Official Records, 2002-03). In addition to the aforementioned components, the mentors and mentees participate in a variety of events together throughout the academic school year, including regular telephone contact, special UDM events and lectures, academic and professional workshops, i.e., improving study skills, career planning workshops, and local social and cultural events, for the purpose of building and maintaining a successful mentoring relationship. Refreshments are
also provided at the end of each event (Professional Mentor Program Plus Official Records, 2002-03).

Based on the number of students placed on academic probation and the number of adult African-American students and other students within the UDM population who want to join the program for various reasons other than academic probation, a target of 75 new students per year was tentatively set for the program. Moreover, it was anticipated that many of the students would remain in the program over a three-year cycle, thus, program planning anticipated an eventual membership of about 130 students per year once the program became established (Professional Mentor Program Plus Official Records, 2003-04).

PROGRAM EVALUATION: METHOD

A thorough evaluation of the Professional Mentor Program Plus would require a longitudinal study of a program cohort in comparison with a matched control group. There was no practical way, however, to publicize the program on the one hand and then set up a true control group that would be denied access to the program. In the alternative, we elected to simply monitor the progress of those students who did avail themselves of the mentor program and to get feedback from them as to their experience with the program: what they most liked about it and suggestions for improvement.

The mentor program sponsored a series of nine Professional Development Workshops and/or “social events” over the course of the academic year 2003-04. To evaluate these workshops and the mentor program in general, three evaluation tools were used: a) a “Program Evaluation Questionnaire” filled out by attendees immediately following each workshop; b) a focus group discussion of the program; and c) tracking the GPAs of the attendees of the various workshops.

In order, the topics for the various workshops from October 2003 through June 2004 were as follows:

1. Academic Survival Strategies that Work: October 12, 2003
2. Improving your Research Skills: November 9, 2003
3. The Benefits of Professional and Peer Mentoring (and Holiday Celebration): December 5, 2003
4. How to Prepare for Graduate School and Succeed: January 8, 2004
5. Celebrating Black History Month through Gospel Music: February 21, 2004
6. Mentoring as a Tool for Professional and Personal Success: March 14, 2004
7. The Rewards of Mentorship: April 18, 2004
8. 2004 Graduation and Awards Banquet: Moving Onward and Upward: May 2, 2004
9. Fifth Annual Barbeque: June 4, 2004 (with Round-Table Discussion)

Some 75 undergraduates attended one or more workshops, with a total attendance of 376. The total number of Evaluation Questionnaires returned was 143.
Thus, while many mentees submitted two or more questionnaires over the course of the year’s workshops, typically less than half of the attendees at any given workshop filled out and returned a questionnaire.

**PROGRAM EVALUATION OUTCOME**

**Evaluation Questionnaires**

Subjects were asked to rate the overall quality of the workshop on five different scales, pertaining to overall quality, quality of material, relevance of material, length, and organization. Questions were answered using a 5-point Likert scale, with high (5) indicating “excellent.” For all scales, across all items and all workshops, the mean rating was 4.65, or somewhat above the midpoint between “above average” and “excellent.” Given the truncated nature of the scale (scores could range as low as 1 but not above 5), a mean score above 4.5 shows a remarkably favorable evaluation of the workshops. Put another way, 92% of all ratings were either a 4 or a 5. Finally, means of the individual items ranged from 4.57 to 4.75, indicating that student-attendees saw the workshops as strong in all areas.

Subjects rated the workshops on five scales, measuring: overall program quality, quality of material presented, relevance of material, length of workshop, and organization of workshop. Mean scores on the five rating scales ranged from 4.57 (length) to 4.75 (relevance). Thus, all scales showed scores above the midpoint between “above average” and “excellent”; differences among the scales were not significant. Because the five evaluative scales resulted in such agreement, they were treated as a common or combinable scale and subjects were given a total evaluative score based on the sum of the five items. (Scale consistency, measured by alpha, was .89.) We then explored the relationship of this total evaluative score with the other measures in the questionnaire.

**Correlates of High Evaluation**

Virtually all subjects were positive in their evaluation; out of an N of 143, only one subject gave a mean rating below the theoretical neutral point (i.e., a 3.0 average scale score) and five subjects were neutral. Over half (55%) gave the particular workshop a perfect rating on all scales.

Attendees who rated the workshops highly tended to be more confident of completing their degree ($r = .17, p = .06$); to have attended more workshops ($r = .30, p = .001$), to be continuing members of the mentor program ($r = .17, p = .05$), and to believe that the workshops gave them things that were personally and professionally useful ($r = .37, p = .001$). Taken together, these mildly positive relationships suggest that students who found the workshops appealing tended to
attend more workshops, to become more involved in the mentor program, and to feel more confident of completing their degree.

Were the workshops more helpful to some subjects than to others? The 75 attendees represented a wide variety of academic majors. The two most frequent categories of major were “business and management” (38% of subjects) and “health and human services” (27%). “Education” was third with 8%. Health and human services majors rated the events somewhat more highly than did business and management majors: 4.76 vs. 4.43 ($t = 2.83; p = .05$). While 1/3 of a scale point does not seem to be of practical significance, a tentative hypothesis for this difference by major is that students who choose the health and human service area for a major are already more receptive to the kinds of personal and social interaction that most of the events fostered.

Focus Group Feedback

The final workshop of the year, the annual barbeque, concluded with a focus group discussion with the authors. The purpose of the discussion was to generate qualitative data relevant to the effectiveness of the mentor program. Ten members participated in the focus group. All were current UDM students and active in the mentor program, either as mentors (3) or as mentees (7). All had attended at least two previous workshops. The relatively small number in attendance provided ample opportunity for all attendees to express their opinions and for the evaluators to probe for more detail.

The participants had difficulty singling out any particular workshops that were more helpful than others; rather, they tended to identify general experiences that they had in the program that were helpful to them. Moreover, these general experiences highlighted three main themes: networking, sharing, and skill acquisition.

Networking

The workshops provided an opportunity to interact with people currently in the “real world,” who were seen as having especially valuable information concerning the job market. The fact that many of these professionals were former UDM students who had gone through the very programs the members were in was seen as a major plus. Participants stressed the benefit of these professionals’ understanding their situation. It also seemed likely that these professionals’ success provided added encouragement to them because they shared similar circumstances.

Sharing

Participants also felt that they had a lot to learn from each other, whether they were mentors or mentees. Coming together in a non-classroom atmosphere,
combined with the stimulation of the day’s speaker or program, seemed to facilitate a sharing of information (and personal experiences) among themselves to an extent that was not likely to happen during normal classroom contacts.

**Skill Acquisition**

Participants mentioned a variety of skills (and information) that they had gained from their involvement, including: how to choose and apply to graduate programs; resume writing; job seeking; preparing power point presentations; and helpful hints on study habits and note taking.

**Mentee Characteristics**

During the course of the academic year, 75 undergraduate students attended one or more workshops and filled out sign-in sheets with their name and student information, thus enrolling themselves in the Professional Mentor Program Plus as potential mentees (i.e., they were placed on the program mailing list). Over the course of the year these members attended a mean of 5.15 workshops (median: 5.0). Their ages ranged from 19 to 58, with a mean of 33.49; 90% were over the age of 21. There was a trend for older subjects to attend more of the workshops ($r = .22$, $df = 69$, $p = .07$, two-tailed).

**Tracking Students’ GPA**

The ultimate purpose of the mentor program is to increase the success of the students who participate. While “success” can have many meanings, it is taken for granted that most students have as one of their goals the completion of their degree. Degree completion, in turn, depends on academic success, one measure of which is grade point average (GPA). GPA is a good indicator of how confident members have become in an academic setting and of how capable they are of program completion (given the level of skills currently attained). Therefore, we examined the GPAs of the mentor program participants.

Subjects’ cumulative GPAs (at the close of the academic year) ranged from 1.71 to 3.93, with a mean of 2.95 (median 2.93). The typical mentee had earned 97.9 credits, with about one-third of those credits having been by transfer, typically from a community college.

As stated above, improvement in GPA is an objective measure of mentees’ ability to attain their goal of degree completion. Of the 75 mentees, 46 showed an improvement in GPA for the year, and 25 showed a decrease (with two having no change). The average change in GPA for all mentees was +.13, which was a statistically significant increase ($t = 1.89$; $df = 71$; $p = .032$, one-tailed). While our evaluation method does not allow us to conclude that the Mentor Program was causally responsible for this increase, the mentees themselves certainly believed that the program was a factor in helping them to be more confident in the
university environment, and it is encouraging to find that the GPAs of the group are headed in the right direction, overall.

Retention

The ultimate purpose of the Professional Mentor Program Plus is to foster the academic success of students who participate. Success, in turn, is measured either by completion of the student’s degree program, or at least by continuation in that program. For purposes of this study, we operationalized student retention as either program completion in the 2004 academic year, or enrollment at UDM in the 2005 academic year. In this analysis, 73 of the Mentor Program students’ files were able to be accessed. One methodological problem was that a student continuing his or her education elsewhere would be considered a negative outcome. Thus, measuring “success” by whether a student re-enrolls in one’s own university is somewhat misleading from the point of view of the student. Therefore, in order to make a meaningful assessment, it was critical to construct a reasonably comparable control group.

A comparison or control group was constructed by picking one course at random from each Mentor Program student’s Semester II, 2004 enrollment. From this course, the two adjacent students on the alphabetical class list were selected as controls, with the proviso that their names not be on the Mentor Program list. This selection method had three advantages. First, it was totally accidental in that the researchers had no control over who was included in the comparison group. Second, by using subjects from the same classes, the control group would more likely resemble the Mentor Program group than if we had sampled from the student body as a whole. Because they were taking classes at the same time period and in the same subject matter, they too would be more likely to be non-traditional and minority students. Finally, by taking two control subjects for each program subject, we were able to generate a more stable basis for comparison.

The sampling method did indeed produce a comparison group that was similar to the control group. On the most important variable, mean grade point average, there was virtually no difference: 2.93 (Mentees) vs. 2.95 (controls). The Mentee group was somewhat older (34.9 vs. 31.3, *p* = .02), which is to be expected since the program was designed to target older students. There were also predictable differences between the Mentee group and the comparison group on race and gender. The Mentee group was 75% African American, 16% White American, and 9% other; in contrast, the comparison group was 49% African American, 35% White American, and 19% other. On gender, the Mentee group was 86% female, compared to 74% female for the comparison group.

With respect to retention, 88% of the Mentees either graduated in the 2004 academic year or enrolled and completed courses in the 2005 academic year. If we discount those who graduated, 84% re-enrolled in 2005. In comparison, 81% of the control group graduated in 2004 or enrolled and completed courses in
2005. Discounting the 2004 graduates, 76% of the control group re-enrolled. Expressed as a correlation (phi coefficient), the relationship between being in the Mentor Program and retention was +.09 ($df = 217; p = .10$, one-tailed).

While we cannot conclude from the above that involvement in the Professional Mentor Program Plus significantly increased the odds of student retention, the fact that the Mentee group had a somewhat higher retention rate than did the comparison group is certainly a positive finding. The comparison group, after all, had a slightly higher GPA, was over three years younger, and had a lower percentage of African Americans and females (who would be more likely than males to have to balance family responsibilities).

**CONCLUSION AND FUTURE PLANS**

In summary, a new mentor program model, Professional Mentor Program Plus, was implemented and evaluated. The program uniquely combines the elements of mentor-mentee matching, socialization, workshops, and inter-generational outreach. This program is directed specifically at adult African-American students experiencing academic difficulty. The program is open to all UDM students, and while the target group made up the vast majority of the members, a good number of academically proficient and non-minorities also participated. Moreover, participants in the program were very positive in their evaluation of each of nine workshops, a focus group gave positive feedback about the program as a whole, and participants showed a small but statistically significant increase in GPA. Finally, a one year study of retention showed that program participants had an impressive 88% retention rate; this compared favorably to a control group that had an 81% rate.

Building on the positive experiences of the first year, a new set of workshops were scheduled for the current academic year. It was felt that many of the workshops offered benefits to more than simply the targeted mentee population. As a result, the workshops are now being presented as a student service and we are concerned with assessing the total number of students served, not only the mentor program members. As for mentees’ development, a new workshop on peer mentoring is being designed to help the mentees offer academic and personal support to their own friends and student peers. Professional mentor training is also required for community members who wish to serve as mentors to adult students in the Professional Mentor Program Plus.

As to the future, the Professional Mentor Program Plus is continuing into its second year with a new round of workshops. As the program moves forward, UDM will continue to advertise and promote Professional Mentor Program Plus as a premier academic services program throughout UDM and Michigan. In addition, the Professional Mentor Program Plus will continue applying for outside funding from private, corporate, and individual sources via grants and annual giving programs.
In addition, it should be noted that The Professional Mentor Program Plus was developed at UDM as part of the university’s commitment to attracting and retraining adult students of color. The evaluation of the first year of the program has found the program to be promising and has provided ideas for some adjustments to the program in its second year. Based on this initial evaluation, this program appears to be a helpful higher education model for attracting and retaining a more diverse student body, especially insofar as this entails students who do not come from a culture of higher education. The program model is also flexible enough that it can easily be replicated and revised by other universities to serve a variety of student populations (i.e., traditional age student groups, female student groups, male student groups, Hispanic student groups). Lastly, this program model can be modified to address the students’ specific academic concerns, for example by adjusting the content of the workshops and by recruiting a different mix of professional and peer mentors and community involvement.

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