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Mentoring Undergraduate Students

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Kelly Ward, Lisa E. Wolf-Wendel, Series Editors

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Executive Summary

PROVIDING COLLEGE STUDENTS with access to mentoring has become a national priority, as evidenced by the prevalence and diversity of formal and informal mentoring programs and practices at postsecondary institutions. Mentoring efforts can be effective in addressing key issues and problems currently facing colleges and universities across the country, including the need to increase degree completion rates, reduce inequities in outcomes for marginalized and underrepresented groups, and broaden participation in the science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) pipeline and workforce. Mentoring has long been considered a developmental and retention strategy for undergraduate students, and research suggests mentoring efforts are positively related to a variety of developmental and academic outcomes.

Unfortunately, mentoring research has been repeatedly observed by scholars to be underdeveloped relative to the importance and growing number of mentoring programs supported at the national, state, and local levels. Robust research is needed to guide the development, implementation, and assessment of undergraduate mentoring efforts. As the number of studies focused on mentoring undergraduate students continues to grow, comprehensive reviews of the literature are necessary to synthesize new knowledge. Literature reviews provide an efficient and robust way for practitioners and researchers to make sense of a large body of literature and to identify evidence-based practices specific to designing, implementing, and evaluating mentoring programs.

The most recent comprehensive review of the mentoring literature was conducted by Crisp and Cruz (2009), who provided a critical synthesis of

empirical research conducted between 1990 and 2007. Although findings pointed to the overall effectiveness of mentoring as a means to develop undergraduate students and support their academic success, the review also identified persistent conceptual, methodological, and theoretical weaknesses that impede the usefulness of findings in guiding the development of mentoring practice. Fortunately, the mentoring literature appears to have evolved substantially over the past decade, with over 100 studies published on mentoring undergraduate students since the last systematic review. However, it is unclear if or how the previously discussed limitations have been addressed by mentoring scholars or to what degree knowledge has developed in recent years. Renewed consideration of knowledge, and remaining unanswered questions, about mentoring undergraduate students is thus warranted.

The overarching purpose of this monograph is to move the mentoring conversation forward by offering an updated synthesis of the undergraduate mentoring scholarship published between 2008 and 2015. We sought to address four specific questions. First, we wanted to identify and understand how empirical knowledge and theory have advanced since the last comprehensive review. Importantly, we find that recent scholarship provides a more complex understanding of how mentoring can promote social justice and equity in higher education by providing more focus to student groups that have been historically understudied and underserved in higher education. We also find that the reviewed research has provided more attention to theory, as well as practical matters such as what mentoring looks like and how it is perceived and experienced by undergraduate students. Further, our review synthesizes current understanding of mentor matching processes and activities that mentors engage in with students, which are expected to be of use in guiding the development and implementation of mentoring programs.

At the same time, findings highlight enduring conceptual, theoretical, and methodological limitations of the usefulness of research in guiding mentoring practice. One such limitation is ambiguity in how mentoring has been defined and conceptualized across studies. In response, a second goal of the monograph was to identify and provide clarity about the characteristics that serve to meaningfully distinguish mentoring relationships and programmatic efforts. Consistent with prior reviews, no one definition was found to

accurately represent the diversity of relationships that students and institutional agents may term “mentoring.” Rather, findings suggest that definitions of mentoring might be improved by describing the characteristics that distinguish mentoring relationships and programs. In particular, we suggest that undergraduate mentoring relationships may be differentiated by the following characteristics: (a) relationship features, (b) form or source of the relationship, (c) relationship structure, (d) program types, and (e) forms of mentoring support provided to the student. In terms of formal programmatic efforts, this monograph details four distinct, and yet in some ways overlapping, types of mentoring programs. These include orientation and university retention programs, mentoring for social justice and equity, peer mentoring, and undergraduate research and honors programs.

Another enduring limitation of the mentoring literature is the underdevelopment and relative absence of theory available to guide the administration of mentoring programs. Although there are a fair number of theories that aim to identify and define the components of mentoring relationships, scholarship that sheds light on how mentoring is related to student development, learning, and success was shown to be particularly limited. Those applying theoretical or conceptual frameworks often develop models specific to their individual research, borrowed from or based on frameworks designed to explain relationships in business. Theoretical models that continue to interrogate how identity can shape how mentoring is defined, how individuals engage one another, and the needs of protégés are important for advancing mentoring research and practice.

As such, the third goal in developing this monograph was to integrate theory and research in a way that could provide tentative hypotheses regarding the relationship between the various characteristics and outcomes of mentoring. We draw upon reviewed theory and empirical findings to offer an integrated conceptual framework that identifies connections between developmental relationships, students’ characteristics, educational contexts, relationship features such as intent and intensity, forms of support, and potential short- and long-term effects on students’ college experiences and outcomes. Among other things, our framework acknowledges the interconnectedness between students and their educational context. Students choose and influence

their educational environments, and environments simultaneously act upon and shape students, driving their needs and resources. Additionally, our model offers testable ideas regarding how mentoring activities indirectly and directly can have an impact on intermediate and long-term student outcomes.

An important and yet often overlooked responsibility of scholars is to effectively bridge research and practice. With that in mind, our fourth and final goal in developing this monograph was to offer evidence-based practices for the administration of formal mentoring programs. Although there are a growing number of online resources to guide practitioners in developing undergraduate mentoring programs, we find that few are firmly grounded in theory and/or rigorous empirical evidence specific to undergraduate students. As such, our monograph concludes with a set of specific recommendations and evidence-based practices expected to be useful in designing, implementing, and evaluating mentoring efforts in undergraduate education.