

SPARTANS MENTORING SPARTANS: EXPERIENCES FROM A POSTSECONDARY MENTOR EDUCATION PROGRAM



Phillip Warsaw, Aaron J. McKim, and Douglas L. Bessette

Department of Community Sustainability, Michigan State University

Author Note

Corresponding Author: Phillip Warsaw, 480 Wilson Road Room 326, East Lansing, MI 48823. Email: warsawph@msu.edu

Project funding source: Subaward from Purdue University through the National Institute of Food and Agriculture (Grant Number: 2019-70003-29089)

Conflict of Interest: None to report

Previous scholarship has established peer mentoring as a valuable support mechanism for students, particularly underclassmen and underrepresented and underserved students. These benefits were amplified during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, which limited traditional avenues of support at a time of heightened precarity among enrolled students. However, while peer mentoring has an established research base stating its benefits, scholars have also noted the potential limitations of this model, most notably interpersonal challenges and power dynamics which might arise among peers. Further, there remains a need for empirical studies on efficacious approaches for training potential mentors to navigate these dynamics. To that end, the current study examined the efficacy of a postsecondary mentor education program developed during the COVID-19 pandemic. Using post-experience interviews, students' perceptions of the program, willingness to engage in future mentoring relationships, and self-reported capabilities to serve as an effective mentor were assessed. The findings contribute to the existing literature suggesting the importance of effective preparation of potential mentors in a peer-mentoring context as a precondition for positive outcomes for both mentor and mentees. Recommendations include future scholarship exploring outcomes for mentees in peer-mentoring relationships with mentors who have received prior training, as well as additional resources to expand the implementation of mentor education programs at other institutions.

Keywords: mentoring, leadership, training, COVID-19, postsecondary education

Retaining students within postsecondary programs, especially those in agriculture, food, and natural resources (AFNR), is essential to fulfill workforce demand (Goeker et al., 2015). This need is compounded by disruptions to postsecondary education plans brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic (Liu, 2021). Factors which retain students include academic self-efficacy, social connections, and a sense of belonging, which can all be developed through mentoring relationships (Tinto & Pusser, 2006). These effects may be amplified for first year students (Flores & Estudillo, 2018; Fox et al., 2010; Glaser et al., 2006). Peer mentoring programs amplify these potential benefits by first providing similar institutional support to the mentors, while they are also trained to provide mentoring to their mentees (Kiyama & Luca, 2014).

Despite the documented benefits of peer mentoring programs, they are not without risks. Potential risks include unhealthy dynamics of power within the mentor-mentee relationship, particularly if the mentee becomes overly reliant on mentor support (Colvin & Ashman, 2010). The potential for these drawbacks places a greater emphasis on the importance of designing mentor training programs which unpack the notion of power and encourage inclusive mentoring practices (National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine, 2019). This case study explored the experiences of participants in Spartans Mentoring Spartans, a pilot mentor training program at Michigan State University designed to provide students with a mentor education experience tailored to the principles of inclusive

POSTSECONDARY MENTOR EDUCATION PROGRAM EXPERIENCES

mentoring. The purpose of this qualitative research was to explore the experiences and outcomes of students involved in a mentor education program at Michigan State University. These insights may inform future mentor education programs.

Methods

Theoretical Framework

These insights may inform future mentor education programs. This research was framed using the Input-Environment-Outcome (I-E-O) Model (Astin, 1993). I-E-O is widely used to understand the impact of postsecondary experiences on students (Goegan & Daniels, 2021). I-E-O suggests evaluating educational experiences requires considering (a) inputs – characteristics (e.g., career interests, race, goals, values) learners bring with them to college, generally, as well as specific learning experiences during college; (b) environment – the totality of opportunities students interact with while in postsecondary education, including engagement in specific postsecondary programs (e.g., Spartans Mentoring Spartans); and (c) outcomes – aspects of the individual influenced during their postsecondary experience (Astin, 1993; Astin & Antonio, 2012). The model proposes outcomes of postsecondary experiences are influenced by both inputs and experiences (Astin, 1993). The parsimonious nature of the model is both its greatest strength and its most common critique; scholars highlight the model is easily understood but lacks the nuances of student development described more fully by other models (Strayhorn, 2008). The model was selected for this study, however, given its consistent use to conceptualize the impact of specific postsecondary programs, like Spartans Mentoring Spartans (Goegan & Daniels, 2021; Strayhorn, 2008). In this research, the inputs of interest included perceived perceptions of mentoring; the experience was engagement in Spartans Mentoring Spartans, and the outcomes of interest were motivations, intentions, and ability to offer inclusive mentorship.

Empirical Approach

A qualitative case study (Merriam, 2002) design was employed to complete this research. The bounded system was Spartans Mentoring Spartans at Michigan State University, offered during the Spring 2022 semester. The Spartans Mentoring Spartans included participation in eight one-hour, synchronous, online seminars. Sample seminar topics included: (a) inclusivity and purpose of mentoring, (b) culturally responsive mentoring, (c) difficult conversations and mental health, and (d) understanding success and imposter syndrome. The seminars featured a mix of lecture-style content provided by the faculty team and student-only breakout discussions related to the week's topic. Participants in Spartans Mentoring Spartans received a \$500 scholarship at the completion of the

program. A total of eight students participated in the program, all enrolled in a degree program within The Department of Community Sustainability at Michigan State University.

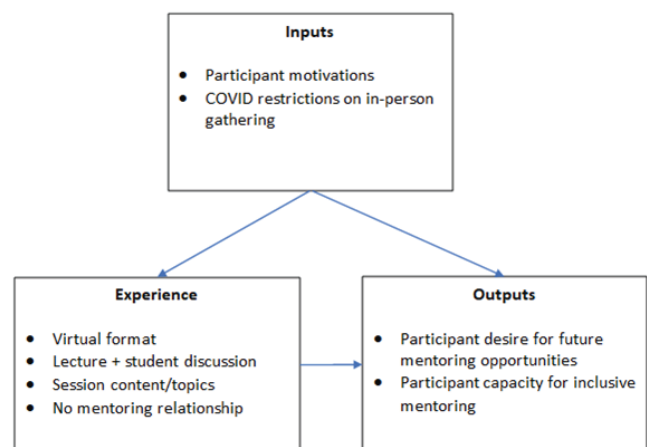
Students were not assigned a mentee or required to engage in a mentoring relationship to participate in this program. During a trial version of this program in 2021, the project team conducted outreach to identify first and second year students interested in receiving mentoring across introductory courses within The Department of Community Sustainability. However, efforts to follow up with these students yielded an insufficient number to match with the program participants. Efforts to recruit potential mentees for the 2022 iteration of the program were further complicated by ongoing disruptions to in-person instruction at Michigan State University due to COVID-19, including a temporary shutdown of in-person instruction during the start of the spring 2022 semester. As a result, the project team decided not to include mentees for the 2022 cohort, the results of which are presented here.

Three types of data were collected. First, program facilitators conducted 25-to-40-minute, one-on-one, semistructured interviews with seven of the eight program participants ($n = 7$). Following the I-E-O framework, participants were asked questions to address their motivations for joining the program (inputs), their assessment of the programmatic and logistic structure of the program (experiences), and the impact that the program had on their desire and capacity to serve as a mentor in the future (outputs). The framework for this project is illustrated in figure 1. Interviews were conducted within two weeks of program completion. To triangulate, both program curriculum and facilitator observations were also included as data. The research was assessed as exempt by the Institutional Research Board at Michigan State University (study number: STUDY00005842).

All interview data was transcribed verbatim in preparation for data analysis. Then, the research team conducted a multi-stage analysis using the constant comparative method (Glaser, 1965). First, one member

Figure 1

I-E-O Conceptualization for Spartans Mentoring Spartans



POSTSECONDARY MENTOR EDUCATION PROGRAM EXPERIENCES

of the research team read all the interview transcripts to glean an introductory understanding of the data. Then, the same member inductively coded the data based on emergent and overlapping ideas. Then, codes were compared to each other to form overlapping ideas refined into themes. Following this, the research team met to review the data, codes, and emergent themes. Given the research team were also program facilitators, facilitator observations and program curriculum were integrated into the discussion to refine the final codes and themes.

Subjectivity Statement

All researchers on this project were facilitators of the Spartans Mentoring Spartans who led the creation of the curriculum. Further, each member of the research team is committed to quality learning and feels inclusive mentoring is an essential skill to develop within postsecondary education.

Findings

Input: Participant Motivation

Students most frequently referenced a desire for social connections as their motivation for participating in the program. One student tied this desire specifically to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, sharing “I [hadn’t] really been involved in stuff because of the pandemic, I [felt] like... in a complacent state where I was...good with doing nothing. And...I wanted to do something that would hopefully benefit me, allow me to meet new people.” Another student noted, “I’ve just grown to love leadership positions and reaching out to people and talking to people, so I thought it’d be a good opportunity.”

The second most prevalent motivation articulated by participants was a desire to give back by helping others. Multiple students reflected on their own experiences as an undergrad within The Department of Community Sustainability and connected it to their reasons for joining the program. One student stated, “I wanted to...give back to my community and my department because...this community is very giving and very supportive.” Another student, reflecting on the resources they had access to, said he joined the program because “it was something that I kind of wish that like I had when I was a freshman or like, like the whole like connecting with somebody who is older than you and like you can like learn from.”

Experience: Program Structure

The decision to not include mentoring relationships in lieu of a focus on mentor education received a mixed response among the participants. The positive aspect of this decision most cited by students was the ability to focus on learning each of the aspects of a productive mentoring relationship prior to seeking to mentor someone, versus trying to do so while simultaneously learning these concepts. This idea is captured within the following quote,

“I liked the aspect of not having a full mentor relationship...I liked being able to go over the ground rules, in a sense, and then be able to take that by myself.” For another student, the emphasis on mentoring skills allowed them to see how the content might extend beyond mentoring and be generalized as leadership skills. This student shared “Instead of it being about mentoring people necessarily, I think it was more about how to be like an effective leader and an effective communicator, which I think are valuable skills.”

That said, other students expressed a desire to have mentees as part of the program. Connecting to the earlier motivation provided by COVID-19, one student reflected on the decision not to include mentoring as a part of the program, stating “I think that would have been a cool addition...I think that would help a lot of people, especially in the kind of digital and isolated world.” Further, some students noted the counterbalance of focusing on education in this program meant they were unable to use this space to reflect on challenges they face in a live mentoring relationship. One student discussed this idea, saying:

Doing the physical mentoring was a strong experience for me because we’ve learned about something (in the previous week of the program). And then next week (after we’ve met with a mentee), something instantly comes up and I’m like, ‘oh, great, now we can talk about this.’”

Students similarly expressed ambivalent feelings about the program being delivered as a virtual-only program. A common challenge mentioned by several students were difficulties connecting with people on Zoom. Participants were not required to keep their cameras on during each session. While students would commonly (though not universally) turn their cameras on during their discussion, many would turn them off during the lecture-style content. Reflecting on this dynamic, one student shared, “I feel like being in person, you are able to cultivate relationships a bit better rather than just seeing a picture on the screen.” Reaffirming this perspective, another student shared, “it is just hard to connect with people over the computer.”

That said, some students appreciated the flexibility presented by a virtual format. As the university transitioned out of COVID protocols, several students noted the flexibility of Zoom remained valuable, particularly as they adapted to managing busy schedules which now included in-person activities. One student shared, “[B]ecause we have a lot of classes in person now...having an online made it like an easier commitment... because with everything going on, it was one thing we could do stationary.” Another student added:

I enjoyed...the online format, just because...it gave me a little bit more freedom...I could take this, this program that I really wanted to be a part of, and I have a class...that ends 10 minutes before (the program sessions) I can still do this...I think the in-person...programs or clubs or whatever kind of limits people’s availability, especially mine.

Balancing these perspectives, one student shared, “you can do everything on Zoom that you can do in person, but I do feel like in person you can make conversations flow

POSTSECONDARY MENTOR EDUCATION PROGRAM EXPERIENCES

better,” while another echoed this balance in discussing the potential value of a hybrid option, saying “in the future, it might be helpful to do a hybrid format...I think that adds a balance and allows people to kind of have the best of both worlds.”

The participants were more unified about the value of group meeting structure. In particular, multiple students discussed the value of the student-only discussion groups as a mechanism to advance their growth in the program. Given the often-personal nature of the content delivered (e.g., imposter syndrome), the intent of discussion groups was to give students the opportunity to explore difficult subjects among their peers. In their interviews, students affirmed the success of this format. One student noted:

I think the people in this group were really great in explaining themselves and their feelings on certain issues like imposter syndrome...And I think them being so open, but also willing to take criticism, or just overall new ways of thinking about it...was really helpful for me.

Another student shared a similar sentiment, saying “[S]ometimes when we talk about...having difficulties, feeling like you’re fitting in...and that’s something you can kind of share with other mentors, just through the small group discussion.” A third student discussed the particular value of the discussion groups being small (i.e., 3 – 4 students), saying “I feel like, especially since we were able to have very small discussion groups, we were able to talk a bit more and expand a bit more about our thoughts and ideas on issues.”

Output: Impact On Participants

While students were ambivalent about the lack of assigned mentees in this program, multiple participants felt they would be more informed mentors, both in the present and the future, because of this program. One student, who had received an internship opportunity in the summer, said:

I think that I’ll be able to reach out to people and network a bit better and really just advocate for myself, because that’s where you make connections...I think that (during) the summer I’ll definitely be able to gain some mentoring relationships.”

Another student, who was already working as a studentteacher, said “I felt that in my personal work as a teacher, I was able to carry a lot of those communication skills and mentoring skills into that to be able to more effectively teach students and direct students.”

Even for students not already in a mentor position, they still noted the value of having these skills to effectively take advantage of future mentoring opportunities. For instance, one student noted the program would be beneficial for themselves and their future mentees, because they now know “there should be an end goal, like there should be scheduled meetings, there should be certain criteria that actually makes a mentoring relationship work and work fluidly.” Another student, reflecting on the ongoing return to campus post-pandemic, said:

[C]oming back to campus as an upperclassman with a lot of people that are new to campus...I think

I’ve definitely taken some unofficial or informal mentorship roles...A lot of friends that might be underclassmen, or people that are new to the university, I feel like we’ve had a lot of chances to talk...And if people ask you for help, even in our grade, I feel like I have the skills to talk to them or lead them towards a goal of theirs. Even if it’s not a formal mentoring relationship, just helping out friends and being good resource.

One of the discrete skills participants stated the experience helped to develop were conversation skills, specifically within the context of a mentoring relationship. One student noted the experience resulted in “[knowing] how to be the one to carry the conversation, you know, be the one asking the questions.” Representing the ideas shared from multiple students, one participant shared they did not “communicate with people...in a professional way” during the COVID-19 pandemic. Continuing, this student worried they had “lost some of that ability;” however, concluded the program “definitely played a role in helping me realize I can still communicate with people in a professional way.” A third student remarked that:

Another thing we learned [was] how to give feedback, and [in] a positive way...[L]ooking at it from the other side, if I was a mentee, I would know that my mentor is giving me feedback, because they want to help me, not taking that as a criticism.

In addition, the difficult and personal nature of some of the topics also equipped students to better engage with those subjects outside of the program, both academically and in personal settings. This is of particular importance in a department such as The Department of Community Sustainability, where a growing body of literature has examined how students have struggled and adapted to the psychological trauma caused by limited global responses to climate change. One student commented on this idea, “I’m more aware of the best ways to communicate with others like professors and my peers...[H]ow to go about thinking about very tough subjects, especially with our department we discuss a lot of difficult issues.”

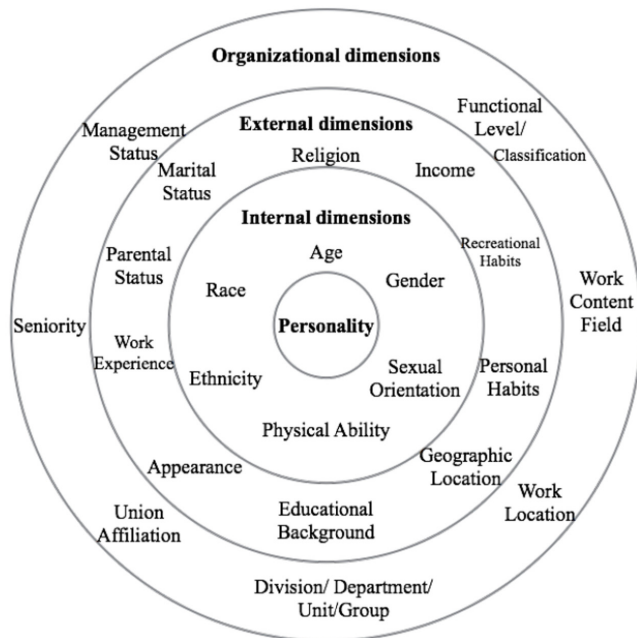
Students also shared how the mentor education program afforded them an appreciation for new and different perspectives. Two sessions during the program centered on the need and value of considering diverse perspectives in mentoring relationships. The second session of the program, on the purpose of mentoring and inclusive mentoring, framed mentoring as a way to help students from diverse backgrounds feel welcome on campus. In particular, the content from this meeting emphasized the role of peer mentors was not to attempt to ‘fix’ the problems that a potential mentee may face, or to serve as an expert on all of the issues a mentee might run into. Instead, the role of a mentor should be to first center the needs and goals the mentee brings into the mentoring relationship, and then act empathetically in understanding those needs, and identifying the appropriate resources for their mentee to connect with. The fourth session, on culturally responsive mentoring, took a deeper look at the cultural factors which might shape the experiences that a mentee brings into a

POSTSECONDARY MENTOR EDUCATION PROGRAM EXPERIENCES

mentoring relationship, and thus shape how the mentors might best serve as a source of support to their mentee. In this session, the students learned about six patterns of cultural difference: communication styles, attitudes toward conflict, approaches to completing tasks, decision-making styles, attitudes towards emotional and personal matters, and approaches to knowing. Then, students were taught about the 'diversity wheel,' first developed by Loden and Rosener (1990), which is a visual representation of common dimensions of diversity, illustrated in figure 2. After learning about these axes of cultural difference, the students were engaged in breakout rooms to reflect on times throughout their lives that cultural differences may have impacted their ability to communicate effectively with others, and how understanding these differences could have led to a positive outcome.

Figure 2

Dimensions of Diversity (adapted from Loden & Rosener, 1991; representation from Jolanta, 2015)



One student noted the value of this content, particularly given its absence in much of the course content currently offered within the department, saying “we don’t discuss, in depth, imposter syndrome or culturally sensitive mentoring,” but these discussions, “really changed how I view situations and talk to people and definitely made me feel more confident being a leader.” Further, one student discussed how this content had a complimentary effect on their performance in the classroom, stating:

I feel like I'm able to be a more attentive listener, and see what the other perspectives are within the groups I'm a part of, and I feel like that's made me a better learner in general, just being able to receive information and then think about it in different ways that I may have not thought about it previously.

For other students, this space was a valuable place to learn about and reflect on how their experiences shaped how they moved about spaces at Michigan State University,

and improved their ability to relate to others. In a reflective manner, one student shared “my hometown, it is like all white people,” and that this experience “was important to learn about other things, and open my perspective, and get a different background.”

Another content area that drew significant feedback from the participants was from the sixth session on imposter syndrome. This session introduced the concept of imposter syndrome, as developed by Clance and Imes (1978), with a specific emphasis on its relationship with systemic bias within institutions. This focus served as a bridge and continuation of earlier discussions about inclusive and culturally responsive mentoring. Students were then asked to break out into pairs to discuss moments when they felt they were in a prohibited space or role, and to consider if that situation had the markers of institutional bias and imposter syndrome. For many of the participants, this activity and lesson resonated, beyond its application for them as potential and future mentors. Instead, several students spoke about the value to them as individuals, which is notable due to the demographics of the cohort, which was majority female-identifying. Expressing their appreciation, one student noted “it was a really good lesson...understanding you do belong.” Another student shared, “talking about [imposter syndrome] with other people, I realized what it really was” expressing it “was interesting to hear...if other students deal with that too.”

Summary

This research explored the experiences of participants in a mentor education program. Insights from this research may inform broader mentor education programming; however, it is important to note the limitations of this research. Namely, this research is limited to a single program and the perspectives of seven program participants. Additionally, the research is limited by program facilitators conducting the interviews, increasing the possibility of social desirability bias. Therefore, caution is encouraged when extrapolating the findings to external contexts. Considering these limitations, our conclusions and recommendations are organized into three over-arching ideas.

Importance of Application

Support was identified for both including and omitting the requirement to mentor during the program; however, most participants suggested the experience would have been enhanced by including a mentoring requirement. While students reported positive learning outcomes, the omission of the mentoring requirement within the experience appears nonetheless to have been a missed opportunity to extend learning through application (Astin, 1993; Astin & Antonio, 2012). Therefore, we recommend programs strongly consider the inclusion of an authentic mentoring requirement as part of a mentor education program. That said, given the potential benefits of mentor education in preparing students to function in peer mentoring relationships, similar programs might consider structures which begin with an educational component, followed by matching participants with a mentee.

Introducing New Perspectives

Seminars relating to inclusion, imposter syndrome, and cultural sensitivity were highlighted by students as particularly impactful. Evidence suggests the impact of these seminars comes, in part, from their novelty within postsecondary curriculum (Colvin & Ashman, 2010). Students expressed these components were at the forefront of their lived experiences and future leadership ambitions. Thus, program facilitators are encouraged to implement these topics within their curriculum; additionally, investigation of additional perspective-cultivating topics is warranted.

Hybrid Mentor Education

The final idea is structuring mentor education programs using a hybrid approach, balancing in-person and online learning opportunities. Recognizing mentoring education programs are infrequently compulsory, program flexibility may attract a broader range of students. Further, balancing online and in-person learning seizes the opportunity to create a flexible experience via online learning while also affording opportunities for more authentic engagement and relationship building via in-person learning.

Mentor education programs serve a critical role in developing the next generation of inclusive mentors (Flores & Estudillo, 2018; Fox et al., 2010; Glaser et al., 2006). Continuing to inform these programs through diverse scholarship and informed practice is critical to their sustainability and impact.

References

Astin, A. W. (1993). *What matters in college? Four critical years revisited* (1st ed.). Jossey-Bass.

Astin, A. W., & Antonio, A. L. (2012). *Assessment for excellence: The philosophy and practice of assessment and evaluation in higher education*. Rowman & Littlefield.

Clance, P. R., & Imes, S. A. (1978). The imposter phenomenon in high achieving women: Dynamics and therapeutic intervention. *Psychotherapy: Theory, research & practice*, 15(3), 241.

Colvin, J. W., & Ashman, M. (2010). Roles, risks, and benefits of peer mentoring relationships in higher education. *Mentorship & Tutoring: Partnerships in Learning*, 18(2), 121-134. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13611261003678879>

Fox, A., Stevenson, L., Connelly, P., Duff, A., & Dunlop, A. (2010). Peer-mentoring undergraduate accounting students: The influence on approaches to learning and academic performance. *Active Learning in High Education*, 11(2), 145-156. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1469787410365650>

Flores, G., & Estudillo, A. G. (2018). Effects of a peer-to-peer mentoring program: Supporting first-year college students' academic and social integration on campus. *Journal of Human Services: Training, Research, and Practice*, 3(2), 1-25.

Glaser, B. G. (1965). The constant comparative method of qualitative analysis. *Social Problems*, 12(4), 436-445. <https://doi.org/10.2307/798843>

Glaser, N., Hall, R., & Halperin, S. (2006). Students supporting students: The effects of peer mentoring on the experiences of first year university students. *Journal of Australia and New Zealand Student Services Association*, 27, 4-17. <https://doi.org/10.3316/aeipt.150638>

Goecker, A. D., Smith, E., Fernandez, J. M., Ali, R., & Theller, R. (2016). Employment opportunities for college graduates in food, agriculture, renewable natural resources, and the environment. *United States Department of Agriculture*.

Goegan, L. D., & Daniels, L. M. (2021). Academic success for students in postsecondary education: The role of student characteristics and integration. *Journal of College Student Retention*, 23(3), 659-685. <https://doi.org/10.1177.1521025119866689>

Jolanta, M. A. J. (2015). Diversity management's stakeholders and stakeholders management. In *Proceedings of the 9th International Management Conference „Management and Innovation For Competitive Advantage* (pp. 780-793).

Kiyama, J. M., & Luca, S. G. (2014). Structured opportunities: Exploring the social and academic benefits for peer mentors in retention programs. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*, 15(4), 489-514.

Liu, R. (2021). Disparities in disruptions to postsecondary education plans during the COVID-19 pandemic. *American Educational Research Association Open*, 7(10), 1-19. <https://doi.org/10.1177/23328584211045400>

Loden, M., & Rosener, J. B. (1991). *Workforce America!: Managing employee diversity as a vital resource*. Irwin, Professional Publishing.

Merriam, S. (2002). *Qualitative research in practice: Examples for discussion and analysis* (1st ed., Jossey-Bass higher and adult education series). Jossey-Bass.

National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine. (2019). *The science of effective mentorship in STEM*. The National Academies Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/25568>

Strayhorn, T. L. (2008). How college students' engagement affects personal and social learning outcomes. *Journal of College and Character*, 10(2), 1-16. <https://doi.org/10.2202/1940-1639.1071>

Tinto, V., & Pusser, B. (2006). *Moving from theory to action: Building a model of institutional action for student success*. Paper presented at the National Symposium on Postsecondary Student Success.