Harambee: A Mentoring Program to Recruit and Retain

Students of Color in Counselor Education Programs

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Abstract

Mentoring is an important evidence based practice in the development of a professional counselor. Students of color have reported several challenges with transitioning into counseling graduate programs, such as fitting in, making friends and gaining support. As programs continue to attract and retain students of color it is imperative for counselor education programs to consider formal mentoring relationships, as mentors and protégés report numerous benefits. Individuals’ benefit from the practice of mentoring but there are program benefits as well, such as the impact on recruitment and retention. An innovative mentoring program within a multicultural framework is discussed and the program implications presented.

*Keywords:* Counseling Graduate Programs, Students of Color, Mentoring

Harambee: A Mentoring Program to Recruit and Retain

Students of Color in Counselor Education Programs

Harambee is a Swahili term meaning “to pull the community together.” Harambee captures the spirit of a program model developed at a private Mid-Western university to provide a mentoring opportunity to African American graduate counseling students. African American students in graduate counseling programs are an identifiable minority in predominantly white universities and report a subjective sense of isolation and marginalization in these environments (Henfield, Owens & Witherspoon, 2011). Additionally, there is an underrepresentation of mentoring relationships among minority career based graduate students and professionals (Ortiz-Walters & Gilson, 2005). African American graduate counseling students have reported intense challenges acclimating to counseling programs, functioning in predominately white institutions (PWI), obtaining support in the program from white faculty, developing friendships and collegial relationships with white colleagues and remaining in the program for graduation **(**Henfield, et al., 2011; Young & Brooks, 2008). Mentoring has been proposed as one vehicle to heal the cross cultural disconnects that exist in PWI’s and promote advocacy for minority students admitted into counseling programs(Atkinson, Casas & Neville, 1994; Haizlip, 2012; Hughes & Kleist, 2005; Patton, 2009).

The Harambee mentoring program model is rooted in a commitment on the part of the counselor education program to nurture, support and mentor African American students in their professional identity as counselor while acknowledging the unique talents their African American identity brings to clinical mental health counseling and school counseling environments. The program model was constructed upon the principles of cooperation, collaboration, and student empowerment, rather than a traditional mentoring model whereby mentoring is hierarchal and power is held only by the mentor (Bailey, 2010). One noteworthy component that facilitates the collaborative environment is the selection of mentors who are alumni of the counselor education program. Alumni mentors provide a wealth of knowledge to student mentees based on affiliation with a counselor education program and faculty.

**Focus on African American students**

Geography, access and counselor program reputation all play roles in the number of African Americans attending any particular counselor education program (Guiffrida & Douhit, 2010). In the development of this program model, the focus on African American students was generated by three significant events impacting this counseling program and other programs in the state at the time of inception: (a) A state licensing board report revealed that few African American students were applying to take the state licensure exam relative to the number of students enrolled in degree programs across the state, (b) Among the identified African American students who did take the state exam, less than a third of those students passed the exam on the first administration while over seventy five percent of white students passed the exam. (c) In the pursuit of Council for the Accreditation of Related Educational Programs (CACREP) , the standards recommended that counselor education programs place more effort in recruiting and retaining students of color to reflect the diversity of the local community in which counselors are most likely to serve (CACREP, 2009). For this Midwestern institution, African Americans constitute 44.8% of the urban population surrounding the university. In 2005, at the start of the Harambee Program, approximately 8% of the students identified as African American or Black African. This program attracted a few persons native to Africa primarily due to institutional affiliations in a number of African countries such as Ghana, Tanzania, Kenya and Niger.

The experience of African American students in graduate education and specifically in counselor education may be quite different from the majority culture in PWI’s(Butler, Evans, Brooks, Williams & Bailey, 2013; Haizlip, B., 2012).Research has suggested there is a greater likelihood for African American students to avoid seeking help from white faculty due to the perception that white faculty are disinterested or that as graduate students, the African American must appear to be more self-possessed than white peers to compensate for negative stereotypes(Guiffrida & Douthit, 2010).The pressure that African American students may feel regarding performance may lead to unnecessary stress and burnout and possibly withdrawal from a counselor education program(Henfield, et al., 2011). PWI’s admitting African American students may utilize components of mentoring to decrease the likelihood of isolation from peers, disconnect with faculty and a sense of “not belonging.”

**Mentoring in Counselor Education**

Young and Brooks (2008) defined mentoring as a "dynamic, reciprocal relationship in a work environment between an advanced career incumbent (mentor) and a beginner (protégé) aimed at promoting the career and development of both" (p. 399). Mentoring ought to include open communication with reciprocal feedback, goals and expectations, trust, care for one another, and enjoyment (Allen & Poteet, 1999). Functions of mentoring include teaching, sponsoring, encouraging, counseling and befriending (Anderson & Shannon, 1988). Mentors can help students focus on strengths in overcoming obstacles versus focus on feelings of inadequacy **(**Hughes & Kleist, 2005).

Academic mentoring is similar, yet has some distinct differences from organizational mentoring (Van Dyne, 1996; Ortiz-Walters & Gilson, 2005). In counselor education programs mentoring is focused on socializing the student into a professional role, versus an organization. Secondly, the mentoring relationship is more predictable due to the beginning and the completion of the program. The mentors and protégés participate in a more natural cycling of relationships due to the academic calendar (Black, Suarez & Medina, 2004).

While there is some variability in the definition of mentoring it seems fair to describe mentoring as a professional relationship between a more experienced counselor and a mentee whereby the goal of the relationship is to provide support for career exploration and skills to navigate toward the completion of a degree and the completion of licensure for practice. Bruce (1995) suggested three functions of mentoring that appear to intersect with recommendations for supporting African American graduate students(Haizlip, 2002; Henfield, et al., 2011): (a) psychosocial support, (b) role modeling and (c) professional development.

**Mentoring Programs for Students of Color**

Outcome studies related to providing mentorship to students of color in higher education and counselor education appear promising. Students experienced less stressful transitions and reported higher satisfaction with their program while mentored, and it was found that social support was a mediating variable. Mentored students felt a greater sense of belonging and believed mentoring contributed to their overall success (Bowman & Bowman, 1990; Hinton, Grim & Howard-Hamilton, 2009; Kelly & Schweitzer, 1999; Williams & Schwiebert, 2000).

The literature in counselor education supports the efficacy of mentoring, psychosocial support and professional development (Bowman & Bowman, 1990; Haizlip, 2012; Schwiebert, 2000; Walker, 2006). Different mentoring relationships appear in the literature, such as a second year graduate student mentoring a first year graduate student, faculty mentoring of graduate students and practicing licensed professionals in the community mentoring the graduate student. Mentoring either happens in an informal or formal context but the majority of the time the school instituted a formal mentoring program. The literature recommends that mentoring programs would benefit from including several dimensions: (a) Inclusion of the underrepresented populations in Counselor Education, such as students of color and international students; (b) Consideration needs to be given to a multicultural paradigm of mentoring; (c) Inclusion of a student informational packet outlining the requirements of participation; (d) After the mentor, mentee matching a follow up contact is recommended to ensure that a connection has been made; (e) If the mentoring pair is a cross-gender or cross-cultural dyad then it is imperative that the issue of differences and similarities be addressed (Bowman & Bowman, 1990; Butler, et al., 2013; Kelley & Schweitzer, 1999; Schwiebert, 2000; Tentoni, 1995; Walker, 2006).

**Harambee Program Model**

**Invitation and Gathering**

As part of the planning process for Harambee, two initial steps occurred: (a) Identification of interested mentees and (b) Identification of potential mentors. First, potential mentees who identified as African American or Bi-racial/African American on their admissions forms were contacted by letter. Among the first group contacted 80% accepted the invitation. Persons in their internship program typically declined. The next step was to contact African American alumni in the local area willing to assist. The response from potential mentors was overwhelmingly positive. A few alumni stated they were honored to be called, however, too busy to participate. The first group of mentors and students were all African American females. At the time of program inception, there were no males enrolled in the program.

At the beginning of the academic year, mentors and mentees were invited to gather in the late afternoon on a Friday. This was identified as the best time for both mentors and mentees due to work schedules. Mentors arrived 1.5 hours in advance of mentees for education and training on the mentoring process. The mentors were represented by direct service counselors and clinical supervisors. In order to model empowerment, the facilitators first welcomed the mentor’s reflections on the functions of mentors, the goals of mentoring and plans for the initial meeting with mentees. The facilitators then tied together the themes presented and affirmed the concepts generated by the mentors in the context of existing literature on mentoring.

During the transition welcoming the mentees, a buffet with refreshments was made available where mentors and mentees could introduce themselves to one another informally. The facilitators hoped to generate an atmosphere of hospitality, generosity and fun as a means of acknowledging the African American spirit of Harambee or “coming together.” The mentors and mentees introduced themselves and discussed their mutual interests in mentoring and being mentored. Similar to the previous session with the mentors, the facilitators summarized the goals and expectations in the context of the literature describing the benefits of mentoring.

The final part of the session included pairing mentor and mentee. Mentors and mentees found a space in the room or building to sit and begin a 1:1 introduction including scheduling the next meeting and activity.

**Monitoring**

An important aspect to a mentoring program is providing on-going support to mentors and mentees (Kelly & Schweitzer, 1999). The lead facilitator checked in with the mentors and mentees every six to eight weeks over the course of the academic year to verify mentoring meetings were occurring and determine whether there were any obstacles. In one case, a mentee reported difficulty contacting the mentor. The lead facilitator contacted the mentor and determined the mentor was not committed to the program. The mentee was immediately reassigned to a new mentor who followed through with scheduled appointments.

**Celebration**

A celebration in the Spring Semester brought closure to mentoring relationships for the academic term. Mentors and mentees gathered in a spirit of celebration accompanied by food, refreshments and music. Mentees were invited to bring a family member or friend to enjoy the celebration with their academic peers. In this large group, mentors and mentees were invited to share their experience of taking the risk to engage in a mentoring relationship (Schwiebert, 2000). In several instances mentors and mentees had made arrangements to continue the mentoring relationship external to the formal program sponsored by the counseling education program. These decisions were affirmed and supported. The celebration concluded by acknowledging one mentor with an award for outstanding service.

**Evaluation**

An evaluation form was provided to each mentor and mentee and completed after the celebration banquet. The evaluation form was brief but designed to capture the experience of the mentee and mentor and consisted of several open ended questions about the quality of the experience and one question about the content and issues addressed during the experience. Overall, mentoring experiences were described as favorable. In one instance, a mentor and mentee pair had a difficult time connecting due to scheduling conflicts. In another instance, a mentor was extremely concerned about the mentee’s scope of obligations. The mentee was working and attending school leaving little time to participate in the mentoring program.

**Mentee’s Experience**

When asked to describe the experiences and activities with their mentors, many of the mentees described having a variety of contacts with their mentor which included lunch, dinner, phone conversations and emails. The mentees contacts consisted primarily of psychosocial support around classes and general well-being. There were mentees who stated that contact was minimal with their mentor and that scheduling conflicts existed. Other mentees agreed that it was very effective to have a mentor who had graduated from the counseling program because they understood the stress that they were experiencing. The following statement depicts the sentiments of one mentee in the Harambee program, “My mentor has been there for me. She has provided me with valuable information to help me make choices about my career. She is always available, but not bothersome. She is very knowledgeable and does not hesitate to share it or herself.”

**Mentor’s Experience**

Although the majority of the students benefited from the Harambee mentoring initiative, the mentors had specific recommendations for improvement. Several mentors recommended an accountability system for the mentee, believing that if there was a designated person from the counseling program to follow-up then the mentee would be more apt to participate fully as well as increasing the number of meetings for the year. A mentor also recommended additional funding to help with tuition for the students thinking this would assist with greater participation in the mentoring initiative as many mentees were employed full time.

According to the mentors, students were able to garner support for such issues as adjusting to graduate school, understanding the counseling profession, discussing race/gender issues and other diversity topics, career and personal development issues as well as being introduced/referred to people who were helpful to their career progression in the counseling profession. Even though a program faculty member was contacting mentors and mentees during the semester to monitor the relationship, some students were not able to be forth coming regarding information about the quality of the relationship. Reasons included a desire to be perceived favorably not only with the mentor but also within the program, and efforts to avoid complaining about the mentoring relationship. These same reasons are reflected in the literature (Warren, 2005).

**Renewal**

As the result of on-going summative evaluation, the Harambee program has experienced renewal in the form of changes to the initial design. Over time, the counseling program experienced a significant increase in admission of African American students. While this change was welcome, there were not enough African American mentors to pair with African American mentees. The facilitators discussed the inclusion of dominant culture mentors with significant experience supervising African American counselors in training. As a result, mentees had the opportunity to indicate whether a similar cultural group mentor was preferred or whether there was no preference. The lead facilitator was able to pair mentees with mentors as part of the requests from mentees in the Harambee program.

Additionally, several African American male students entered the program requesting an African American male mentor. Bailey (2010) has discussed the importance of academic and social support for African American males after enrollment in graduate programs to promote success and retention, especially for African American males. Only two African American male alumni qualifying as mentors practiced in the immediate area. One alumnus was unavailable. The second agreed to work with two mentees despite a very hectic work schedule. The mentor was a former military officer who was very dependable and provided extraordinary mentoring to the two African American men going above and beyond the call of duty.

Finally, several Latina students requested the opportunity to participate in Harambee as they identified a need to engage in similar process for support. After consulting with the mentors and current mentees, the facilitators expanded the program to other self-identified students of color. Due to the increase in alumni of color who have graduated the program, there are more African American mentors and Latino/Hispanic mentors available for admitted students.

**Implications for Counselor Education Program Development**

**Retention and Recruitment**

In Spring of 2005 the student body consisted of 10% students of color with majority African American at 8%, Hispanic/Latino at 1% and Asia Pacific Islander at 1%. As of academic year 2012-2013, students of color represented over 18% of the student body with the majority being African American at 14%, Asian Pacific Islander at 3% and Hispanic/Latino and Native American both at 1% of the student body. The counseling program maintained a 98% retention rate for African American students and a 99% retention rate for the other students of color. The primary reasons for the African American students leaving the program were financial or personal reasons. The student who left for personal reasons was a participant in the mentoring program and the student who left for financial reasons had opted out of the mentoring program. The students who left the program were academically sound but were not forthcoming with additional details about reasons for leaving the program.

**Commitment**

To improve commitment and accountability to Harambee, the mentoring description (Appendix A) and mentoring agreement (Appendix B) were developed and provided to prospective mentees. The agreement discussed the requirements of the Harambee which consisted of a minimum of two meetings per year and any additional contacts that the pair agreed upon. Implementing minimal contacts within the agreement were intentional, considering the busy schedules of both the mentor as well as the mentee.

**Continuous Improvement**

Overall, the mentoring program has been one factor that has assisted with the increase of students of color by almost 100% in the counselor education program. Offering the mentoring program to a diverse student body has been enriching for all, especially when one mentoring pair was able to have their “one on one” in the mentee’s first language of Spanish. The implementation and cost are minimal (Appendix C), resulting in many benefits to the department.

The department has since added an African American male faculty member and continues to recruit diverse adjunct faculty when possible (CACREP, 2009). In addition to the Harambee mentoring program, all faculty continue to offer mentoring opportunities to students in the program depending on their area of interest and research background. This lends itself to developing a more comprehensive mentoring program with multiple mentors, through formal as well as informal contexts (Schwiebert, 2000; Dolan, 2007). The expectation continues to be that if a student were mentored in Harambee, then the mentee will become a mentor to others who follow in succeeding academic terms. After seven years of programming, there are more mentors than mentees affiliated with Harambee.

**Future Evaluation Goals**

As the counseling program continues to improve the Harambee mentoring initiative, faculty would like to ensure that a formal as well as informal evaluation occurs every year. This will assist in determining that participants have a voice in the initiative generating improvements as the Harambee community grows. Even though follow-up has taken place with those who have not continued in the program, there could be a more intentional process developed for follow-up and intervention as well as accountability. The mentoring relationship is an integral part of the process (Tenenbaum, Crosby & Gliner, 2001) and interventions to improve and strengthen the mentoring relationship will also be addressed (Ortiz-Walter & Gilson, 2005; Kram, 1983).

**Conclusion**

Recruitment, retention and inclusion of students of color are frequently actions that fit into a college or counselor education program strategic plan (CACREP, 2009; Oritz-Walters & Gilson, 2005). Sometimes counselor educators are at a loss to explain low numbers of applications of students of color at PWI’s. The program model captured in Harambee focused on the African American and Black African population based on demographics relative to the geographical area of the university creating the program. The spirit of the Harambee initiative may be adapted to diverse populations based on geographic location and the mission of the counselor education program. This article stressed the importance of commitment on the part of program faculty to be involved in the mentoring program from beginning to end, demonstrate a genuine interest in nurturing and improving the program, and empowering mentor and mentees to provide leadership within the mentoring program itself. Opportunities to celebrate beneficial relationships that promote professional identity are invaluable to meeting the demand of an ever changing demographic for counselors that represent growing minority communities. While mentoring is only one strategy to foster inclusion of minority students at PWI’s, it is a tangible strategy that may render quantifiable and qualitative results for some counselor education programs.

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Appendix A

**Harambee Mentoring Initiative**

**Swahili word for “pulling together”**

**Purpose: To build and maintain the community**

**The Counseling Department**

**Invites You to Participate in the Harambee Initiative**

**Conception**

The Counseling faculty met with a group of African American students and program graduates in 2005 to discuss how they experienced the Counseling program. We were pleased to hear their positive comments and that they were interested in developing a mentoring program to enhance the professional development of our African American students and graduates.

The unique aspect of the mentoring program is that the mentors are alumni of the Graduate Counseling Department. Utilizing the alumni of the department increases the department’s ability to connect with the community by partnering with a counseling professional who is familiar with the Xavier program and the profession of counseling.

**Rationale**

Very few African/African Americans and Hispanics are employed as community or school counselors in the state. A mentoring program is one way of attracting students of color to our graduate program and assisting them in their professional development. The mentoring program is not only a strategy for recruitment but also has the goal of retention once admitted. Likewise, our African/African American and Hispanic/Latino graduates who participate as mentors will be better able to stay “connected” to the program and the profession.

**Participation**

Every African/African American and Hispanic/Latino student in the department is eligible to participate in the mentoring program, although not every student chooses to do so. If you choose to participate, every effort will be made to match you with your stated preference when possible, for a specific gender or a focus of school or community counseling (Thomas, 2001). If you are interested obtaining a mentor, simply come to the meeting on April 26, 2013. The meeting will be held in Hailstones 7 from 4:30pm-6:00pm. You will have an opportunity to meet other students in the program and faculty as well. See you soon!

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Appendix B

**HARAMBEE**

**MENTORING INITIATIVE**

**Swahili word for “pulling together”**

**Purpose: To build and maintain the counseling program community**

**MENTORING GUIDELINES AND AGREEMENT**

**FOCUS**

The focus of this initiative is Career Development and Role Modeling mentoring aimed at providing new skills and exposure to the counseling profession. The program also allows the mentee to learn, emulate, and identify with the mentor (Hackett & Byars, 1996). The mentor also provides career coaching that will impact the student’s self-efficacy, along with helping to develop a professional counselor’s identity in a culturally specific context (Brown & Lent, 1996**).**

**PARTICIPATION**

Every Hispanic/Latino, African American alumnus as well as Hispanic/Latino, African American graduate student is eligible to participate in the mentoring program. If you choose to participate, every effort is made to match you with a mentor of color and student in the program (Thomas, 2001). We value your contribution as a Counseling Graduate Student and Alumnus and for your assistance with the development of this valuable initiative.

**Time Frame: One Year Commitment.**

**Mentoring Connections:**

**Meetings: Fall and Spring Meeting**

**Additional Mentoring Interactions: Mentoring interactions may consist of telephone conversations, academic conferences, mentoring specific meetings or culturally specific events. The additional contacts can be as little as phone conversations or as much as in person meetings, this is to be negotiated between mentor and mentee.**

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**I agree to participate in The Harambee Initiative during Fall 2013 – Fall 2014. If I am not able to fulfill my commitment I will notify my mentor/mentee and faculty advisor as soon as possible**.

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Mentor/Mentee Date

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Appendix C

Cost of the Mentoring Program Implementation

1. Garnered the support of the department Faculty.
2. Garnered the support of the College Dean who subsequently provided monetary support for the initiative.
3. Implementation of two meetings per year spring and fall semesters (2005-2006).
4. All meetings were held in the designated Counseling Department classrooms and the university catering services were used to provide the food and beverages.
5. Purchased additional study material to be put on reserve in the university library for students of color to improve state licensure exam (2005-2006).
6. Primary Coordinator of the mentoring program attended the Mentoring Conference at New Mexico University with financial support from College Dean (2008).
7. Association for Counselor Education and Supervision – Collaborated with other Counselor Educators on Conference Presentation – Mentoring in Higher Education (2009).

**Yearly Cost:**

Fall Meeting Food and Beverage Cost $250.00 for 35 participants

Spring Meeting Food and Beverage Cost $250.00 for 25 participants

Fall and Spring Meeting (Gifts, University Paraphernalia) $100.00 for 20 gifts

Yearly Mentor of the Year Award $ 75.00

Total $675.00