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# Mentoring in the Middle Years: Major-Based Peer Mentors and an Experienced-Based Sociology Curriculum

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# Mentoring in the Middle Years: Major-Based Peer Mentors and an Experienced-Based Sociology Curriculum

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**KEYWORDS**—*peer mentor(ing), middle years, sophomore slump, high impact practices, student success, retention and graduation rate*

In this article, we present the design and evaluation of a middle years, major-based peer-mentoring program at a small public master's-granting institution in northern California. The middle years encompass the academic period between the end of first year and the beginning of senior year. The peer mentors in this program supported a middle years experience-based curriculum, while offering academic mentoring, career support, and connections to communities and other peers.

We begin by conceptualizing peer mentoring. We then provide an overview of the research literature on high impact practices, as they relate to persistence and graduation. We locate major-based peer mentoring in particular, and middle-years programs more generally, as atypical but effective strategies for supporting student success. We then outline the institutional context and detail a program design that targets key points in a high-impact middle-years curriculum, as well as structures for additional mentor outreach.

The outcomes discussed in this article are based on an online survey, as well as institutional and process evaluation data. Overall most students had met with their major peer mentors and reported positive outcomes related to academic success, major integration, and career planning. Students of color were significantly more likely than white students to have met with their peer mentors. First-generation students were significantly more likely than students whose parents had a college degree to have met with their peer mentors. Additionally, students of color were more likely than white students to report that a major peer mentor helped them attend a department event, a measure of academic integration.

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## PEER MENTORING AND HIGH IMPACT COLLEGE SUCCESS PRACTICES

—In this research, we use the concept “peer mentor(ing)” to refer to individuals, processes, and programmatic structures that constitute a system of communication and support for college students. In general, the scope, duration and approaches of peer mentor programs vary (Collier 2015), but the charge of peer mentors is usually to draw on their own life experiences and training to develop holistic supportive relationships with mentees while offering advice, information, and insights (Burke, Sauerheber, Dye and Hughey 2014; Zellner 2008; Benshoff 1993). The model of peer mentoring described in this research adopts this holistic approach and situates the peer mentor as a bridge to resources, as well as a reassuring source of street knowledge—much of the mentor tool kit comes from their own personal experiences with discovering, interpreting, and navigating the university academic culture and administrative structures.

In our work, we defined “peer mentors” as non-tutoring student support staff; they provided bridges to

tutoring, but did not provide those services directly. Peer mentor programs have been a central feature in the world of student affairs. Peer mentors are common in residence life, multicultural centers, and health centers. In the research literature, while the use of the term “tutor” was always linked with direct academic support (Cai, Lewis and Higdon 2015; Sloan, Davila and Malbon 2013), some research also used the term “peer mentor” to refer to this same direct delivery of assistance with academic work (Sherman and Burns 2015; Marcoux, Marken and Yu 2012).

Academic department adoption of non-tutoring peer mentors is less common, in general, and unique in its development in a non-STEM department such as Sociology. In the research literature, academic department-based peer mentor research that focused on non-tutoring models was primarily located in the fields of science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) with recent histories of addressing diversity and retention (Bowling and Taylor 2015; Gross, Iverson, Willett and Manduca 2015; Tenenbaum, Anderson, Jett and Yourick 2014; Hogan et. al. 2017). To that extent, the research in this article contributes to the development, understanding, and evaluation of the unique challenges and opportunities for non-tutoring peer mentor models within academic programs in general, and social sciences more specifically. Furthermore, this work provides a model for leveraging major-based peer mentors to support high impact and inclusive curricular designs (Kuh 2008) that contribute to measures of student success, such as persistence and graduation.

Differences in college student persistence rates are often theorized in relationship to student integration (Tinto 1993). Academic integration includes meeting with advisors, discussing academic plans, participating in study groups and attending career-related workshops; social integration includes going places with friends from school and involvement in campus clubs. First-generation college students experience lower levels of both social and academic integration compared to students with parents who have a bachelor’s degree or even some college experience (Nunez and Cuccaro-Alamin 1998). The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reports that students of color are more likely than white students to be first generation (NCES 2009). They face complicated higher education navigation challenges that include daily microaggressions (Sue 2010), as well as outright bigotry, while historically white campuses slowly reinvent

structures and policies to align with the needs of multicultural and diverse student bodies (Touchstone 2013).

Older models for student support focused on “assimilation.” These models problematized “differences” as deficits in experience and values (Guiffrida 2006; Hurtado and Carter 1997). These deficit models of student success directed primary focus to program designs that “fix” students so that they can be successful in relatively static institutional environments.

More recent student success models define diversity and difference as an asset. They value contributions and strengths that every student can bring to their classrooms and programs (Freire [2005] 1970; Martin Lohfink 2005). Experience-based curriculum (Kuh 2008) and peer relationships (Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridge, and Hayek 2006; Yorke and Thomas 2003) are among the high impact practices that address inclusive student engagement and success. This work on integration has been linked with theory on upward mobility and cultural capital (Bourdieu [1977] 1984) and social capital linked to peer mentoring in higher education (Moschetti et. al. 2018). Some have designed university-wide mentoring programs focused on developing cultural capital through explicit linkages to academic and career networks (Ortiz and Virnoche 2015; Collier and Morgan 2008; Stanton-Salazar and Dornbusch 1995).

One recent pilot study by National Institute of Health researchers examined a peer mentor training model that “embraces and celebrates the cultural diversity within mentoring relationships” (Byars-Winston, Womack, Butz, McGee, Quinn, Utzerath, Saetermoe, Thomas 2018: 86). Researchers found that participants experienced cultural awareness training as valuable to their work with students from diverse backgrounds. Many peer mentor programs are now incorporating cultural competency training to harness student assets and strengths. In 2012, Michigan State University released a mentor training toolkit that emphasized training mentors to better understand their own cultural backgrounds as assets in developing peer mentor relationships (Bottomley, 2019).

Based on American College Testing (ACT) survey data from 258 four-year colleges and universities, students at the second year and into the latter part of their middle years need particular advising and support (ACT 2010:5). This period, sometimes referred to as the “sophomore slump,” represents a second major flight period for reasons different from those for leaving in the first year. Students who were successful in their first year need to, in

their middle years, develop connections to academic and career paths, build new relationships that are supportive of that path, and engage in “focused exploration” through service and internship experiences that are much more intentional compared to often free-floating, freshmen-year involvement (Schaller 2005). According to Saveliff (2003), while social ties in the first semester were stronger predictors of Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) student persistence, academic (and career) ties were stronger predictors of EOP student persistence in subsequent years (Saveliff, 2003). EOP is a U.S. Department of Education TRIO program that provides comprehensive support for low-income, first-generation students.

A 2005 survey of 382 public and private four-year institutions found that only a little more than 35% of the institutions had at least one initiative specifically directed at sophomores (Tobolowsky and Cox 2007) and very few of those involved peer mentors. These sophomore programs were designed to address the early slump period focused on career planning (74%), major selection (65%), and/or academic advising (61%). About half the programs (46%) incorporated social events for sophomores. Yet only 15% of the institutions adopted models that employed peer mentors for sophomores. Within the California State University system, California Polytechnic State University (Cal Poly) provided a typical example of a sophomore program most common at the national level—they connected students and faculty mentors through a living community (CalPoly 2010) but did not include peer mentors.

The American Sociological Association (ASA) has taken particular interest in studying the academic success outcomes of students in our own discipline. The roots of Sociology and a recent renewed interest in social action (Dentler 2002; Burawoy 2004) provides rich grounds for designing and studying high impact practices like peer mentoring. Spalter-Roth, Senter, Stone and Wood (2010) suggest that major to career transition work is very important for students in majors like Sociology that are missing the obvious vocational pathways of majors like Nursing or even Social Work. Spalter-Roth, Van Vooren, and Senter (2015) found that Sociology is a particularly strong major for helping first-generation students overcome barriers in social and cultural capital.

During the last 20 years, one of the ASA flagship journals, *Teaching Sociology*, published several studies that discuss mentoring. Yet as observed within broader mentoring research outside our discipline, we found no

evidence of major-based undergraduate peer mentoring parallel to our model. Instead, the research in *Teaching Sociology* focused on mentoring of graduate student teaching that involved peer support (Jungels, Brown, Stompler, and Yasumoto 2014; Wurgler, VanHeuvelen, Loehr and Grace 2014; Hunt, Mair, and Atkinson 2012), as well as teaching collaboration models that involved faculty mentors (Finch and Fernández 2014; Moss and Blouin 2014). Other work on graduate-level mentoring focused on professional socialization (Keith and Moore 1995; Jones, Davis and Price 2004) and preparing doctoral students to move into full-time faculty positions.

The *Teaching Sociology* research that focused on undergraduate sociology mentoring addressed the benefits of student-faculty relationships in collaborative research (Shostack, Girouard, Cunningham and Cadge 2010; Howery and Rodriguez 2006; Crawford, Suarez-Balcazar, Reich, Figert, and Nyden 1996). At the undergraduate level, Howery and Rodriguez (2006) noted that collaborative research provided a “fruitful” context for student-faculty mentoring of minoritized students who might not otherwise seek or find mentoring. Other research on undergraduate peer mentoring appeared in the form of “peer facilitators” or instructional leaders for service learning (Chesler, Ford, Galura and Charbeneau 2006) or classroom-based peer learning models (Foster 2015; Petronito 1991). These models rely on the tutor conceptualization of peer mentors that is different than the model in our study. As noted above, we found no other research suggesting the formal adoption of Sociology non-tutoring peer-mentor models like ours.

### **A SHIFTING INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT: THE UNIVERSITY SYSTEM, THE CAMPUS, AND THE MAJOR**

Humboldt State University (HSU) is one of 23 campuses in the California State University (CSU) system. HSU is the northern-most campus and in a rural setting with 74% of students originating from areas more than 250 miles away (HSUIR 2012). In the fall term of 2012, HSU served 8,116 students through 49 baccalaureate degree majors, 12 graduate programs, and 14 credential programs (HSUIR 2012). In the last several years enrollments have dropped and the campus has experienced a series of deep budget cuts.

We launched the major-based peer mentoring program as the campus engaged with a CSU system-wide retention and graduation initiative (GI 2025). The initiative called for the closure of student opportunity gaps,

as well as improvements in retention rates and decreases in years to graduation. During this same period, while first-generation, as well as Pell-eligible students, continued to make up more than half the HSU student population, the campus increased enrollment of minoritized students. In 2013, the campus earned the federal designation of “Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI)” (U.S Department of Education 2016). By 2018, students of color made up almost 50% of the student body. Throughout this period, the Department of Sociology maintained greater student diversity than the broader campus. With majors in Criminology and Justice Studies (CJS) and Sociology (SOC), by 2018, more than two-thirds of the students in the Department were first-generation college students. More than two-thirds received Pell grants. And more than two-thirds of students in the Department identified as students of color.

HSU students encounter a conflicted campus environment and community. University classroom windows frame vistas of a redwood forest, a local marsh, and the Pacific Ocean. These sites fuel the curiosity and commitment of Department faculty and students engaged in courses like Environmental Crime, Forests and Culture, Social Ecology, and Environmental Inequality and Globalization. At the same time, the rural California community that surrounds the campus is predominantly white. The red terracotta rooftop tiles across campus buildings signal a history marked by colonialism. That history includes the genocide of the Wiyot people on whose land the university now towers. This continued dark side of the community is evidenced in news headlines that report student and community fear and anger with racism and violence, including the 2017 murder of David Josiah Lawson who was a second-year CJS major at the time he was stabbed at an off-campus party.

Students in the CJS and SOC majors experience a department with a long history and strong identity in social justice and change. In that way, courses like Community Organizing provide tools for one way to address the world around them. Faculty and students are engaged in community action research, activism, and applied sociological research. In much of the coursework and in related applied research and activism, race, class, gender, sexuality, and citizenship are organizing frameworks that drive us in posing challenging questions about power and privilege, and help in developing solutions that support social justice. To some extent, the academic

classrooms in the Department provide space for students to understand, discuss, and work together on addressing injustices around them.

Like many programs, during the last 20 years the tenure density of the Department has decreased and we rely more and more on critical “temporary” faculty members. In 2001 the department employed nine tenure-line faculty members and few lecturers to serve one relatively small (136) undergraduate major and a master’s program. In 2012, we launched a new major in Criminology and Justice Studies (CJS). In 2018, with the additional CJS major and triple the overall Department enrollments, seven tenure-line faculty members and the equivalent of almost five full-time lecturers supported the three programs. In 2013 during the first year of the CJS program, we enrolled 61 CJS majors and in the next academic year, that number more than doubled to 149. Since 2012, the MA program averaged 20 graduate students (HSUIR 2015) and major enrollments grew. At census fall 2018, we enrolled 367 majors across our two BA programs.

### **PROGRAM DESIGN: PEER MENTORS SUPPORT AN EXPERIENCE-BASED CURRICULUM AND HOLISTIC ADVISING**

—In January 2013, we launched one of the first “major-based” peer-mentor programs on campus. Alexis Grant, the second author on this paper, was the grassroots catalyst for the initiative. She was already well-networked and respected among her peers in the Sociology community and it was her idea to start a mentoring program. She was a mature transfer student who had experience with training and outreach for AmeriCorps in the Washington, D.C. region. Her work had involved mobilizing young people to be active members in the community, as well as mentoring AmeriCorps members. Her mentoring supported the retention of the corps members in their year-long service commitments.

We designed the Sociology peer mentor program to provide one-to-one mentoring that supported a Department practice of holistic advising, as well as outreach to groups of Sociology majors in key courses. This course outreach focused on pivotal points in the curriculum where we knew peer support could be most beneficial. Peer mentors met with students in a second-year service learning class, a third-year professional development seminar, and in courses where students prepared materials required for enrollment in capstone internship and thesis courses. The curriculum itself was informed by

research on high impact teaching and learning, as discussed in the literature review of this article. The curriculum addresses career uncertainties. It also creates connections between developing academic skills, “real life” experiences, and imagined post-academic life.

The mentors also served as social links to support student involvement with major-related activities and academic community building. They encouraged mentees to attend a variety of department events from degree planning workshops to beach bonfires. They also collaborated with the Sociology Student Association on planning events and generating participation. In the following sections, we provide further detail on the curriculum and the role of peer mentors in supporting students in the program.

**Service learning second-year course.** Since 2010, the Department consistently taught the second year “Social Issues and Action” course with a service-learning component. CJS majors enroll in a parallel “Criminalization/Inequalities” class. All students work with a faculty service learning and internship coordinator, as well as the university service learning office, to identify a community organization of interest and complete 13–20 hours of service in that placement. Service learning experiences include everything from assisting at the local food bank to playing board games and talking with teens at juvenile hall. As these are short-term community experiences, they usually involve relatively simple tasks while allowing students a small window into the operations of a community group.

Peer mentors work with the faculty coordinator to support Sociology majors as they search for and confirm their service learning placements. Service learning engages students with the community at an early stage, begins to build their network, and structures an opportunity to think about possible career pathways. While some students are already seasoned volunteers, others have never volunteered or are not familiar with the local community. The prospect of cold calling employers can be very intimidating. Therefore, peer mentors were crucial in supporting this process.

Peer mentors introduced themselves to the service-learning students during the first weeks in the semester. They share their own experiences and offer to meet with students one-to-one to brainstorm on service learning opportunities and make contact with organizational staff. They provided students with their contact

information and how they can best connect with them. Mentors also used the student sociology club as an avenue for outreach and connection with students. They attended sociology club events, meetings, and outreach events designed for clubs by the university.

**Professional development seminar.** After several years as a pilot elective course, in 2013 the Department began to require a one-unit professional development seminar for students in their second or third year. We created the seminar in response to student feedback that the résumé and career work we had been doing in the capstone course was too little and too late. We are one of only about half (51%) of U.S. Sociology programs that deliver career-related content formally in our curriculum and one of one-third (32.9%) of programs that require students to take the course (American Sociological Association 2018). Integrating key elements of professional development and job search (Hecht 2016) into a required seminar addresses career-mentoring challenges for large enrollment majors. The seminars also address equity gaps that develop around professional mentoring delivery without the structure that curricular integration offers. Furthermore, with a professional foundation in place via the seminar, one-to-one student-faculty advising and peer mentoring can build on that knowledge.

Major peer mentors are required to have taken or be enrolled in the professional development seminar. With these skills in place, they are able to support their mentees in seeking service learning placements, internships, and jobs. The proseminar topics include building résumés and cover letters, as well as networking logic, organization systems, and other skills from elevator speeches to working a room. The Harvard Business School reported that 65 to 85% of jobs are found through networking (Harvard 2012). Students also learn to plan and manage a job search, from creating a system to keep track of all the moving pieces to business correspondence and interview preparation. We partner with career center staff so that everyone completes at least one mock interview. And as a class they talk with a panel of community professionals who share their experiences of hiring new staff members. The panel discussion is usually followed by a reception where students are encouraged to apply the networking skills they learned in class.

In the early phases, we team-taught the seminar to give faculty members a chance to solidify their own comfort levels with not only teaching, but also implementing

these professional practices. The instructors also collaborate with professional staff at the career center for mock interview support, as well as computer lab trainings where students are introduced to the latest online internship and job sites.

For students planning graduate study, we offer a parallel seminar with a slightly different focus. We build CVs and statements of purpose. We plan for building research experiences that make students competitive in their graduate school applications. Students also develop strategies and systems for researching and organizing their graduate program search processes, as well as linking networking strategies with that search. They all participate in mock interviews where their peers watch and participate in providing feedback—they learn quickly to identify strong points and areas that need work in peer interviews. During the final graduate school seminar meeting, the class meets with a panel of experts. Most terms we include panelists who speak to PhD, MA, MSW and law school considerations and admissions.

**Capstone thesis or internship.** The capstone is the final experience-based course. In the semester before their capstone, students must decide and get instructor approval to enroll. The preparation for enrollment requires considerable work. Peer mentors are trained on how to support students in the planning processes, even if they have not yet completed capstone themselves.

Peer mentors accompany the capstone faculty coordinator for thesis and internship classes when they meet with students in key gateway classes: research methods and theory. In this meeting, the faculty coordinator reviews the options for capstone and explains the details of forms and contracts required to secure permission to enroll in the internship class versus the senior thesis course. Here again, peer mentors offer to set up meetings with students to help them with the process. For internship students, this often involves 2–3 informational interviews with area organizations and then development of a contract for at least 90 hours of work. For example, one recent student contracted to help plan and coordinate an annual fundraiser for Big Brothers Big Sisters. For thesis students, they must secure approval on a research proposal. Because of the department emphasis on social justice and public sociology, sometimes senior thesis students work for or collaborate with campus departments or community organizations. On the other hand, because of relationships with research centers on campus, sometimes

our students choose to secure research assistantships for their internship experiences. In addition, peer mentors encourage their mentees to attend the final presentations of thesis presentations and internship poster sessions scheduled in the last week of each term.

**Supporting holistic advising.** The Department integrated major-based peer mentors into three existing advising mechanisms: (i) pre-registration group advising; (ii) pre-registration one-to-one faculty advising; and (iii) walk-in main office traffic where students get answers to general questions about the department and other resources. In 2017, the Department discontinued group advising and adopted a policy for holistic one-to-one advising; all majors meet with a professional or faculty advisor at least once each term. Advisors then release registration system advising holds allowing students to enroll in classes for the next term. Peer mentors offer “pre-advising” in anticipation of busy registration period schedules. Pre-advising helps students make the best use of their faculty advising time. Peer mentors help students identify questions, as well as prepare and review important advising materials, such as their degree plan and paperwork required to register for some specialized classes (internship and thesis). All students in our majors develop two or four-year online degree plans that link directly to degree audits in an online academic records system.

**PROCESS EVALUATION: CHALLENGES AND ADJUSTMENTS**—Throughout the early development of the program, Mary (the first author on this paper) collected qualitative process evaluation data from peer mentors and mentees, as well as from staff and faculty members. She noted information shared in peer mentor meetings, as well as through informal conversations in the office and the hallways. In this section, we discuss some of these data, particularly as they related to changes we implemented in the program design. We focus on identifying peer mentors, structuring contact, navigating caseloads, and training.

**Identifying peer mentors.** The peer mentors themselves reported overall positive experiences in their work supporting students in our majors. We learned that the best peer mentors were outgoing and mature students who also possessed a good amount of “street smarts” about getting things done on the HSU campus. Some skills/knowledge could be provided through training, but major mentors really did need an already developed sense



of the campus, the department, and the major. In addition, the same student in the major who made an excellent writing tutor (quiet and steady) was not necessarily the same student who would be really outgoing, best received, and trusted as a peer mentor.

Students found it easy to talk to Alexis and she often worked with students referred to her by friends. “You need to talk to Alexis...” was the word on the street. Alexis had come up through the community college system like more than half of the other students in the Sociology major. She worked hard and had excellent grades. As an African-American transfer student, she related to the struggles of other students, including the racial challenges of studying on a predominantly white campus in a very white region of the state. The Sociology major was more diverse than most other programs on campus, yet students still experienced struggles with microaggressions (Sue 2019) and structural racism (Crenshaw, Luke Harris and Lipsitz 2018). In addition to navigating the racial landscape of campus, majors also struggled with the demands of being student athletes and parents. Outgoing mentors built rapport and trust to help students meet a range of needs.

**Structuring contact: avoiding over-advising and reaching those who most need support.** In the original program structure, we built two main mechanisms to connect mentees with a peer mentor: the first caseload method mirrored the design of the HSU first-year peer-mentoring program (Ortiz and Virnoche 2015). The second mechanism relied on faculty members connecting students with peer mentors. Relying on caseload lists, Sociology peer mentors pulled majors to them through frequent communications in person and via email. The three mentors led by Alexis sent out initial communications and visited classes. From these communications, and targeted communication at advising time, they generated meetings. Alexis in her playful yet assertive style would see a mentee on campus and remind them that they owed her a meeting. The second method involved working collaboratively with the faculty. Faculty members pushed Sociology majors to mentors with emails such as “Could you check in on Jackie Jones? Just ask her how things are going?”

In the second year, where we initiated the caseload lists, students were coming to Alexis and asking if they could switch mentors. Alexis did some mentoring of students off her list, but her workload became overwhelming. It was challenging to manage the demands, as the

students knew Alexis was the mentor with the most experience. At the same time, she was mentoring students who perhaps needed less support. At least a few students reported to mentors that there were too many emails and efforts to get them to meet and that we should cut back on those efforts. Some students who had Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) advisors, faculty advisors, and now a major peer mentor said they were “over advised.” Yet Alexis told her mentees who were also EOP students that she could really help with “major” advising. Another peer mentor felt that in general, the pre-advising meetings were the time when he had the most tangible outcomes—that maybe we could cut back and focus mentoring on just a few key things. In general, the mentors said that plugging into class structures was the easiest and most accepted way to have contact with mentees and work from there.

Similar “over-advising” concerns were part of broader campus conversations that sought to identify and target students with the fewest advising resources and avoid adding yet another layer of support to students who were already well-supported. While we know that some students have multiple contacts with staff and faculty members, as well as first-year peer mentors, there are other students whose one-to-one contact with even one faculty member was fleeting at best. The question remains regarding how to get students who need more advising to contact the right people and when to leave students alone. With a relatively small department, Sociology faculty members were able to provide some of that direction as they identified students in their classes who needed mentoring support. As the Department grew, identifying students in need of peer-mentoring support became more difficult.

In 2015, at the suggestion of the office manager, peer mentors began staffing the main office 4–6 hours each week. Office hours in a more remote general resource room had been too lonely. This main office availability not only provided relief to the office professional staff, but also gave peer mentors greater visibility. The new structure generated an even more lively Department office culture: many students stopped by to say “hello” and more students could receive immediate extended support from peer mentors.

**Creating and navigating peer mentor caseloads.** In the first years of peer mentoring, all Sociology majors who had 25–90 units received an email in the fall introducing

the major peer mentors and letting them know that a mentor would be contacting them. We divided the lists of potential mentees between two mentors and at least initially paired students who identified as African American or Latino with mentors who identified similarly. The program only employed 2–3 peer mentors in any given year. After that first year and as our enrollments grew, we abandoned matching based on ethnicity or other identities. Regardless of ethnicity, in that first year many students encouraged their friends to talk to Alexis, who identified as African American and had the most experience. In addition, in that first year, even majors who had more than 90 units asked to meet with Alexis and we added them to the list of students who we considered part of our mentoring population.

At the start of the third year, at the request of past transfer students, mentors began outreach via email to transfer students over the summer. Sociology at that time enrolled 30–40 transfer students every fall and the system required that they have all their lower division coursework complete. As a designated transfer student advisor for years, Mary saw many students in shock as they worked out tightly scheduled degree plans that potentially had them graduating in three or four semesters. They had a short period to transition into a new university setting, connect, and move on.

We started the program with mentor-mentee intensive email and personal contact. This was the model for the university-wide, first-year peer-mentoring program. We scaled this back to a model that structured mentor outreach around two particular times and related objectives: (i) September/February mentors focused on getting students to department social events, career and study abroad fairs, and providing transfer student transition support; and (ii) October/November and March/April focused on pre-advising meetings to help students get ready for required meetings with their faculty advisors.

**Peer mentor training.** Mentors received training before and during their mentoring experience. Because most academic departments seldom have the capacity to fully train mentor staff, we initially looked outside for training programs organized in student affairs. While a centralized training program for student leaders was not fully developed on our campus, several cohorts of major-based peer mentors participated in segments of trainings that were designed for mentors employed by the campus first-year peer mentor program. This spring training included

introductions to student development theory, principles of mentoring, campus demographic and retention information, cultural competency skills, leadership, and campus resources. In August, major-based peer mentors also participated in parts of a week-long, first-year mentor training (Ortiz and Virnoche 2015).

In recent years, because of over-taxation of student affairs staff asked to also support our academic mentors, we moved to more limited in-house training. We tried a couple of different models for training shared across 6–8 academic departments with major-based peer mentoring. In general, the shift created instability in training delivery and further highlighted a significant need for a campus-wide infrastructure to support major-based peer mentors.

### ONLINE SURVEY EVALUATION OF MAJOR PEER MENTORING

—In February 2014, to generate initial assessment data and inform potential program changes, we administered an online questionnaire to 90 Sociology majors on our mentoring list who had received emails and potentially met with our major peer mentors. Some of these students were part of the first year of mentoring and continued in the second year. The response rate was 43%. More than half the respondents (61%) identified as female, a rate slightly higher than female representation in the major (57%). The sample included 34% (14) white students and 32% (11) Latino students. The other respondents identified as bi/multi-racial (3), African American (1), and American Indian (1). Six (15%) students identified as other or did not respond to the question about ethnicity. While African Americans were underrepresented given their enrollment in Sociology, majors identifying with other race and ethnic groups were appropriately represented in the sample, though small numbers make it statistically impossible to draw conclusions based on single racial/ethnic identifications.

More than two thirds (67%) of the respondents identified as sophomores or juniors. While 48% of the students at the university in 2013–14 identified as first generation, 69% (26) of our respondents indicated that they were first generation college students. About half (19) indicated that they worked and went to school.

**Mentoring impacted academic success, major integration, and career planning.** More than two-thirds (71%,  $n = 38$ ) of the respondents indicated that they had met with a major peer mentor (TABLE 1). On all but one measure of

academic success, major integration, and career planning, at least two-thirds of respondents who met with major peer mentors reported receiving support in these areas. As noted earlier, major integration and career planning are particularly salient factors that maintain student success in the middle years of their college experience (Saveliff 2002; Schaller 2005).

Fifty percent of respondents indicated that a peer mentor helped them attend a department event. Almost all (92%) of respondents indicated a peer mentor helped them feel welcome in the program and more than three-fourths (79%) indicated that they received help from their mentor in connecting with faculty. Likewise, more than two-thirds (67%) reported mentor help with career planning. Overall, the results indicate that the mentor curriculum and outreach was successful in reaching the program objectives.

**First generation and students of color more likely to meet with peer mentors.** Generation status and ethnic/racial identity impacted the likelihood that students chose to meet with a peer mentor. First generation students were more likely (80%) than continuing generation students (46%) to meet with a peer mentor ( $\chi^2 (1, N = 36) = 4.3, P < 0.05$ ). Likewise, students of color were more likely (81%) than white students (46%) to meet with a peer mentor ( $\chi^2 (1, N = 29) = 3.91, P < 0.10$ ). These outcomes on the use of peer mentoring are promising given reported retention and graduation gaps for these groups of students. As noted in other research, peer mentors can serve as a vital bridge to achieving intermediary objectives of the middle years (academic integration and career planning) that lead to retention and graduation. There was no statistically significant relationship between gender and respondent reports of meeting with a major peer mentor.

**Major peer mentoring impacts major integration for students of color.** Of the students who met with major peer mentors, students of color were more likely than white students to report that a mentor helped them attend department events. More than two-thirds (67%) of students of color reported support with event attendance compared to 17% of white students ( $\chi^2 (1, N = 18) = 4.0, P < 0.1$ ). Participating in department-related events was one measure of academic integration included in the online survey. As noted earlier, connection to an academic program of study is particularly vital for students in the middle years. These connections support a sense of belonging in a course of study. Coupled with a post-graduation focal point (career direction), these experiences affirm

meaning and worth as students face the day-to-day challenges of being a student. Students of color in a predominantly white campus and community often experience additional barriers to academic integration. Major peer mentoring provided particularly promising results for mitigating one of these challenges for students of color.

**Connection, security, and guidance: peer mentors "in my corner".** The survey included two open-ended questions directly related to major-based peer mentoring. The first asked: "What have been the best aspects of major-based peer mentoring for you?" More than half the participants (55%  $n = 21$ ) provided one or two sentence/phrase responses. More than half the comments related to the significance of support coming from a peer. Their relationships with peer mentors created a sense of security. Overall, they noted that peer mentors helped them create connections to other students, faculty, resources, and a check that they were on track. One first generation white female transfer student wrote the longest response that captures the sentiment across comments:

My mentor was willing to stay connected with me during my first semester. This extra resource enabled me to feel more secure in my new surroundings with the Sociology Department. Additionally, my peer mentor met with me in person to listen to concerns that I had regarding my course and gave me suggestions and options. As a result of this regular personal and email interaction, I was able to stay on track and not give up on myself when things got tough during the semester. My peer mentor was genuinely interested in my well-being and how I was doing in my classes and with my instructors. It meant a lot to me knowing that someone was in my corner rooting for my academic success. I am on a clear path towards my graduation at this time...It is a much-needed and invaluable resource.

Another student, a first-generation Latino (male) wrote:

The fact that you can talk to another student definitely adds another level of comfort and security when inquiring about classes to take in the following semester.

The second open-ended question asked "What

**TABLE 1.** Major Peer Mentoring Outcomes by Gender, Ethnicity, and Generation Status (n) percentage

	Overall	Gender		Δ	Ethnicity		Δ	Generation		Δ
		Women	Men		White Students	Students of Color		Continuing	First	
Met with a Major Peer Mentor	71 (38)	73 (22)	62 (13)	-11	46 (13)	81 (16)	+35*	46 (11)	80 (25)	+34**
A mentor helped me...	(24)	(16)	(7)		(6)	(12)		(5)	(19)	
<b>Academic Success</b>										
Be successful in courses	83	75	100	+25	83	92	+9	100	79	-21
Be on track to graduate	75	69	86	+17	67	92	+25	74	80	+6
Make course & graduation plans	71	69	71	+2	67	92	+25	60	74	+14
<b>Major Integration</b>										
Attend department events	50	38	71	+33	17	67	+50*	60	47	-13
Feel welcome in the program	92	88	100	+12	83	92	+9	100	90	-10
Connect with faculty	79	75	86	+11	67	83	+16	100	74	-26
With career planning resources	67	69	57	-12	50	75	+25	100	58	-42

\*\* P < 0.05 \* P < 0.10 (Fisher's Exact Test - Small Sample Size Adjustment)

suggestions do you have for improving major-based peer mentoring?" Almost half of the 24 short responses to this prompt actually reinforced the current program design (e.g. "none"; "nothing I liked my experience"). Two to three comments referred to access to and timing of mentoring outreach, opportunities for interactions, and the degree of intrusiveness our program should pursue. They also suggested more mentors, drop-in office hours, and earlier contact for transfer students (implemented and discussed above). They also wanted more social and networking events. Their comments about intrusiveness indicated differing needs in this area: some asked that students be allowed to opt out of continued contact from mentors and others suggested that everyone should be required to participate in at least one in-person meeting with a mentor.

### **PEER MENTORING AND POSITIVE GRADUATION OUTCOMES**

—In this section, we discuss institution-level graduation data related to upper division transfer students. We focus on upper division transfer students because they have been a consistent target for the most focused outreach and interventions of our major peer mentor program. Transfer students by definition are already academic success stories—in most cases they have transferred from community colleges and have done well in their coursework. In addition, they have also been successful in navigating the bureaucratic hurdles of transferring to a new institution of higher education. At the same time, transfer students face a compressed timeline for academic integration and career planning. Most transfer students enter our Department and develop a four-semester plan for graduation with an advisor. For them, the reality of such a rapid trajectory to graduation and the next chapter in their professional life is both exciting and daunting.

Sociology transfer cohorts who had major peer mentors had higher graduation rates than earlier cohorts. The 2012 upper division sociology transfer cohort ( $n = 23$ ) experienced our first and most intrusive efforts at peer mentoring in their second term. They generated a drastic spike (70%) in two-year graduation rates compared to the two-year rates for 2010 and 2011 cohorts (30% and 48%). After that initial spike, on average 52% of upper division sociology transfer students graduated within two years (cohorts 2013–2016) compared to 31% of all HSU upper division transfer students, and 45% of transfer students in

the College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences that is home to our Department

In 2013, the Department began accepting upper division transfer students into a new major in Criminology and Justice Studies (CJS). The institutional data indicate that Department-level positive graduation outcomes carried over to transfer students in the new CJS major. Fifty-seven percent of 2013–2016 CJS cohorts achieved a two-year graduation rate. In the periods discussed above, cohort sizes are relatively small (10–36; mean = 22). In addition, it is impossible at the Department level of analysis to untangle positive outcomes potentially linked to major peer mentors from other simultaneous Department interventions and practices (e.g., elimination of group advising, program early adoption of electronic degree planning tools). Comparison data from all-university and college average outcomes suggest more research is needed using university-level data that control for variances in department advising and major-peer mentor practices. While a controlled study of graduation outcomes was not the focus of this research project, the institutional data presented here suggest that major-based peer mentoring should be considered as a factor in future evaluation work.

### **DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

—Overall students reported that contact with peer mentors positively influenced their experience in the Department of Sociology. Most Sociology majors met with their major peer mentors and, of those, most reported that the mentors had helped them across multiple measures—academic success, major integration, and career planning. Students of color were significantly more likely than white students to have met with their peer mentors. First-generation students were significantly more likely than students whose parents had a college degree to have met with their peer mentors. Additionally, students of color were more likely than white students to report that a major peer mentor helped them attend a department event, a measure of academic integration.

During the 2014–15 academic year, with Alexis graduated and Mary on sabbatical, the Department peer mentor program experienced sustainability challenges. A new Department chair added peer mentor coordination to a long list of other responsibilities amidst a loss of faculty members to leaves and retirements. At the same time Department enrollments across all majors peaked in 2014 at 435; recall that the major peer mentor program

was launched when enrollment averaged 136. Yet even in this tumultuous period, graduation outcomes remained strong for upper division transfer students in our majors.

Given that positive outcomes on intermediary measures of academic success, academic integration, and career planning took place when the department was much smaller, follow up survey research is planned for 2019. This research will explore the extent to which positive outcomes have been maintained, as enrollments grow and mentors are asked to support greater numbers of their peers. In addition, as noted earlier, more research using institution-level retention and graduation data is also needed. Ideally, this work would control for variance in department-level advising and adoption of major peer mentoring. This work may strengthen the link between major peer mentoring to graduation outcomes. Finally, we recommend qualitative interviews that center student experience of mentoring, advising, and professional development curriculum outlined in this paper. More detailed narrative accounts would lend to better understanding of the nuances of student experiences and related possibilities for adjusting Departmental structures to best support middle year objectives of academic integration and career planning.

Since fall 2015, with six tenure-line faculty back in place and plans for additional hires, Mary resumed coordination responsibilities for the Department peer mentor program. In addition, she resumed consulting on peer mentor program development with faculty members outside the Department. She also provided modest levels of continued cross-program peer mentor coordination. In 2019, as we send this article to press, there remains interest in maintaining peer-mentor programs across several university departments, but there had been no movement institutionally to resource an infrastructure to support these programs.

On the bright side, the HSU 2018 Strategic Enrollment Management Plan directed the campus to build support for transfer students. In addition, Mary worked with the College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences to develop a proposal for GI 2025 funds to support a college structure for major-based peer mentor coordination. Funding of that proposal is pending.

As noted above, a central infrastructure is particularly important for faculty members, typically Department Chairs who have less knowledge about peer mentor program design and need resources for mentor training

and support with the day-to-day coordination of peer mentors. The research presented in this paper provides some evidence to support allocation of resources to these infrastructures. Major-based peer mentoring in the Department of Sociology, likely in combination with high impact curriculum and holistic advising, was positively related to academic integration and career planning, as well as improved graduation outcomes.

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