



Examining Collaboration in Faculty and Student Partnerships of a Community College Pilot Mentoring Program

Raquel Corona

CUNY Queensborough Community College

Madiha Shameem

CUNY Queensborough Community College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://encompass.eku.edu/pedagogicon>



Part of the [Educational Leadership Commons](#), and the [Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Commons](#)

Corona, Raquel and Shameem, Madiha, "Examining Collaboration in Faculty and Student Partnerships of a Community College Pilot Mentoring Program" (2021). *Pedagogicon Conference Proceedings*. 2. <https://encompass.eku.edu/pedagogicon/2020/reciprocity/2>

This Event is brought to you for free and open access by the Conferences and Events at Encompass. It has been accepted for inclusion in Pedagogicon Conference Proceedings by an authorized administrator of Encompass. For more information, please contact Linda.Sizemore@eku.edu.

Author Biography

Raquel Corona is a Lecturer at Queensborough Community College and a doctoral candidate at St. John's University. She has worked previously in writing across the curriculum and her dissertation is a rhetorical exploration of how transnationalism affects the dissemination and circulation of stories about the Latinx female body and sex.

Madiha Shameem is a Lecturer at Queensborough Community College (QCC) and has been a part of QCC since 2009. She teaches various English courses as well as developmental reading and writing courses. She has completed her Master's degree in English Literature and will begin a doctoral degree program in Literacy with a concentration in TESOL in 2021.

2020 Pedagogicon Proceedings

A Closer Look at Collaboration in Faculty and Student Partnerships of a Community College Pilot Mentoring Program

Raquel Corona and Madiha Shameem

Queensborough Community College, City University of New York

This essay presents a study of a pilot mentoring program at a community college in the New York City area that was structured in alignment with Students as Partners. The faculty and peer mentors in this pilot program were partnered to work together to mentor a group of incoming freshmen exiting remediation. The study focuses on the mentor partnerships specifically. Through the analysis of end-of-semester reflection mentors composed together, we reflect on how they collaborated to mentor their students and implement a program for mentees.

Introduction

Community college students tend to work a significant amount of hours and usually only go to campus to attend class. As a result, they often have limited engagement in non-academic activities leading to limited social engagement at the college and a weaker support system. Mentoring has been a crucial tool in helping community college students engage in their college experience, form a sense of community, and increase their chances of success (Crisp, 2010). Although mentoring at the college level can be found in orientation or student engagement offices within student affairs or through faculty advisement related to their academic discipline, the pilot mentoring program of focus for this essay was a collaborative and experimental endeavor between the English department, Math department, and a pre-college remedial program in the spring of 2019. The goal of the grant and the mentoring program was to provide support to students exiting remediation and entering their first semester of credit-bearing courses at the college by assigning them both a faculty mentor and a peer mentor. However, this support was not academic in nature nor focused on assisting students directly with their writing or math skills. Instead, the mentors were expected to help students feel a sense of belonging to the campus community, encourage participation in campus events, student clubs, research, and internships, as well as connect students with campus resources and academic support while assisting

students in gaining a better understanding of the habits of a successful college student (i.e. organization, time management, and study skills).

It is important to note that this was a pilot program and there was only enough funding for it to run for one semester. Because of those constraints, as faculty coordinators of the English mentoring program we had the opportunity to structure the program in whatever way we deemed best. (There were a different set of faculty coordinators for the Math department.) Essentially, we were responsible for recruiting, hiring, and training a set of mentors and matching them to a set of mentees and then utilizing a budget for a set of programs. After some conversation, we decided to partner the mentors (faculty and peer) for them to work together as a team in overseeing a set of mentees and create one program for the mentees. By forming these teams, we also intended to provide our faculty and peer mentors an opportunity to gain experience working as equal partners, something that occurs so little in a community college setting. We felt it would be especially beneficial for our peer mentors to gain enrichment through this experience. In this study, we analyze end of semester reflections that the faculty and peer mentors composed together to document their experiences working as a team. In this essay we provide key themes we found in their reflections and what they revealed about the level of collaboration that transpired throughout the semester. At the end we consider ways in which we as faculty coordinators could have better fostered this collaboration and partnership.

Understanding the Institutional Context and Larger Mentoring Program Goals

Queensborough Community College (QCC) is a part of The City University of New York (CUNY), the largest urban public university in the nation, with 25 colleges throughout the five boroughs of New York City (City University of New York, 2020) QCC's campus is one of the most diverse campuses in the nation. In 2018, Hispanic students represented the largest group on campus at 30% , followed by Black at 29%, Asians represented 22% and White students made up 13%. This diversity also includes 22% of its students who were born outside of the USA and over 35% of freshmen who speak a language other than English at home (City University of New York). QCC is an open enrollment college, so it offers remediation to students who may need English or Math intervention before beginning credit bearing coursework. In fact, 44.6% of incoming QCC freshmen in fall 2018 were in need of remediation in Math and/or English. Since its inception in 2011, many of these students have been served by the CUNY Start Program (qcc.cuny.edu). The CUNY Start program is offered at associate degree granting

CUNY colleges. It offers intensive instruction in developmental education to incoming CUNY students with significant remedial needs. In Fall 2018 alone, QCC's CUNY Start program served 316 students with 88% of the students enrolling in a CUNY college following the semester of completion (City University of New York, 2020)

The mentoring program in this study was part of a multi-pronged approach to assisting CUNY Start alumni as they transitioned into credit-bearing courses. This program served approximately 80 students who completed the CUNY Start Program in Fall 2018 and took credit-bearing courses in the Spring of 2019. These students were mentored by an English faculty member and a past CUNY Start student who worked in partnership together to provide students support, guidance, and resources as they navigated their first semester of college courses. Our study is focused on these student and faculty mentoring partnerships and how they worked as a pair throughout the semester to assist their mentees.

Methodology: Our Inspiration and Implementation

These faculty and student partnerships were created in mind and inspired by Alison Cook-Sather's Students as Learners and Teachers program and her subsequent collaborative publication with Catherine Bovill and Peter Felten entitled, *Engaging Students as Partners in Learning and Teaching: A Guide for Faculty*. Although this scholarship is centered on students working in collaboration with faculty to develop their pedagogy in college classrooms, we wanted to consider adapting the model of having faculty and students work in partnership. We delineated the same responsibilities for both mentors. Furthermore, we truly expected these partnerships to be equally valuable for both faculty and students as they gained an important and necessary perspective from one another.

Although our study encompassed interviews with the mentors and the review of certain pieces of writing they developed throughout the semester, this study focuses on one key responsibility they shared: an end of semester reflection. In the reflection the mentors had to discuss their experience working together and describe the ways in which they collaborated on various aspects of their job responsibilities. We informed the mentors of this reflection during training and sent an email about a month prior to the end of the semester with detailed instructions for this writing task (Figure 1). Our goal was to conduct a "summative assessment" of the partnerships that "provide[d] the opportunity to take a step back to gain perspective on the arc of the work and to document its outcomes for both internal and external audiences" (Cook-Sather et al., 2014, p. 198). We had

imagined that if they composed a reflection as a mentoring pair we would have a document that is actually reflective of their collaboration and work together for the semester. Essentially, it would be a tangible document that both mentors created and wrote together as well as a document representative of their greater partnership.

For this study we reviewed the four reflections from the mentoring partnerships. Each reflection is approximately two to four pages in length and single-spaced. As writing partners, we individually read through the reports and then met to discuss key themes we found in the reports. Afterwards, we each did some free-writing on the three themes we were most interested in exploring. Upon our next discussion, we realized that two of the themes were closely connected and that for the greater essay we would discuss them together. For this essay we will discuss how these two themes helped us understand these partnerships.

Key Themes in the End of Semester Reflections

Scheduling Difficulties and its Impact on Collaboration

One of the biggest hurdles that our mentors seemed to face was scheduling regular meetings together. Most of the mentoring teams felt that meeting in person was the most effective form of communication. Some groups started off meeting in person and moved to other forms of communications as the semester progressed. Other groups decided from the start that they would be unable to meet in person due to conflicting schedules. All but one faculty mentor received a course release however, they still had personal and professional obligations that left them with limited time to meet with peer mentors. Like many community college students, our peer mentors had full schedules that consisted of family obligations and other forms of employment on top of full time academic coursework. Therefore, other methods such as phone (mostly text) and email were effective methods of communications and modes that both parties (peer and faculty) felt comfortable using. Teams felt that these forms of communication were quick and effective and allowed for regular “meetings” to occur so they could discuss mentee outreach, program updates and workshop ideas and preparations.

Since we expected a larger response from the mentees we asked the partners to meet each other at least twice in the semester but did not specify the length of the meeting so they could have been as short or as long as their schedules allowed. However, the mentees were not as responsive as we would have

imagined and therefore, we thought this would increase the number of meetings between the mentoring partners in order to meet the weekly hour commitments of the program. The reflections reveal though that is not how they spent their time. Even though our peer mentors were academically responsible, it seemed that they were unable to meet the expectations of the job to meet in-person with their faculty partner. We believe this was due to the peer mentor schedules. A study at University of California by L.Clements found that 54.5% of surveyed community college students reported having a job, with 35.3% working more than 16 hours per week and 11.1% more than 30 hours per week. Furthermore, it found that among the students that reported having insufficient time to study, 36.1% said their job occupied their time and 34.7% said that family responsibilities occupied their time. All of our peer mentors resided with family members and one of them was a parent. Since the role of peer mentor had limited hours and salary, our peer mentors had to maintain other forms of employment to maintain a consistent income while also tending to their family obligations.

Two of the major duties of the mentors was to collaboratively mentor a cohort of students and plan a program for all mentees. Even though the teams had limited in-person meetings, their program did not seem to be negatively impacted. The topic and method of the program was left to the teams to decide and although we asked teams to “collaboratively” create a workshop, we did not specify what the collaboration should look like. The teams reported developing the workshop by brainstorming individually and bringing in their own questions and thoughts about what mentees would most likely benefit from. When it came to working on tasks for the workshop, all groups split the labor in half based on skills and experience. As one team put it, each team member was able to “fill-in” the gaps. Regardless of their inability to have many in-person meetings, it seems as though the partners were quite in tune with their partners’ preferences and talents. From this, we assume that the email communications were perhaps more personal than just business-like transactions. However, we do not know the level of “collaboration” that took place within each team. When it came to mentoring their cohort of mentees, each team decided between themselves the mode of communication they would use to approach the students. They regularly updated each other on their progress, mostly via email and phone text messaging. Some groups divided students into two groups for each mentor to contact while other groups tried different methods to reach the same students. Splitting mentees defeats the purpose of the program as the goal of the program was to *collaboratively* mentor a cohort of students. However, it seemed that some groups were only completing the task of contacting students but not doing so together as a team.

Considering the “Reflection” Genre

An important component of the research that needs to be accounted for is the genre of the artifact we are studying. We explicitly wanted to explore the reflection document itself and the directions provided to the mentoring pairs because we noticed in our discussion together that the documents we received from the mentoring pairs were actually quite different from what we expected. Essentially, we had to come to terms with the reality that if three out of the four mentoring pairs submitted a document that was not within our realm of expectations, then the reason may have been ineffective communication on our part. In our conversation, we noted that we expected to receive a reflective essay with three to four paragraphs describing the answers to our questions. Instead, all four of the mentoring pairs structured their reflections after the writing prompt’s four sections (Figure 1). None of them submitted a cohesive document in essay form. Instead, they each provided a response to the questions we posed, often delineating who was responding with first names or initials. This was especially surprising to us because we thought we would not know who composed what part of the reflection; we expected to receive fully synthesized text that reflected one partnership’s ideas.

Although this certainly was the case across the board, one mentoring pair probably took the most creative license in drafting a document that was organized in sections according to the titles we delineated in the prompt and wrote as a pair in response under each section title. There was no way to determine who wrote what part of this document. This reflection was probably closest to what we had expected to receive from the mentoring pairs. We say this mainly because this was one of the only reflections that began by using a key set of words that described their partnership:

Three words can describe our working relationship: participation, commitment, and dialogue: Participation: everyone shows his sense of participation to the mentoring program by executing our duties. Commitment: each party was working towards the program success. Dialogue: our collaboration is subject to brainstorming each time we had to do something together for the program. (Mentor Reflection, Fall 2019)

This language denoted to us that as a pair they had meaningfully reflected and discussed the significance of their partnership and what transpired throughout the semester.

In addition, there are some obstacles that we need to acknowledge which may have also kept the mentoring pairs from creating the best reflections. The reflection was due at the end of the semester. We tried to account for this by making the due date two weeks after final exams. We discussed earlier how all the mentoring pairs alerted us to the difficulties they had in actually meeting together in person. These reflection documents also show us what happens at the end of the semester when everyone's time is being pressed for competing responsibilities in their lives. This kind of environment is not conducive to meaningful reflection and writing collaboration.

If done in the future, we would dedicate a portion of our in-person meetings for mentoring pairs to develop this document. This would give us the ability to communicate our expectations and distribute the prompt. We would provide more in-depth instructions as to the kind of document we sought and for what purpose we were asking this of the mentoring pair. Also, prior to this meeting we would provide some prewriting questions to get them started individually and be able to share during the meeting with each other. During this in-person meeting we would give the mentors at least 30 minutes to begin composing their reflections together. The pre-scheduled time at a meeting together would have provided the mentoring pairs a more meaningful entry into this writing task and even allowed them to better plan the reflection and its composition. Secondly, we would create a more open and reflection-based set of instructions instead of an entire sheet of questions. Providing so many questions despite its purpose of being a great guide, turned this document into a report.

Conclusion: Defining Collaboration

We studied these end of semester reflections to understand how the mentoring pairs came to work together and make key decisions. After reviewing the reflections and seeing the ways in which they were composed as well as the inability of the partners to meet regularly face-to-face, we are left asking if this was a collaborative relationship like we had imagined it would be. What the analysis of the reflections reveals is that a preliminary answer to that question would be "no." If the mentoring pairs produced a document in which there were direct answers to the posed questions and a clear distinction between the mentors' response, then collaboration was based simply on putting their individual ideas into a singular document. We also sought more specificities as to how their partnership worked, but most of the reflections were quite surface-level

with intricacies only reached when it came to how they chose to communicate specifically.

As we read more literature on the kind of assessment that could take place of students-as-partners work, we observed that having the mentoring pairs reflect throughout the semester could have provided more insight into how they collaborated and how they felt about their partnership. This may have helped them be able to reflect together more meaningfully at the end of the semester as well. Often our once a month in-person meetings involved the discussion of the mentees and changing our approach to reaching mentees because the majority of them were non-responsive. At no point did we touch base with the mentoring pairs to see how their work together was progressing nor was this placed as a priority because we just assumed that was happening. From the research, it is obvious that more meaningful and educational work has to be done with both faculty and students about how they engage in these partnerships. Overall, we had not provided much guidelines regarding collaboration or even had a discussion with the mentors about our expectations surrounding their collaboration. They could have simply looked at their job duties and assumed that they were paired in an effort to consolidate their labor.

Overall, our small case study for this essay only allows us to understand collaboration through a writing task which could be extremely limiting considering the mentors never really composed together or reflected in writing at all until the end of the semester. Our study also encompassed individual interviews of all the mentors, which this paper does not cover, and examining those may hold more promise in providing more information about the kind of collaboration these two partners actually engaged in . It's also important to remember our initial goal in creating these partnerships: for faculty and students to learn from one another and work together in a way that our institution does not really provide them currently. Despite collaboration seeming a failure through the written reflections, we believe they do not thoroughly showcase what mentors gained from working together. Our interview questions get at the heart of that, we are confident that the interviews will reveal something wholly different. The main reason we chose to study these partnerships was because we realized how much it changed both faculty and peer mentor alike. The materials prepared for conferences we have presented together as a greater mentoring team are evidence of that. With more funding and time, we would have the ability to carefully review the interviews with the mentors and the communication log that documented the interactions between mentors and mentees. All in all, we do this in hopes that

publication and careful study of this pilot program could provide us the “proof” that such partnerships are invaluable to our students' growth as well as faculty’s understanding of student needs and challenges. This is the necessary information needed to garner funding for the implementation of this program again.

References

- City University of New York. (2020). *About CUNY*. cuny.edu. <https://www.cuny.edu/about/>
- Clement, L. (2016). External and internal barriers to studying can affect student success and retention in a diverse classroom. *Journal of Microbiology & Biology Education*, 17(3), 351–359. <https://doi.org/10.1128/jmbe.v17i3.1077>
- Cook-Sather, A., Bovill, C., Felten, P., & Cook, M. (2014). *Engaging students as partners in learning and teaching : A Guide for Faculty* (First edition.). Jossey-Bass.
- Crisp, G. (2010). The impact of mentoring on the success of community college students. *The Review of Higher Education*, 34(1), 39-60. <https://doi.org/10.1353/rhe.2010.0003>
- CUNY Office of Institutional Research and Assessment. (2020, April 11). *Total enrollment by race/ethnicity and college: Percentages fall 2019*. http://www.cuny.edu/irdatabook/rpts2_AY_current/ENRL_0015_RACE_TOT_PCT.rpt.pdf
- CUNY Office of Research, Evaluation, & Program. (2020). *CUNY Start Enrollment Snapshot Fall 2018*. http://www1.cuny.edu/sites/cunystart/wp-content/uploads/sites/51/2020/08/FA18_CUNYStart_EnrollmentSnapshot_rev7292020.pdf
- QCC Office of Institutional Research and Assessment. (2015, January 29th). *Selected Six Year Trends at QCC*. <https://www.qcc.cuny.edu/oira/docs/SixYearTrendReport.pdf>
- QCC Office of Institutional Research and Assessment. (2019). *2018-2019 Fact Book*. www.qcc.cuny.edu/oira. <https://www.qcc.cuny.edu/oira/docs/Factbook-2019.pdf>