

## **Learner-Centered Near-Peer Mentorship in Higher Education**

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## **Introduction & Need for Strategy**

Student competitions in solving complex real-world problems help students develop career skills (Konak et al., 2024). However, preparation is time-consuming, and faculty may lack the capacity to guide student teams adequately alongside their other responsibilities. To address this, faculty often recruit upper-level undergraduate or graduate students to serve as near-peer mentors and coach the team of students. These experienced students help less experienced students learn, grow, and apply knowledge both in and out of the classroom (Colvin & Ashman, 2010). Near-peers hold less positional authority and share power and responsibility for learning more naturally than faculty (Singh et al., 2014). Yet near-peer mentoring is rarely examined as a learner-centered practice or evaluated for its impact on mentors and mentees. This abstract examines a case at a historically Black college and university (HBCU) land-grant institution, where a graduate student mentored a team of five undergraduates for a national business plan competition, and how that near-peer mentoring relationship became a bidirectional, learner-centered experience that developed both the mentor and the mentees.

## **Connection to the Literature**

Mentorship is often viewed as a one-way transfer of knowledge from mentor to mentee, but this view is increasingly questioned (Ahmadmehrabi et al., 2021; Chen & Chai, 2023). Contemporary learner-centered approaches frame near-peer mentoring as a reciprocal process that benefits both parties (Coppola et al., 2021; Stockkamp & Godshalk, 2022). In higher education, this form of mentorship is recognized for enhancing student success and providing essential academic and psychosocial support (Colvin & Ashman, 2010; Terrior & Leonard, 2007). While mentees benefit from improved academic performance and well-being (Destin et al., 2018; Le et al., 2024), mentor development is often treated as secondary. Prior literature acknowledges that mentors also experience growth (Leeder et al., 2022; Lopez-Real & Kwan, 2005), but this is frequently overlooked. Additionally, most studies focus on clinical and STEM fields (Bowyer & K. Shaw, 2021; Zaniwski & Reinholz, 2016; Zhang et al., 2022), leaving a research gap in non-clinical contexts. Given that mentoring is a mutually beneficial relationship, addressing both the mentor's and the mentee's needs is key to its success. Hence, this abstract explores near-peer mentoring using Weimer's (2013) Learner-Centered Teaching framework, which posits that sharing power transforms both educators and learners.

## **How It Works & Implementation of Strategy**

Over the course of one semester, a graduate student mentored five undergraduates preparing for the HBCU Students National Business Plan Competition, which required an innovative business idea, a written business plan, and a pitch presentation. The mentor used learner-centered strategies throughout the semester. Students generated business ideas in structured brainstorming sessions facilitated by the mentor, assessed each idea's feasibility against real-world examples, and voted on which to pursue. Students then self-selected the plan sections they would own, and the mentor answered their questions with further questions to engage students' funds of knowledge and promote student autonomy. The mentor coordinated meetings and organized repeated practice presentations, in which students chose speaking roles and refined their delivery through feedback from peers and the mentor.

## **Results to Date**

The mentor's field notes and post-competition conversations with mentees were reviewed and inductively coded into recurring themes. Eight career skills emerged (Table 1), four of which were mentioned by both mentor and mentees.

Table 1. Career Skill Experience and Development in the Near-Peer Relationship

| <b>Career Skills</b>            | <b>Mentor</b>                                                                            | <b>Mentees</b>                                                                        |
|---------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Active Listening                | Listened to understand each student's needs and encouraged everyone to share their ideas | Applied feedback from mentor and teammates without defensiveness                      |
| Leadership                      | Led through accountability by monitoring progress and maintaining communication          | Took ownership of assigned tasks and held themselves accountable to the team          |
| Teamwork                        | Facilitated group cohesion without taking over the process                               | Collaborated with peers with different ideas and working styles                       |
| Conflict Resolution             | Learned when to intervene and when to let the team resolve tension independently         | N/A                                                                                   |
| Critical Thinking               | N/A                                                                                      | Evaluated business feasibility against real-world conditions                          |
| Communication                   | Improved use of mentoring language tailored to each student's needs                      | Improved writing, oral, and presentation skills                                       |
| Entrepreneurial/Business Acumen | N/A                                                                                      | Built applied business knowledge through hands-on development of a real business plan |
| Time Management                 | N/A                                                                                      | Managing coursework deadlines, the competition, and other commitments                 |

The team placed 4th out of 40 institutions nationally and presented without the mentor's presence, reflecting the autonomy and ownership students had developed. Collectively, these findings reinforce the notion that learner-centered practices facilitate the development of career skills for both educators and learners.

### **Advice to Others**

To replicate this model successfully, programs should be designed to foster mutual growth through near-peer mentoring. Educators need to intentionally select near-peer mentors rather than choosing them out of convenience. The mentoring experience should be structured with clear deliverables for both mentors and mentees. Mentees should be allowed to choose their roles within the mentor's structure, as self-selected responsibilities enhance ownership, accountability, and enthusiasm, as shown in Table 1. Mentors should focus on asking thought-provoking questions, as this encourages critical thinking and maintains mentees' responsibility for their own learning. Mentors should adopt a waiting rule before intervening in team disputes, allowing the team to resolve tensions independently. They should acknowledge their own knowledge gaps and be open to learning alongside mentees. Structured reflection should be integrated into the mentor's role to help recognize and document their development, as field notes made the mentor's growth visible in this case. Lastly, near-peer mentoring should be seen as a deliberate pedagogical strategy, rather than a workaround for faculty limitations. Future work will formalize this reflection into a structured study to examine the bidirectional development described here in greater depth.

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