Mentoring Experiences of Undergraduate Retail and Hospitality Students

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Background. Mentoring is an important aspect of personal and professional development for college students, and research has shown that mentoring programs are particularly beneficial for underrepresented groups. Some of the benefits of mentoring include improved academic performance, mentee's career attainment, enhanced skills, increased confidence, and expanded networks, to name a few (Jacobi, 1991). Much of the research, to date, has focused on mentoring programs within STEM disciplines with few studies investigating the unique mentoring needs of students in retail and hospitality programs (Deale, 2018). Unfortunately, a diversity gap continues to exist in both industries with few underrepresented groups holding positions at the C-Suite or executive levels (Ang et al., 2021; Renner, Betts, & Cook, 2021).

Purpose. The purpose of this exploratory study was to identify the mentoring experiences and preferences of students seeking careers in service industries (i.e., retail and hospitality) and identify what differences may exist based on underrepresented status.

Methods. The sample was taken from students enrolled in retail and hospitality programs at a large four-year public institution (n=744). All students in the college received an email inviting them to participate in the study. After the initial email invitation, second and third email reminders were sent at one-week and two-week intervals. One hundred and seventy-nine surveys were completed yielding a 23.79% response rate. After cleaning the data, only 137 surveys were usable.

Using a modified version of the College Student Mentoring Scale (Crisp, 2009), the survey consisted of 11 Likert-type questions measuring student's psychological/ emotional and degree/career support (1= strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree). Additional questions asked about sources of information, desired mentor traits, and mentoring program preferences. Descriptive statistics and t-tests were used to analyze the data. The sample was predominantly female (79.41%), URM (65%), and employed part-time (58.09%).

Results. Results of the survey indicate that undergraduate students generally feel supported, both emotionally and professionally. Participants agreed that they had someone who expressed confidence in their ability to succeed in their careers (M=4.0) and someone who encouraged them to consider career opportunities (M=4.16). Students were less likely to indicate they had someone who served as sounding board for them (M=3.58) and helped them question their

assumptions by guiding them through a realistic appraisal of their skills ($\underline{M}$=3.58). The most desired mentoring activities were: serving as a reference ($\underline{M}$=4.68), introducing me to industry people ($\underline{M}$=4.49), and sharing jobs in my selected career ($\underline{M}$=4.43). There were no significant differences based on underrepresented status.

When asked which group they would consider for career and professional support, respondents indicated family (19.63%), colleagues and friends at work (19.01%), professors (17.15%), and friend groups outside of school (13.84%). When selecting a mentor, students were most interested in finding a mentor that: had relevant knowledge and skills, were well connected in the industry, able to give constructive feedback, valued diversity, and demonstrated honesty. Less important mentor traits included attentiveness to their needs, able to find necessary resources, similar backgrounds, and flexibility.

Overwhelmingly, a majority of the respondents (76.47%) indicated that they do not currently have a formal mentor who provides them with professional and career advice. When asked if they would like to have a mentor, only 41.04% of the sample indicated yes. The most common barrier for finding a mentor was lack of industry contacts, followed by lack of confidence. Respondents preferred hybrid (43.52%) and face-to-face (42.59%) mentoring opportunities. Only 13.89% of the sample preferred a virtual mentor.

Implications. This exploratory study provides insight into the mentoring needs of students pursuing careers in the dynamic retail and hospitality fields, industries both plagued with high turnover and employee retention concerns. While most students indicated that they had some support, there is evidence to suggest that mentoring efforts of this program could be improved, particularly helping students question their assumptions about their skills and serving as a sounding board for them. Surprisingly, there were few differences based on underrepresented status. These findings will be helpful for academic units who are seeking to develop and/or enhance current mentoring programs. Specific recommendations include offering training for mentors that provides specific strategies for increasing both psychological/emotional and career/professional support for students. Relatively few students indicated that they sought mentoring support from faculty. Further research is needed to identify potential mentoring barriers between faculty and students.

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