



# Creating Successful Mentorship Relationships: Findings from an Evaluation of The National Hispanic Medical Association's College Health Scholars Program

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## Abstract

**Introduction.** Achieving a diverse healthcare workforce is critical for addressing health disparities in the United States (Wilbur et al., 2020). To that end, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Action Plan to Reduce Racial and Ethnic Health Disparities supported a pipeline of training programs for students from under-represented populations who are interested in public health and medicine (U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services, Office of the Secretary, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation and Office of Minority Health, 2015). In 2017, the Office of Minority Health provided funding to the National Hispanic Medical Association to develop and conduct a randomized controlled trial of the NHMA College Health Scholar's Program (CHSP), a mentoring program aimed at increasing the diversity of health professionals by preparing Hispanic pre-health college students for graduate study. Intervention group (IG) students are paired with mentors in health professional schools to discuss academic preparation, finances, and personal/professional development. They also have access to a private online student group for peer support and webinars.

Currently, there is a gap in the literature detailing the specific characteristics on which to match mentors and mentees for a successful mentoring relationship, with many mentorships assuming pairing mentees with more senior professionals is inherently better. Here we present qualitative findings from the CHSP evaluation focusing on the characteristics to consider when pairing CHSP mentors with mentees that were perceived as important for facilitating a successful relationship.

**Methods.** The findings presented here are from Years 2 and 3 of the CHSP and include data from: one focus group with 7 IG students, five interviews with mentors from Year 2, and nineteen



interviews with students in both the IG and control group (CG) in Year 3. The Year 2 focus group and interviews included questions on students' onboarding experience, program perceptions, impact, and recommendations. In addition to these topics, the Year 3 interviews included questions on the challenges students face in college. Each focus group and interview were audio-taped, and the recordings were sent to a professional transcription company. All instruments were approved by The New York Academy of Medicine's Institutional Review Board (IRB) prior to use.

**Results.** Above all else, students reported that the ability to relate to their mentor is the most important factor impacting the success of the mentorship relationship. Ability to relate was tied to: 1) being close in age; 2) sharing a similar background; and 3) a similar academic trajectory. Being close in age was viewed as more useful than having a more seasoned health professional as a mentor, as younger mentors could speak to the challenges of the current educational systems and application processes and refer mentees to specific resources. In general, students perceived younger mentors as more knowledgeable of current systems and resources for pre-health college students compared to those who are older.

*Well, I can relate to what he said about – my mentors, none of them have really been very relatable to me... And then, reading the profiles of my next three mentors, none of them really seemed like I would actually get along with – because all three of them were much, much older adults. The one that I'm connected with right now, I think she's a middle-aged woman from New Jersey. And I'm like, "I'm in Texas. I'm only a sophomore in college." I know that she's a nurse, but can she really help me – or will she even have those resources? I mean, his mentor is about the same age as him, so he still has those resources that he can give him. But I feel like mine wouldn't even have that.*

Being able to relate to one's mentor was also facilitated by having a shared background, including culture and ethnicity. Other characteristics that contributed to strong mentor/mentee relationships included being part of the first generation in their family to attend college and speaking Spanish as the primary language at home. Students reported that having a shared background is particularly impactful when building a relationship and connecting with their mentor.

We both come from a Hispanic background, and he was first-generation college student, too. So, that's an easier way because he kind of told me his experience – it's a very similar experience when it comes to family life. I think one thing I [asked]... is, "How do you study at home with such chaos sometimes? How do you deal with certain family members being like, "Why aren't you doing this and why aren't you doing that or why are you studying so much?" So, he kind of gave me his guidance... Sometimes I'm having a whole mental breakdown and he's like, "I understand what you're going through. You just have to breathe and take some time for yourself."



Also, Spanish was my first language and then I learned English. That's the same thing with my mentor...Growing up in school, you're being taught in English, but you're thinking Spanish, so it made it a little bit more difficult understanding certain things. He's gone through the same thing, so he's given me advice on how to navigate through that.

And I feel like having a mentor for the medical career, especially with being a first generation, male, person of color it's been remarkable the amount of impact it has.

Like I mentioned before, I think that students of color, Latinx, we have a lot of self-doubt, because we think we're not capable of achieving the same things as our counterparts. So, I do think that having a mentor there and motivating you and you witnessing that someone else is able to accomplish the things and goals for yourself. I think that is something very valuable, because we're reminded that we are capable of achieving our goals.

Lastly, sharing a similar academic trajectory was important. Students who were planning to take time off or who had taken time off between years in school prior to graduating reported unique challenges that a mentor with a similar experience could both speak to and help address. Having a mentor who attended a school with the same type of academic term (e.g., quarter, semester) was also reported as useful to those students who wanted guidance on when they should begin studying for finals within their academic term.

*If you go the traditional route, you kind of don't have an understanding of what nontraditional lifestyle is like. The feedback that I've been getting from her was really supportive, really receptive, but it doesn't display a level of like growth or understanding of where to go from there.*

*My school works according to the quarter system. Her school was semesters. It's really totally different. So, sometimes regarding school problems, I got to talk to other mentors at my school to find out what I should do and why I should not...for right now, I don't contact her frequently just because I feel like she tries hard to help me, but then it's just because of that situation [regarding the lack of familiarity about my academic term] that she can't give me a lot of helpful advice regarding my school.*

**Conclusions and Discussion.** Mentorship programs are relatively common and have shown value, but there is insufficient information regarding program attributes that supports success. The NHMA College Health Scholars program has taken on a significant challenge in that the goal is post-college education in competitive and difficult fields and many of the students engaged experience many barriers to success, including absence of professional role models, and



economic constraints. Findings suggest that younger Hispanic mentors in health professions training may be particularly effective for this group. In addition, thoughtfully pairing mentors and pre-health college students from underrepresented groups based on shared background and academic trajectory can result in supportive and successful mentoring relationships. Developing a pipeline through mentoring is a critical step in increasing the diversity of the healthcare workforce. Incorporating the findings from this evaluation is one approach to bolster successful mentorships and work towards achieving that goal.

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