

Interdisciplinary Mentorship and Collaboration in Higher Education

The African proverb "It takes a village to raise a child," widely recognized for its metaphorical richness, extends its relevance into various realms, notably within higher education.¹ Originating from traditional child-rearing contexts, its philosophical essence resonates in academia, emphasizing the indispensable role of a collective support system in guiding students throughout their educational journeys.² This paper draws on the experiences of teacher educators at a Historically Black College University (HBCU), deeply engaged in collaborative initiatives that transcend conventional advisory roles, enabling robust interactions with students across diverse academic endeavors and reaping associated benefits.³

Exploring this under-researched area, this paper examines the practical application of the "village" paradigm within academia, underscoring its profound impact on student success, the evolution of interdisciplinary mentorship models, and overall student well-being amidst the complexities of educational landscapes.⁴ Furthermore, it will delve into the reciprocal advantages experienced by faculty members through collaborative engagements, thus contributing to the enrichment of the scholarly community and advancing pedagogical practices.⁵ In our pursuit of enhancing P-12 educational environments, it becomes imperative to nurture creativity within teacher education settings, equipping educators with the necessary preparation to meet the evolving demands of their profession.⁶

Literature Review

Enhanced Academic Experience

In traditional university educator preparation settings, students typically rely on guidance from a single advisor within their department.⁷ This primary advisor assumes a pivotal role encompassing various responsibilities significantly influencing a student's academic success and personal growth. Advisors serve as educators, advocates, mentors, and connectors to broader academic and professional communities, playing a multifaceted role crucial to student development.⁸ Recognizing the indispensable role of academic advisors, this paper advocates for the necessity of broader support systems.⁹ Primary advisors lay the groundwork for a student's educational journey by assisting with academic planning, career guidance, emotional support, research opportunities, academic progress monitoring, and preparation for graduate school.¹⁰ However, it is essential to integrate faculty members from diverse educational disciplines into the support network. These faculty members act as supplementary mentors, thereby enriching the support system available to students,¹¹ particularly preservice teachers, the focal point of this paper.

The concept of "it takes a village to raise a child" is readily adaptable to higher education, where the "child" represents the student. This metaphor underscores the value of a collaborative educational environment where multiple mentors contribute to a student's development.¹² Despite its benefits, the integration of mentorship within university teacher education programs remains uncommon,¹³ particularly at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), due to resource constraints and potential lack of institutional support.¹⁴ This structural oversight is detrimental, as diverse mentoring enriches students' educational experiences, exposes them to various mentoring experiences, and better prepares them for professional challenges.¹⁵

Engaging multiple mentors from various academic disciplines significantly enhances preservice teachers' educational journey by providing comprehensive pedagogical insights,¹⁶ fostering interdisciplinary collaboration skills, and enhancing professional development opportunities.¹⁷ Mentors from different fields expand preservice teachers' knowledge and skills by introducing them to the latest research, technological tools, and educational trends, preparing them to be adaptable and forward-thinking educators.¹⁸ Adaptable and forward-thinking educators are vital because they can effectively respond to their students' diverse and evolving needs.¹⁹ These educators can implement innovative teaching strategies, integrate new technologies, and create inclusive learning environments that cater to all students, including those with different learning styles and backgrounds.²⁰ By anticipating future trends and challenges, adaptable educators can also prepare students for a rapidly changing world, ensuring they develop the critical thinking, problem-solving, and collaboration skills necessary for success in school and society.²¹

Furthermore, the support from a diverse group of mentors enables preservice teachers to receive more personalized support tailored to different aspects of their personal and professional growth.²² This support ranges from academic advice and emotional support to career planning and networking opportunities, thereby reducing feelings of isolation and increasing resilience and job satisfaction.²³

Additionally, multiple mentors can offer a variety of perspectives on research opportunities and innovative practices, enabling preservice teachers to engage in research spanning different fields and fostering a culture of innovation within education, thereby strengthening the quality of teaching.²⁴ Despite the importance of research in education, this practice is uncommon in teacher education programs.²⁵ When multidisciplinary mentors guide and engage with preservice teachers in research, it helps them become more aware of setting and achieving goals and substantiating their efforts by relying on scientific knowledge

produced by others,²⁶ ultimately elevating the quality of education at all levels.²⁷ This multidisciplinary mentorship approach equips preservice teachers with the tools and confidence to navigate the complexities of modern classrooms, including integrating technology,²⁸ managing diverse learning needs,²⁹ and addressing socio-emotional factors.³⁰ By fostering a "village" of support for preservice teachers, educational institutions enhance their ability to produce well-rounded, competent, and innovative educators. This holistic support system enriches their academic experience and better prepares them to meet the demands and challenges of the modern educational environment, ultimately benefiting the broader educational community.³¹

Historical Overview of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs)

Historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) are institutions founded primarily for the education of African Americans, although their charters were not exclusionary.³² From their arrival on the shores of the United States, black people thirsted for knowledge and viewed education as the key to their freedom.³³ Before the Civil Rights movement, historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) offered Black Americans one of the only available routes to a college education. HBCUs date back to the nineteenth century, when many schools were founded to provide Black students with higher education opportunities.³⁴

There are 105 HBCUs in the United States of America, as displayed in Table 1. HBCUs enroll 14 percent of all African-American students in higher education. However, they constitute only 3 percent of America's more than 4,000 institutions of higher education.³⁵ Although sometimes overlooked, HBCUs are an essential option for high school students in the college search. These colleges offer benefits that minority students may otherwise not receive.³⁶

Table 1. Summary of HBCUs

Type Institution	Number of Institutions Per Type	Percent of Total HBCUs
4-Year Public	40	38.09%
4-Year Private	49	46.66%
2-Year Public	11	10.48%
2-Year Private	5	4.76%
Source: US Department of Education, White House Initiative on Historically Black Colleges and Universities		

Black colleges and universities have been key producers of talented Black scholars who go on to become leaders in their communities. Approximately 15 percent of master's degrees, 10 percent of doctorates, and 15 percent of first professional degrees are awarded to Black students from HBCUs.³⁷ The U.S. institution of slavery placed an indelible mark on Negroes in America. For more than 200 years, Black men and women struggled for the most basic rights. What are known today as historically Black colleges and universities are tied to the social and economic plight of African Americans and their progeny.³⁸ The majority of HBCUs were established in the mid to late 1800s as pre-collegiate schools for newly freed slaves and normal schools for training teachers. These institutions continue to provide exceptional opportunities for African Americans in many disciplines, and their success is well documented.³⁹

Accountability and Support

Accountability and support are essential components in student-faculty partnerships in education settings. Student-faculty partnerships involve both the student and faculty members collaborating to achieve similar outcomes.⁴⁰ In these partnerships, students may take on roles that include but are not limited to research assistants and co-authors. Students are not expected to be experts when collaborating with faculty, but to exceed expectations and add to projects from their level of expertise while being ready to learn more about the process from faculty. Cook-Sather⁴¹ noted that it is necessary to empower students in these partnerships to

take ownership of their portion of the workload. Both the student and faculty members feel a sense of accountability in this dynamic. Students are held to a higher standard when working with faculty and are expected to meet stronger standards than students not participating in student-faculty partnerships. Students are expected to learn in real-time and work hard to manage their time, improve their research skills, and improve their academic writing. The student is expected to take the initiative to receive their desired partnership outcomes by taking the lead on tasks instead of constantly waiting for them to be delegated by their counterparts.

Student-faculty partnerships can prove to be synergetic to student-faculty partnerships, including supporting academic outcomes, teaching capabilities, professional goals, and their fields of study.⁴² Through this partnership, students can expect to be more engaged in the academic and research process, feel empowered and reassured in their learning capabilities, and have a deep learning experience. Some of these experiences may be attending educational conferences, collaborating on research papers for publication, and having hands-on experience in every aspect of the research process. Tong⁴³ states that while expectations are high, faculty must be accountable and mindful of putting too much pressure and unrealistic expectations upon their student collaborators. Beyond positive academic results, these partnerships enhance the whole student's well-being. They cultivate creative thinking, inclusiveness, and access to information that they may not have had available otherwise, especially if participating in interdisciplinary collaboration in higher education settings. This extends to both online faculty and students. Technology increases and supports opportunities to engage in collaboration by providing tools to accomplish goals. Overall, student-faculty collaborations are expected to grow learning outcomes and produce scholarly works that can benefit all stakeholders in the process, including the learning institution.

Professional Development for Faculty

Mentoring is a relationship that focuses on support.⁴⁴ Navigating the higher education academia landscape can be challenging for novices with little to no experience, specifically in research. Mentorship not only benefits students; the supportive role also assists faculty members in strengthening their professional practice by seeking innovative ways to meet students' needs and collaborate for both individuals' growth. It is expressed that when faculty and mentors engage deeply in professional learning communities to explore experiences and [provide support], they develop trust, professional friendship, and community.⁴⁵ Conscious integration of these elements [projects, mentorship, continued professional development, and interdisciplinary collaborations] increases learning potential.⁴⁶ The impacts of faculty professional development are both direct and indirect. More specifically, it is integral to illuminate faculty members' various professional development needs. The arena of professional development consists of three major areas: individual development, instructional development, and organizational development. The most common focus for programs of individual development is the faculty member as a teacher. Faculty professional development specialists provide individual and group consultation and instruction on teaching, including class organization, evaluation of students, in-class presentation skills, questioning, and all aspects of design and presentation. They also advise faculty on other aspects of teacher/student interaction, such as advising, tutoring, discipline policies, and administration. A second frequent focus of such programs is the faculty member as a scholar and professional. These programs help in career planning and professional development in scholarly skills such as grant writing, publishing, committee work, administrative work, supervisory skills, and a wide range of other activities expected of faculty. A third individual development program focus is the faculty member as a person. This includes wellness management, interpersonal skills, stress and time management, assertiveness development,

and a host of other programs that address the individual's well-being.⁴⁷ Faculty development programs can be used to explore and strengthen faculty members' professional identities.⁴⁸

Cultivation of a collaborative and student-centered learning environment

Higher education settings are enhanced when students are afforded opportunities to collaborate with faculty. As things evolve, technological advances become increasingly necessary when engaging in academic research. While collaboration benefits the student by providing educational development and professional growth opportunities, all stakeholders share in the positive outcomes.⁴⁹ An added benefit for faculty is the chance to cultivate tailored learning experiences for different learning styles and the diverse backgrounds of their student partners. Such partnerships positively affect student retention for the university as it advances the quality of education and the confidence of the student. Strategies incorporated when creating a supportive environment for students foster a sense of empowerment, a sense of belonging, access, and inclusiveness. Social justice is a positive result of student-faculty collaboration.⁵⁰ Additional outcomes from students partnering with faculty include opportunities to attend research conferences, collaborate on research papers, and be privy to tips and advice on taking their academic careers to the next level.

Technology plays a significant role in collaboration in higher education settings, particularly for online students and faculty.⁵¹ Sharing progress on assigned tasks using tech-based resources assists with time management and task efficiency. It allows collaborators to utilize tools like Research Gate, Zotero, and similar outlets to source ideas and share resources.⁵² Technology is beneficial when engaging in interdisciplinary collaborations. Faculty and students from different departments and universities usually have their own focus areas to which they are committed. Online resources and tools expedite the research process and advance results that may contribute to respective universities and fields of interest. By

incorporating technology and collaborative research, students and faculty contribute to advancing education and, potentially, to their respective research fields.

Preparation of future educators for interdisciplinary collaboration

Interdisciplinary mentorship and collaboration are vital in higher education to equip future educators with the necessary skills for successful teamwork across disciplines.⁵³ In teacher education, there's a strong emphasis on fostering collaboration skills as they are integral to effective teaching.⁵⁴ Interacting with interdisciplinary mentors provides preservice teachers with valuable exposure to diverse perspectives, methodologies, and approaches from various academic fields.⁵⁵ This exposure broadens their understanding and fosters an appreciation for the diverse viewpoints present in educational contexts. As a result, preservice teachers are encouraged to integrate these diverse perspectives into their teaching practices, enriching the academic experience.⁵⁶ Integrating diverse perspectives enhances teaching effectiveness and fosters interdisciplinary collaboration.⁵⁷ Effective interdisciplinary collaboration is essential for educators, as required by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004,⁵⁸ which aims to ensure high-quality education for all children.⁵⁹

Discussion

This paper illuminates the transformative power of interdisciplinary mentorship and collaboration within university educator preparation programs, particularly at Historically Black Colleges and Universities. The aim is to empower both students and faculty members by fostering a culture that values and promotes these practices.⁶⁰ For preservice teachers, the opportunity to engage with mentors from various disciplines enriches their educational experience, enhances their pedagogical skills, and equips them to meet their future students' diverse and evolving needs. This multifaceted support system, akin to the 'village' paradigm, is instrumental in addressing the limitations of traditional single-advisor models.

A key advantage of interdisciplinary mentorship is the broadened exposure to diverse perspectives and methodologies. This approach enhances academic knowledge and fosters critical thinking and problem-solving skills, essential for adapting to the complexities of modern educational environments. By collaborating on research projects and participating in academic conferences, preservice teachers gain practical experience and build professional networks that will support their careers.

For faculty members, interdisciplinary collaboration opens doors to professional development and expanding their scholarly and pedagogical repertoires.⁶¹ Engaging with colleagues from different disciplines fosters a culture of continuous learning and innovation, a beacon of hope for the relevance and effectiveness of educational practices. Furthermore, these collaborative efforts can lead to the development of innovative teaching strategies and the integration of cutting-edge technologies in the classroom, ultimately benefiting the entire educational community.

The unique challenges HBCUs face, such as limited resources,⁶² underscore the necessity of targeted initiatives to foster interdisciplinary mentorship and collaboration. Such challenges require concerted efforts from policymakers and institutional support⁶³ to create an environment conducive to such practices. By prioritizing interdisciplinary approaches, universities can enhance the quality of their educator preparation programs and better prepare students for the demands of the teaching profession.

Conclusion

This paper highlights the significant benefits of integrating interdisciplinary mentorship and collaboration into university educator preparation programs, with a particular focus on Historically Black Colleges and Universities. The findings demonstrate that such practices not only enrich the academic and professional experiences of preservice teachers but also enhance the professional development of faculty members.⁶⁴ By fostering a culture

of innovation and holistic learning, interdisciplinary mentorship prepares future educators to effectively navigate and address modern classrooms' diverse and evolving challenges.⁶⁵

To fully realize the potential of interdisciplinary mentorship, it is essential to address the structural barriers faced by HBCUs. This includes ensuring adequate resources and institutional support to facilitate and sustain these collaborative efforts. Policymakers and educational leaders must recognize the value of interdisciplinary approaches and work towards creating supportive environments that prioritize mentorship and collaboration across disciplines.

Ultimately, integrating interdisciplinary mentorship in educator preparation programs represents a transformative approach that benefits students, faculty, and the broader educational community.⁶⁶ By embracing this model, academic institutions can better prepare their students to become adaptable, forward-thinking educators capable of making significant contributions to their fields and to society at large. Implementing such innovative practices is crucial for advancing education initiatives and ensuring the success of future generations of educators.

ENDNOTES

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