

I Am Because We Are: The Peer Mentorship Experiences of Black First-Year Master's Students in Higher Education and Student Affairs Programs

Jesse Ford, Assistant Professor of Higher Education, University of North Carolina at Greensboro

Dwayne Hamilton, Jr., Graduate Assistant for Student Support, Outreach, and Assessment, Dean of Students Office, University of North Carolina at Greensboro

Alexis Moore Alexis Moore, Student Success Coordinator, Greensboro College

Jordan Farmer, Graduate Assistant in The Office of Leadership and Civic Engagement, University of North Carolina at Greensboro

Ashley Billie, Graduate Assistant for Civic Engagement, University of North Carolina at Greensboro

Kameryn Taylor, Graduate Assistant for Your First Year Programming, University of North Carolina at Greensboro

Despite the fact that more Black students than ever pursue graduate education, the experiences of Black graduate students in higher education and student affairs programs leave much to be discovered. This work aimed to shed light on the interconnections among Black students in master's programs in higher education and student affairs, as well as the impact of peer mentoring on their transition to graduate school. Recommendations for assisting Black students' holistic development at the outset of their academic careers are provided.

College campuses have become more racially and ethnically diverse. As such, educational settings, both K-12 and postsecondary environments, have adapted to accommodate growing racial and ethnic diversity in their student populations, and the literature on their experiences has increased (Briscoe et al., 2020, 2022; Jackson et al., 2021; Ford & Wallace, 2021; McGowan, 2016). With an increasing diversity of racial and ethnic student populations, contemporary literature has reflected a growing concern about the scarcity of faculty and staff of color in higher education institutions

(Smith, 2020). College campuses are seeing a rise in the need for student affairs professionals and faculty who are familiar with a diverse range of racial and ethnic populations, each of which has its own unique set of characteristics.

Despite the fact that scholars continue to observe a low number of faculty and professionals of color, little research exists on the development and selection of the next generation of professionals of color, and no accurate data on the number of staff and students of color in higher education student affairs (HESA) or graduate preparation programs exists (Linder & Winston Simmons, 2015; Taub & McEwen, 2006). While all educators must be prepared to support students of color on college campuses, the existence of professionals of color in student affairs divisions has a substantial impact on the campus climate, especially for Black students (Rapp, 1997). Ongoing issues, such as stereotype threat (Steele, 1997), racial microaggressions (Morales, 2021), and racial battle fatigue (Ragland Woods et al., 2021), are normalized in the experiences of Black students and reflect the need for staff to be culturally competent. Racialized experiences in graduate programs have historically been documented as challenging for Black students (Carrington & Sedlacek, 1976). As new literature has surfaced, race, as a socially constructed identity, has continued to be a source of contention on college campuses for both undergraduate (McGowan, 2016; Smith et al., 2016) and graduate students.

In addition to the challenges of navigating racial tension on college campuses, COVID-19 has caused increasing challenges for college students. Soria and colleagues (2020) found that “the COVID-19 pandemic has disproportionately impacted students who identify as Black, Indigenous, People of Color” (p. 1). Furthermore, Soria and colleagues concluded that Black students were more likely to experience “generalized anxiety disorder and major depressive disorder” (p. 1). Systemic racism is ingrained in American society, and as a result, the COVID-19 pandemic has also disproportionately affected the Black population (Poteat et al., 2020) and cannot be separated from the experiences of Black graduate students navigating COVID-19. The killings of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd in 2020 added another layer of complexity to the difficulties faced by Black students in higher education.

This manuscript builds on narratives rooted in the HESA literature to illustrate the experiences of Black first-year master’s students with peer mentoring and their transition into HESA programs during COVID-19. We acknowledge the multiple definitions of mentor; however, for the purposes of this scholarship, we adopt two definitions that anchor our collective thoughts on mentors. Hill and Ragland (1995) suggested mentors “guide, train, and support a less skilled or experienced person called a novice, mentee, or protégé” (qtd. in Patton & Harper, 2003, p. 72). Building on this, Patton and Harper (2003) added that “mentoring is a cornerstone in the success

of graduate education and depends highly on student–faculty relationships propelled by trust, integrity, opportunity, and understanding” (p. 68).

We anchor this scholarship as one faculty member and five first-year master’s students working to build on the ideas of trust, integrity, opportunity, and understanding to better assist new master’s students with their transition into graduate school. This scholarship is particularly important as Black first-year master’s students’ experiences are often missing in orientation, transition, and retention literature. In addition, as HESA programs seek to diversify their applicant pools (Smith, 2020), we offer this scholarship to initiate a dialogue regarding the needs of Black first-year master’s students in such programs. Specifically, we aim to highlight the significance of peer mentoring, which is the foundation of this scholarship. This research is grounded in a qualitative autoethnographic approach that uses personal experiences to grasp the life diversity of a population (Patton, 2014). This approach challenges traditional methods of conducting research and treats scholarship as a political, socially constructed ideology (Ellis et al., 2011). As such, this approach is both a process and a significant element of the scholarship. Modeled after the methodological framing of Perez-Felkner and team (2020), we offer personal narratives as data to report the experiences of the participants in this work. We conclude with ideas for how to develop and retain future campus leaders who are now enrolled in HESA master’s programs.

Setting the Stage: Black Graduate Student Experiences in HESA Programs

Ford: My journey in higher education as a student has been one of professional development, academic preparation, leadership experiences, and mentorship. More specifically, mentorship has taken on pivotal positions in my experiences as a student and faculty member. My master’s and doctoral advisors both remain critical to my development as they not only assisted in my journey as a student but continue to be visible and supportive in my transition to a faculty role. I lift up and acknowledge the support and mentorship provided by other faculty members who have been critical to my development. In addition to other faculty members who advocated and mentored me throughout my academic journey, peer mentors are and remain vital to my success.

While peer mentoring has been viewed as an added benefit for graduate students, I cannot emphasize enough the necessity of peer mentorship for Black students who can offer culturally responsive support. My Black scholar classmates (collectively known as the Cocoa Scholars) gave essential support throughout both of my graduate degree programs, allowing me to stay engaged and excel academically. Following my start as a faculty member, I observed that our students had developed a similar concept through private conversations and interactions. As scholars, we frequently discuss standing on the shoulders of others, but we pay insufficient attention to

standing beside individuals who are close to us as we navigate successes and failures as scholars and students. By expanding on this concept of those who are close to us and offering context for individuals who work in transition, orientation, and retention offices, this scholarship contributes to the often-unseen networks that enable Black students to survive and thrive in HESA graduate programs and, subsequently, professional roles in higher education.

Black Men in HESA Master's Programs

While the body of knowledge about Black men's undergraduate experiences in higher education is growing (Brooms et al., 2021; McGowan, 2016), research on Black men's graduate student experiences, particularly at the master's level, has remained limited. The available literature on Black men in graduate programs has highlighted racial microaggressions (Burt et al., 2019), racialized imposter syndrome (Burt et al., 2017), and issues of social class (Sánchez et al., 2011). These obstacles already compound the difficulties inherent in being Black on a college campus and in locating mentorship, a difficulty highlighted in contemporary scholarship for Black men enrolled in graduate programs (Burt et al., 2019). We start this work with narratives that provide a snapshot of the lives of two first-year master's students who identify as Black men.

Hamilton, Jr.: Peer mentorship from the other Black-identifying members of my cohort has drastically impacted my experiences as a first-year graduate student. Being able to create spaces that are exclusively Black has created the opportunity for us to lean into our experiences within higher education that are impacted by our race. As the space has been formed, an understood sense of trust and solidarity has been created without having to mention those principles. What we say in that space is often a familiar experience to at least someone in the room, so the advice received includes a personal aspect of life experience but also an informed aspect of being practiced in the higher education sphere. Throughout my K-12 and undergraduate education, I went to predominantly white schools, so creating this space often fell on me. Finally, being in an environment where my peers care about my Blackness and see its direct correlation to their well-being has been a refreshing experience. Overall, this informal sense of counseling—both being counseled and serving as a counselor for my peers—has been a healing experience that has allowed me the space to process my own experiences, informing my journey.

Higher education graduate programs have a responsibility to their students to ensure they are prepared for professional experiences within the field. One thing that a lot of programs cannot do is prepare Black students for experiences within certain programs because it requires a specific set of skill sets that often aren't academic. Being in community with my peers has given me a wealth of resources that I feel are more useful than the theories presented in the classroom. The learned experiences

of my peers have served as forms of professional development in the sense that they have impacted how I will present myself in the jobs I have after this program. Learning about how my peers navigate their institutions provides perspectives outside of my own that expand my idea of what higher education is. More specifically, they provide me with invaluable knowledge about what the experience of higher education can be for me as a Black man and how best to succeed in those situations. These peer mentoring relationships can make learning a group effort.

In my experience, being Black has created a network of people who want to see me win. These mentorship relationships challenge me and motivate me by letting me know someone is always in my corner rooting for me. There are people in my corner that I don't even know, but our Blackness has connected us within a relationship where we are peers rooting for the success of each other. This isn't something I could not do for myself.

Farmer: The idea of attending graduate school was intimidating for me as I applied in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic and switched careers at 28 years old. I was so unsure of my abilities that I almost didn't apply to my program. Once I got into the program, I began to have a sense that I wasn't supposed to be there—imposter syndrome. The intimidation I had transitioning into my graduate program has been alleviated by my connections with peers in my program, with one of the connections being the peer mentor I was assigned in the recruitment process. This mentor, also a Black man, would reach out to me and answer questions I had about the program's culture, curriculum, and student life in general. Through this process, I formed my first connection that has lasted well into my second semester.

Academically, I enjoy a level of connection with my classmates that is truly community oriented. We, as a cohort, have multiple group chats that give us spaces to discuss our graduate experience together. We share a plethora of things, such as events we are all putting on in our graduate assistant roles, due dates for assignments, and general conversation about how we are feeling. In class discussions, we have a respectful dialogue that allows for community learning to occur. I can have a conversation with everyone in my class, and I can't say that I expected that level of community coming into this graduate school experience.

Professionally, I enjoy connections with other graduate assistants both in my own office and within the Division of Student Affairs. In my office, I connected early with the second-year master's graduate assistant in the office. We went and had coffee a week before I started my graduate assistantship. This was great because I was able to get a clear understanding of the office culture, expectations, and prior experiences, which were important to me starting this new journey. This understanding eased

my anxiety about starting my new role. During my time, my connections with other graduate assistants have come from collaborating with different offices to deliver programs, conferences, and committees. The building of strong relationships with other graduate assistants has been influential in the success of my work.

Socially, my transition has been better than I ever could have expected. As I came into this program in a nontraditional route, I figured that I would not have a lot in common with my peers. This thought was squashed early as I interacted with my program members and attended social events outside of campus with a select group of peers. This has been hampered due to COVID-19, but the times that we have been able to get together have been great. As a Black man, I have begun to socially engage more than I have ever with other Black men. This has been the biggest and most influential connection for me as I come from a background where Black men's representation was low among my peers.

Black Women's Experiences in Graduate Programs

Black women, like Black men, face barriers to graduate education but are earning advanced degrees at a higher rate than ever recorded previously (Davis et al., 2022). The double marginalization of race and gender makes the experiences of Black women more complex and frequently complicates the research on graduate education. Contemporary scholarship positions student perceptions of debt (Bostick et al., 2022; Perez-Felkner et al., 2020), mentoring experiences (Davis et al., 2022; Griffin et al., 2020), and the difficulties associated with navigating race and gender in the graduate student experience (Griffith & Ford, 2022; Walkington, 2017). We add the narratives of three Black women enrolled in a HESA program to strengthen our understanding of peer mentoring in the transition to graduate education.

Billie: Being in community with peers has been integral to my transition into graduate school. Personally, one of the biggest challenges I've faced so far is experiencing imposter syndrome in my assistantship and in classes. I often find myself questioning if my thoughts are valid or "smart" enough to be said out loud. By having a network of peers around me—mentors, friends, and classmates—I have been able to tap into a network of people who affirm my thoughts in class and the work I do in my assistantship. One thing that stands out to me is that oftentimes the informal spaces are where I find a lot of connection with my peers. I may not be able to connect and share my thoughts in class all the time, but I am able to share how I'm feeling and what's on my plate more comfortably with peers over coffee or in my office while I'm not doing work for my assistantship.

In a time of COVID, having gatherings is difficult, but I think we have been able to foster little moments of connection, like during our class breaks or going to a

university event together. I think these spaces, as fluid as they are, are created out of a need to turn “off” our minds to the academic work we face and spend time in fellowship with one another. I think by turning off our practitioner minds, we can spend more time connecting with each other as peers. This, in turn, gives us room to be more open and comfortable with each other in times when we do have to have an academic focus or discuss deeper topics in class.

As a Black woman, I think it is important to make a point about how Black mentorship and peers have impacted my graduate studies. Having a Black mentor, Black professor, and Black coworkers has shown me that Black people can be visible in a space where we were originally barred. I think this is a very powerful experience, and I am affirmed by the thoughts I contribute to my work and by people who look like me existing and thriving in higher education spaces. Overall, I think transitioning to graduate school has allowed me to engage with people I would not typically have met in undergrad and foster relationships that I am confident I will support post-grad. I’m not sure where I would be without my peers or if I would even continue in graduate school.

Moore: As a first-generation African American woman, my education has always been a top priority in my life. After obtaining my undergraduate degree in 2016, I decided to spend some time in the workforce before pursuing my master’s. For me, pursuing a master’s degree was anxiety-inducing in many ways. Compared to undergraduate experiences, this journey would be one that I had to research mostly on my own in the absence of a college adviser. The journey would also require me to finance the degree myself—without an academic scholarship. The pressure to choose the right graduate program was unbearable at times, but with support from my family and professional colleagues, I decided to attend and was admitted to the graduate program I’m currently in.

Beginning a graduate program as a nontraditional student who spent some time in the workforce between their undergraduate and graduate degrees invoked many feelings of imposter syndrome for me. I felt somewhat out of touch with school and was unsure of how I would get acclimated to my new environment when most of my cohort members had just graduated from their undergraduate institutions. I did not feel smart enough to be in this new space, nor did I feel I had much to contribute intellectually to my program. It did not take long for me to realize that being in community with my peers and program/cohort members would make me feel more comfortable socially and would give me the confidence that I needed in the classroom.

For me, a combination of friends, cohort members, and peers who are second-years in my program is what gave me the inspiration and comfortability to adjust to graduate school. At the beginning of my first semester, I appreciated the space my program provided for first- and second-year students to discuss the many challenges and

exciting moments to look forward to. I was able to ask raw questions related to my imposter syndrome, and it comforted me to know that other cohort members were experiencing some of the same feelings. Another space that has positively impacted my adjustment to graduate school is the shared messaging platform my cohort uses to stay connected daily. I use this space to ask questions, pose ideas, and discuss class content in a more relaxed manner. This space boosts my confidence in the classroom and has helped diminish my imposter syndrome by making me feel empowered intellectually.

Ultimately the journey to graduate school was tough, but the battle to stay in graduate school and do well is a different feat. Without being in community with my peers, and especially with those who look like me, I would feel much more unsure of myself and my own capabilities. The journey would be much harder. Being able to rely on a core group to be my safe space while navigating graduate school is helping me to reach my full potential as I prepare myself for a future in the student affairs field.

Taylor: As a Black-identifying person on campus, peer mentorship has been an invaluable tool concerning my transition into graduate school. When I first started my graduate program last semester, I felt very lost and insecure. I felt like I did not belong in the classroom, and I wasn't confident in my responses to professors during various classroom discussions. I strongly felt the effects of imposter syndrome. However, through the peer mentorship and support of several of the first- and second-year students in the program, I began to feel more comfortable and assertive in the classroom setting. Seeing other students of color, specifically Black students, being confident in who they were and why they were here in this program gave me the extra push I needed to start speaking up more in class. Finding my "why" has been essential to my success in this program, and I would not have been able to do that without the help of my courageous peers.

Moreover, when I was searching for internship opportunities, I reached out to a couple of second-year students. Without hesitation, these students helped me find great opportunities for internships on and off our campus. This made me feel even more supported by the mentors around me. Furthermore, as a Black-identifying person in their first year in graduate school, having peer mentors throughout the program there to help answer questions and guide me through the first semester has been amazing! Now in my second semester, I feel more supported and confident than ever before. In addition, I truly appreciate the ability to see people who look like me succeeding in the classroom and in their professional lives as well. This has certainly helped me to remain positive about my future career goals within the world of higher education.

I am Because We Are: Recommendations to Support and Retain Each Other As Black Graduate Students Through Peer Mentorship

We would like to acknowledge that all Black students are not a monolith. While peer mentorship has been successful based on the narratives provided in scholarship, placing Black graduate students in a common space does not equate to a shared community. Nor does the formation of the community rely solely on the graduate students and faculty. Faculty and student affairs administrators can assist in the construction of culturally sensitive environments where practicable (Pope & Reynolds, 1997). Additionally, if practicable, the construction of these spaces can be supported by faculty and staff who have a stake in assisting Black graduate students in their transition to higher education and student affairs programs.

The persistent racial inequities in our nation have a significant impact on the growth of students navigating higher education. COVID-19 and racialized incidents in our society have exacerbated the negative experiences of this demographic. In addition to these barriers, Ford and colleagues (2021) add, “the knapsack of emotions students are carrying during the pandemic is overflowing with a host of feelings, including uncertainty about schoolwork, fear about the future, and loneliness” (p. 37). Building on the themes positioned in this scholarship, we offer the following thoughts and recommendations for faculty, student affairs administrators, and other professionals on campus working with and supporting HESA master’s students and their transitions into higher education spaces.

COUNTERING THE IMPOSTER

In the literature on graduate students in higher education, imposter syndrome is frequently mentioned as a recurring difficulty they face as they navigate educational spaces (Gardner, 2013; Wallace et al., 2020;). For Black students transitioning to graduate school, these difficulties are frequently added to a laundry list of other difficulties associated with adjusting to and learning a new environment. To assist students in overcoming these obstacles, pathways such as orientation training, professional development workshops, and spaces for students to meet and interact with one another at the start of their journeys can foster cultural and intellectual enclaves for their academic and social success. In this study, the increased visibility of Black students fostered a sense of connection, which encouraged persistence in the face of the imposter syndrome experienced by first-year HESA students.

CENTERING BLACKNESS AND CREATING HOLISTIC RELATIONSHIPS

Black identity development for college students is not a new concept in higher education literature as it has been explored for decades, mostly notably in student development theory courses. Since the foundational work of William Cross (1971),

more scholars have argued for the need to understand how Black students experience college (Hunter et al., 2019) and, in recent years, the impact of Black scholars conducting research on Black people (Platt & Hilton, 2017), and the intersection of multiple identities including racial identity (Gooden et al., 2020; Means et al., 2017). As Black students transition into HESA master's programs, they often redefine their sense of Blackness (and its intersection with other identities). This sense of Blackness, as indicated by the narratives in this work, is often formed in community with other Black graduate students who are forging their own pathways into these spaces. Moreover, peer mentorship relationships initially based on program affinity have the power to evolve into meaningful relationships outside the graduate school setting that nonetheless support the educational transition.

CULTIVATING SPACES TO RETAIN EACH OTHER

Black communal spaces are not new for Black people (Bordas, 2007), yet the graduate education literature often focuses on the *onlyness* of Black students (Haskins et al., 2013; Stone et al., 2018). The ability to cultivate spaces to develop personal, professional, and interpersonal relationships has been invaluable for Black graduate students. Furthermore, while the presence of same-race mentors is important (Patton & Harper, 2003), spaces without faculty members allow for academic and personal exploration different from that taking place in classroom environments. Non-academic spaces allow students to be vulnerable and frequently result in peer-to-peer communal learning (Lorenzetti et al., 2019). By establishing spaces at the outset of the Black master's student experience, holistic environments can be created to be conducive to learning from and with one another.

DIGITAL COMMUNICATION AND DIGITAL PRESENCE

Digital environments are becoming increasingly significant in graduate student experiences. Moreover, with the impact of COVID-19 and the creation of virtual learning spaces, digital environments are becoming more salient elements of college spaces. As such, orientation, program coordinators, and other staff working with Black HESA students entering graduate school should encourage students to create a digital space for communication that allows them to alleviate their concerns and access support more freely from their peers, as indicated in the narrative presented here. Hernández (2015) has pointed to the digital environment as a counterspace that allows community to be established and maintained. Counterspaces often provide students with the necessary tools to exist and thrive in spaces that are not traditionally or historically designed for their success.

Conclusion

Many education leaders, faculty, and students continue to discuss the challenges of student recruitment, matriculation, and retention, which have become even more

complex due to COVID-19 and racial incidents in our global society. The experiences of HESA master's students, who are being educated to work on college campuses, are a vital component of this conversation, as higher education administrators remain a platform to holistically educate the next generation of culturally responsive educational leaders. Furthermore, for HESA master's students who are training to become higher education administrators, the role of peer circles is valued from the start of their academic careers. With the use of cohort-based learning environments, master's programs that use a collective cohort approach are spaces cultivated for Black students to overcome the problems related to race in collegiate environments. This is especially important given the restrictive environments that higher education institutions have historically created for students of color, particularly Black students.

The narratives presented in this scholarship are only a sample of what is possible if higher education begins to offer a variety of HESA master's programs where students can form peer mentorship communities. This scholarship is offered as an open letter to enable communication among orientation programs, program coordinators, and other stakeholders who are interested in supporting and developing Black HESA graduate students through their educational journeys. Furthermore, in reflection from author one, as a faculty member, how we engage, support, and provide spaces where Black HESA graduate students can exercise agency in their own growth has become critical in the conversation about how to support and retain these students. As previously stated, attracting and recruiting Black students is one responsibility of HESA programs. Other responsibilities include offering spaces and pathways for mentorship by faculty or peers, which is an essential part of student success. The organic relationships developed by the HESA graduate students in this scholarship underscore the need for programs recruiting, retaining, and matriculating Black students to aid them in navigating this process. While this does not address all of the issues faced by Black HESA graduate students, the links made are significant and critical to the success of this group and others learning to navigate student affairs and higher education.

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