

AAIM Perspectives

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Mentoring Minorities: Five Foundational Lessons



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The more university students from underrepresented groups (URGs) I mentor, the more I learn about their past mentorship experiences. Many experienced and overcame streaming at lower levels of education, a process in Canada in which URG students are funneled into nonuniversity streams that limit their future prospects. Many students were told in grade schools that they would not be able to accomplish their aspirations or were actively deterred from pursuing fields and careers that were deemed to be too challenging and out of reach. Many were just guided poorly. Mentoring URG students requires a distinct skill that necessitates attention to nonacademic factors that make up the context of a student's life, including but not limited to casteism, racism, internal or subconscious biases, stigma, and stereotypes.¹

The coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) has illuminated preexisting gaps in health care and economic systems disproportionately impacting Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) communi-

ties.² The current sociopolitical climate in the United States, Canada, and elsewhere is changing rapidly. The Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests in the year 2020, while the pandemic was spiraling out of control, have been formative in our understanding of health disparities through the public health crises of racism.³ Since 2013, BLM gained support and advocacy in response to public displays of police brutality and systemic racism within North American justice systems. Meaningful mentoring of BIPOC students is even more urgent now than ever because the emotional burden put on these students is immense, while witnessing such public display of injustice. Their aspirations to be researchers, advocates, and activists need to be supported and nurtured.

Positive life experiences in early childhood contribute significantly toward lifelong health, economic, and educational achievements.⁴ School teachers and authorities, as well as parents, have a foundational impact on a child's mind and beliefs. Disruptive childhood experiences, if not addressed and managed by a child's social networks, can have detrimental long-lasting effects into adulthood, such as homelessness, poverty, and mental health issues.^{5,6} BIPOC individuals are overrepresented in prisons and are at a higher risk for homelessness.⁷ The URG university-level students I mentor have navigated through these barriers with many lessons learned from their collective experiences. There is a dearth of resources to aid in the mentoring of URG students in university.^{8,9}

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LESSON 1: AWARENESS OF SOCIETAL DETERMINANTS

Classism and racism pervade university campuses, and BIPOC students face systemic covert and overt discrimination, making it difficult for them to succeed within the university system.¹⁰ Guiding URG students requires making a conscientious effort to understand and recognize their university experience, in addition to other experiences that relate to their exposure to other social determinants.⁶ Given systemic barriers, URG students may need different resources to achieve their goals. They may even not have access to the basic necessities such as access to food, safe housing, a quiet space in their homes, broadband Internet, parental support, or other resources.¹¹⁻¹³ They may also have responsibilities at home that include but are not limited to providing financial support, and care-giving responsibilities for siblings, elderly parents, or their own children. This pandemic revealed the day-to-day realities of many URG students in the United States, showing that school meals were their only reliable nutritious food source.¹⁴ Dealing with hunger, sickness, hospitalizations, care giving, or death is also more frequent in URG student lives than their white counterparts. University mentors, and not just school counselors and teachers, must keep this in mind when mentoring, guiding, or teaching URG students. Early childhood school authorities have a vital role to play in laying foundational stones to either build ambitious and strong minds or to repress them. Many BIPOC students I have mentored expressed, later in our mentoring relationship, that they were forced away from their academic ambitions, compelled to aspire less, or simply poorly guided by school counselors or teachers. Many BIPOC advocates and BLM activists are highlighting how such misdirected advice by schoolteachers and counselors is a facilitator for the school-to-prison pipeline.¹⁵ To better understand a student's context, it is of the utmost importance to know what past advice was given to them. Building from past unjust experiences of casteism, racism, oppression, microaggression, and poverty will yield positive mentoring experiences.

PERSPECTIVE VIEWPOINTS

- Since kindergarten, most minority students are told to abandon their dreams and are led to choose a lesser career.
- Understanding social determinants Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) students face is a crucial first step.
- Mentorship with a compassionate attitude without vilifying or excluding BIPOC students is urgently needed.
- All educational institutions and educators must invest in proactively cultivating courageous mentors with open-minded attitudes toward the day-to-day challenges faced by BIPOC students.

LESSON 2: DEARTH OF ROLE MODELS

BIPOC students, especially students who self-identify as indigenous or as immigrants from unstable countries, may not have role models who hold academic or other professional positions.^{16,17} In addition, first-generation students in Western countries might be struggling to identify with two different cultures and it might be difficult to find role models that identify with blended culture. Given a lack of accessible academic role models in their families or social circles, we should not expect them to be exposed to routine conversations about their goals and aspirations in academia.¹⁸ Because of their realities, BIPOC students aspiring to higher goals and positions must be mentored differently. Female BIPOC students may be especially deterred from aspiration due to patriarchal traditions, even within well-educated and financially advantaged families. For example, many females are not allowed to leave their homes alone, even for minor chores, unless accompanied by a male. That male could be their younger brother, but they still must have a male accompaniment, even for some university-going adult female students.¹⁹ Sympathetic inquiries should be made about parental or family support, in a nonjudgmental, nonthreatening, safe, and friendly manner. Sensitive sex and gender role inquiries might be easier for female mentors than for their male counterparts.^{19,20} Co-mentoring, with female and male mentors, may make such explorations more manageable.

LESSON 3: LIMITED SOCIAL NETWORK

Many URG families socialize with relatives, friends, and colleagues who share a common culture or are similar in socioeconomic status. With societal stigma and stereotypes, it is challenging for many URG students to relate to the predominant white culture because of differences in culture, food, clothing, social norms parenting, and religion. These and other differences lead many URG students to limit their socialization to individuals with similar socioeconomic status, resulting in a limited social network. Students from URG families may have limited opportunities to exchange views regarding their goals and aspirations with a dependable circle of family and friends. Lack of ongoing, informal discussions that explore ideas and possibilities while growing up might deter many from

exploring their utopian visions. BIPOC students might find it difficult to relate, due to their unfamiliarity with free, extensive, and, at times, unimaginable discussions on varied topics. Compassionately understanding their limited exposure due to a limited social network and social capital and proactively exposing them to different academic and professional possibilities^{11,21} will yield diverse workforces, leading to representative leadership from middle management to executive boardrooms.

LESSON 4: COURAGEOUS MENTORING

Negativity is subtly instilled in BIPOC students in society and at school in a wide variety of forms, from microaggression to overt discrimination.^{10,22,23} Understanding the root causes of internalized negativity takes courage and conviction. It is quite easy to dismiss students because they did not keep up with a set timeline or because they do not have grand ambitions. They might be involved in their local community or dealing with mental health issues or legal issues. A brush with the law is a reality for all BIPOC people at all socioeconomic levels. They might be stopped by police while driving or walking and then fined, ticketed, or imprisoned.²⁴ Unpacking the experiences of a URG student takes courage. Social and professional constraints in Western countries do not usually allow mentors to engage in issues that may be perceived as “personal” in a student’s life. However, such perceptions are usually superficial because our lives are complex, often with blurred boundaries between the personal and public. Moreover, many cultures do not have such boundaries and are more open to discussion around issues that affect the day-to-day. A welcoming space to discuss with students the issues that are bothering them would create a safe space to delve into a fruitful mentorship experience.

LESSON 5: COMPASSIONATE MENTORING

One size does not fit all, especially when it comes to mentoring URG individuals. A tailored approach to mentoring URG students—regardless of socioeconomic status—is important. To diversify our workforce at all levels, it is essential to avoid inadvertent exclusion of BIPOC students.²⁵ Compassion is an important part of the formula when mentoring BIPOC students. Understanding the importance of subtle and overt differences within BIPOC communities is critical, and mentors cannot assume that all individuals within a community have the same experiences.²² Recognizing the self-negation often built in a BIPOC student’s mind requires compassionate inquiry. With subdued attitudes, these students may not seem to have grandiose visions and personal goals. Mentors must not let self-negation take hold of any student but must strive to unleash the potential of one student at a time, with

compassionate understanding of BIPOC student experiences of oppression and discrimination. Getting to the root causes may seem nuanced, complicated, and unattainable; however, a compassionate and trauma-informed discussion with open-ended questions might simplify the process and make it achievable. Some BIPOC students might have experienced physical, sexual, or emotional abuse, whereas others may have been refugees having survived horrific and difficult circumstances.^{10,22,23} Some might still be facing challenging environments in their own lives or in the lives of their loved ones. Exploratory, well-meaning, and probing questions could inflict more trauma, if conscientious efforts are not first made to promote a culture of safety. It may be wise to first build a trusting relationship¹⁷ with such students with ample time and patience, before indulging in sensitive and personal issues. Even after building trust, it is wise to first seek their permission to speak on delicate and intimate matters. Caring does not equate to compassion. Compassion is a cultivated quality, needing persistent efforts. Through diligent practice, the qualities of wisdom, compassion, and loving kindness develop together. The ultimate result is of benefit to mentor and mentee alike, though cultivating such qualities takes openheartedness, determination, and a consistent intentional effort.²⁶

Mentors must not let the system affect BIPOC students negatively and deny society of well-deserved diversity that leads to creativity, innovation, and productivity. We all must actively engage in uprooting casteism, racism, stigma, and stereotypes in ourselves first and then in society at large. Understanding the sources of negativity instilled in a BIPOC student’s psyche is crucial for successful mentoring. Over time, such subtle negativity leads to underachieving and a loss of creativity, and self-negation subdues ambition. We must nurture diverse students and encourage creativity and innovation.

Diversity is not enough. We must strive to cocreate a workplace or organization that is inclusive and honest.²⁷ It is not just the poverty of money that matters but also poverty of expectations, opportunities, and networking. Our society urgently needs students who are eager to learn and are committed and ready to work on systemic issues such as casteism and racism. Mentoring URG learners with these 5 foundational principles will build strong citizens, strong communities, and strong nations^{11,16,28} to yield a compassionately curated and just world.

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