

The Relation of a Work-Based Mentoring Program to the Academic Performance and Behavior of African American Students

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Using a sample of 202 African American students from four urban high schools, this study examined participation in a work-based mentoring program in relation to academic performance and behavior. Based on the program's academic goals, the unique characteristics of mentoring programs, and social learning theory, it was anticipated that participating in the program would be related positively to grades and attendance. Results indicated that participating in the program for more than half the academic year had a significant, positive relation with students' grade point averages and attendance rates after controlling for their previous-year GPA and attendance. This relation was not significant for those who participated in the program over a shorter period of time. Implications of the results for the career development of African Americans are discussed and areas for future research are identified. © 2001 Academic Press

School-to-work programs in U.S. high schools traditionally have focused on non-college-bound, disadvantaged student populations (Lewis, Stone, Shipley, & Madzar, 1998), in which racial and ethnic minority group members are overrepresented. In 1998, 37% of all students participating in a school-to-work partnership were either African American or Latino (Hulsey, Van Noy, & Silverberg, 1999). The purpose of this article is to explore participation in one type of school-to-work program, work-based mentoring, in relation to the academic performance and behavior of African American students.

Unlike their White student counterparts, many Black students face a host of unique obstacles in their transition from school to work. When seeking employment, racial and ethnic differences in academic accomplishments (Bankston & Caldas, 1997; Keith & Benson, 1992; Mickelson, 1990; Roth & Bobko, 2000; Steinberg, Brown, & Dornbusch, 1997) can serve to limit opportunities for some African Americans, given the relation employers may perceive between grades and

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future job performance (Roth, BeVier, Switzer, & Schippman, 1996). Employment opportunities also may be limited by biased recruitment practices (Ilgen & Youtz, 1986). Further, once hired, Blacks may face the additional task of overcoming barriers imposed by negative racial stereotyping (Pettigrew & Martin, 1987), inflated expectations, and biased job performance evaluations (Greenhaus, Parasuraman, & Wormley, 1990).

Obstacles such as these in the transition from school to work are significant constraints to the career development of African American students. School-to-work initiatives aim to facilitate this transition and may do so by focusing on academic as well as work outcomes. A review of the literature, however, uncovered no research on the academic or career-related outcomes for African Americans associated with participating in a work-based mentoring school-to-work program. This is particularly troublesome due to the extensive use of these programs, the number of African American students who currently are enrolled in them (Hulsey et al., 1999), and the programs' potential impact on the academic behavior and career choices of their participants (Lent, Hackett, & Brown, 1999).

School-to-work initiatives increasingly are using work-based, adult mentors to achieve their objectives. There are more than 84,000 mentoring partnerships in the United States and this number is projected to increase substantially in the future (Beltz, 1995). Students in these programs typically are assigned adult mentors from organizations that have agreed to provide employment opportunities. The students work closely with their mentors at their places of employment over an extended period of time, either during or outside of normal school hours. The presumed beneficial effect of the mentor-student relationship is based on the principles of social learning theory. Consistent with this theory, interaction with the mentor not only may create and/or change student attitudes and beliefs (Bandura, 1986; Kelman, 1958, 1961; Meyer, 1994), but may influence student behavior (Bandura & Walters, 1963). Since social learning theory emphasizes the role modeling plays in learning and attitude development (Bandura, 1986), and modeling is a key function in the mentoring process (Kram, 1983), it is reasonable to expect that an adult mentor can have a positive effect on a student's academic behavior and performance in a program designed to improve academic outcomes.

Although expectations of the beneficial effects of adult mentoring on youth are intuitively sound, only a limited number of studies have tested them. These studies, further, have either focused on youth mentoring outside a work place (Baldwin-Grossman & Johnson, 1999; Hamilton & Hamilton, 1992; Morrow & Styles, 1995) or on work-based programs without an academic objective or component (Ensher & Murphy, 1997; Hamilton & Hamilton, 1997). In two studies of programs which had academic objectives, but were not work-based, the relation between grades and program participation was found to be dependent on student characteristics (Baldwin-Grossman & Johnson, 1999). These studies reported a positive relation between participation and grades, but only for students with low academic achievement levels, high absenteeism, and minimal family support prior to the start of the program (Baldwin-Grossman & Johnson, 1999). These results must be interpreted

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