



The Promise of Mentorship for Women

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Women & Mentorship

Increasingly, college programs have set their sights on what many already know: mentorship helps lead to success.

College is a transition period for students; they become adults, develop social skills to serve them throughout their lives, make lifelong connections to help launch their careers, hone passions, and determine career paths. This transition can be daunting: as many as one in three first-year students will not return for their second year, and only 56% of students at four-year schools will earn a degree in six years.

While women graduate from college at higher rates than men, they still comprise less than 47% of the American workforce and often find lower-paying opportunities than male peers from the same major — and that gap only widens for women of color.

While this isn't news to some, mentorship programs as a whole may come second to already under-resourced universities with limited bandwidth to take on new projects or expand and update older ones. However, mentorship programs have been demonstrated to be a key factor in equalizing success for students, particularly ones who may already begin their academic careers with a disadvantage.

Whether a first-generation student without familial experience in a university setting to rely on for guidance, or a person of color or a woman who may face additional hurdles in their educations and careers because of their identities, providing a structure to receive the one-on-one guidance every student deserves can optimize their chances of success. From their first year through graduate school to life as an alum, students with mentors are more likely to be happy, successful, and satisfied with their educations and careers.

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Women & the Support Needed to Succeed



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Research suggests that women and men approach networking differently. In general, women tend to form smaller networks based on closely-knit relationships — which while excellent for nurturing intimate friendships, can make it more challenging to excel in a world where it's just as much about who you know as what you know.

However, there may also be a perk to this form of relationship-building: a study conducted at the Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University found that not only do students' social networks correlate strongly with their propensity to be placed in leadership positions, but women with a small network of female friends were almost three times more likely to succeed than their peers with a male-dominated social circle.

In short, women help other women succeed.

Women in STEM also face a steep challenge: in particular, women majoring in engineering leave the field in droves. This is attributed to a variety of factors, including sexual harassment (from both peers as well as professors and managers), a lack of confidence, and aspirational differences in the desired impact of their work.

One year-long study demonstrated that having women mentors early on in their college experience increased women's positive academic experiences — as well as their retention in engineering. Nilanjana Dasgupta, from the University of Massachusetts in Amherst, describes mentors as "social vaccines," helping to vaccinate mentees against the stereotypes of women in STEM or other negative perceptions of their gender in their chosen field. If having a woman mentor increases feelings of belonging, as well as motivation and self-efficacy, then what impact could women mentors have more broadly, across all schools and fields of study?

Meanwhile, in women's careers after college, the need for mentorship continues, and women find themselves increasingly shortchanged without it.

It's not hard to extrapolate from there: women compose approximately half of the workforce in the United States, but the percentage of senior roles held by women is just 21%. (Women of color have an even lower likelihood of seeing a leadership role — white women held almost a third of all management positions at 32.5%, followed by Latinas at 4.1%, black women at 3.8%, and Asian women at 2.4%.) The percentage of women CEOs at Fortune 500 companies peaked in 2017 with a disappointing 6.4% of leadership and more S&P 1500 companies are run by men named John than by women.

And yet, women's success after college goes beyond the moral imperative. Large-cap companies (companies with a market capitalization value of more than \$10 billion) with at least one woman on the board have outperformed their peers with no women on the board by 26%. Successful startups have more women in senior positions and more than twice as many women in top jobs like C-level managers, vice presidents, and board members.

Businesses with a woman on the executive team are also more likely to have significantly higher valuations (64% higher, to be precise) at Series A funding. And while the number of women-owned businesses grew 114% from 1997 to 2017, firms owned by women of color grew at more than four times that rate (467%).

The research is clear: women's career success is everyone's success.

And so, it also follows that mentorship may be an excellent opportunity to nurture the academic and career success of women. One study found that employees who received mentoring were promoted five times more often than those who didn't. It also found that both mentors and mentees were roughly 20% more likely to get a raise than those who did not receive a mentor.

With the types of barriers set up for women — sometimes even before they enter their careers — it becomes more critical than ever to make sure women receive the support they deserve to succeed.

Increasingly, women's colleges like Barnard and Wellesley are looking to mentorship programs to engage and support their students.

Barnard College's mentoring program is marking its tenth academic season in the 2019-20 year. With a campus of 2,500 undergraduates, more than 250 students take advantage of opportunities to engage in one-on-one and group mentoring throughout the year. Their participation is matched by contributions of an equal number of alumnae, who bring expertise in multiple industries, at all career levels, and — with the addition of virtual mentoring and "Mentors-on-Call" in 2018 — from around the world.

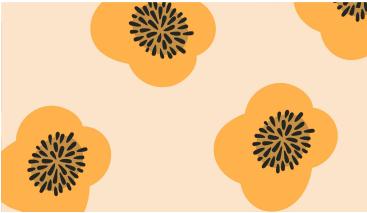
Mentoring opportunities are open to students across their four years, recognizing that it is never too early (or too late) to begin connecting with alumnae whose careers match a student's intellectual and professional goals. Beyond Barnard — the integrated hub for resources across careers, student jobs, fellowships, and graduate advising — sets the tone as early as possible that it is a crucial part of the institution's culture to tap into, and benefit from, professional networks of women.

Alumnae mentors echo and amplify the message of how important these relationships can be for women's professional development and growth. They are, in many instances, the most credible messengers about the importance of mentoring, because they can draw from shared institutional affinity, and their personal experiences after Barnard.



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When it comes to ensuring women have the right support system in place to help them succeed, the first step is creating a culture of mentorship — a cohesive perspective where mentorship is understood, valued, and prioritized. There are three key aspects when approaching creating this type of culture:



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Know your goals.

It may seem easy to set a goal of increasing mentorship on your campus, but take the time to reflect on what this means to you. Is it to increase job placement? Raise retention rates, particularly among women students? Make mentor matches for a certain percentage of incoming freshmen? When you're specific about your goals, it becomes easier to determine the type of program you need, and how best to execute on your plan.

Convey the significance.

A LinkedIn study revealed that 82% of women agree that having a mentor is important, but 19% have never had one. This could be in part because of a lack of representation, and limited access to those who have the knowledge to help. However, alumni often find mentorship a deeply rewarding way to give back to their community, if given the opportunity. Find your base, and let them know what you plan to do.

Make it accessible.

Sometimes where collegiate mentorship programs go awry is giving a student some contact information and a simple "good luck." Empower students to ask for mentorship themselves by providing a structured program with guardrails to guide them. By laying down a path for them to follow, you're more likely to see increased adoption and enthusiasm for your program.



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Conclusion

Ultimately, students deserve a supportive environment to give them every opportunity for success. By leveraging available resources to make a concerted effort to capitalize on the skills of alumni, faculty, parents, and others invested in your students' academic paths and careers, you offer not only a gesture of resounding confidence, but also a meaningful set of circumstances to optimize your students' futures.