

Near-Peer Mentorship:

Empowering Men of Color Through Asset-Based and Student-Centered Strategies



The Brotherhood Initiative is a research-to-practice partnership that draws upon evidence-based approaches to promote academic success for undergraduate men of color at the University of Washington. The BI seeks to build a community of scholars that is equipped with the skills and knowledge to grow and succeed in college and beyond graduation. Our **“Student-Led” brief series** features topic overviews, student stories, and considerations for practitioners and student leaders working to promote and inspire student-centered approaches to critical issues impacting men of color in higher education.



Daniel Garcia

graduated from the University of Washington in 2024 with a Bachelor of Arts in Education & Mathematics. He serves as a substitute teacher for his local school district as well as a research assistant for the BI. He will be starting his master’s degree in education at the University of California, Los Angeles in fall 2025.

INTRODUCTION

Although multiple strategies exist for improving the educational experiences of undergraduate men of color, mentoring remains one of the most commonly employed strategies across men of color programs and initiatives. Participation in mentoring relationships—both as mentor and mentee—is an effective way of fostering academic motivation, retention, and social integration. Studies indicate that mentorship, particularly for men of color, is associated with more positive perceptions of the university, greater self-confidence, and a stronger sense of academic and professional belonging ^{1,2}.

Mentoring is commonly understood as a mutually agreed-upon relationship where a more experienced person (the mentor) supports the development of a less experienced person (the mentee). Near-peer mentoring is a lesser-known approach in which mentors are students who have recently navigated the same experiences or stages their student mentees are currently facing. In 2022, the Brotherhood Initiative (BI) created a near-peer mentorship program to provide holistic support to first-year undergraduate men while also offering professional development opportunities for more advanced BI scholars. The BI Peer Mentorship Program was designed to utilize near-peer relationships and critical mentorship principles to foster academic success and personal well-being.

1 Lopez, E. F., Huerta, A. H., Torres, G. M., Castillo, A. J., & Salazar, M. E. (2025). Mentorship and Outreach: Exploring Students’ Feedback to Improve Men of Color Retention Programs. *Innovative Higher Education*, 1-25.

2 Romero-Reyes, J. (2025). “More Than a Workshop”: Perspectives from First-Generation and Low-Income Men of Color Participating in a Community College Men of Color Initiative. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 49(4-5), 291-306.



Daniel's Story

The Peer Mentor Lead role felt like a natural progression of my journey as a BI Scholar. As a first-generation man of color who had his first year at the UW completely online due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I was well-acquainted with the challenges of being an underrepresented student. However, my time as a student in the BI freshman class enriched my understanding of the various social identities I hold and how I could leverage them to empower myself and others. My experience in the BI sophomore class, where I worked on positively impacting a social issue, helped me realize that I have the agency to make a difference. Finally, my experience as a peer mentor during my junior year provided me with a nascent understanding of relationship building and how to effectively mentor other men of color. Each of these experiences served as stepping stones that strengthened my leadership skills and prepared me to take on the Peer Mentor Lead position.

What stood out to me about the position was that I would have the opportunity to collaborate with the BI staff on the ongoing development of our BI Peer Mentoring program. This was particularly exciting because, although I had greatly benefited from my experiences both as a first-year BI scholar and an upperclassman peer mentor, I was eager to share ideas for improving strategies for first-year support. As a peer mentor the year prior, I remember feeling incredibly frustrated with my first-year mentees. I was unable to understand why they refused to engage with me despite my earnest attempts to connect. I had so many ideas for how to foster these critical relationships, but I had no idea where to even start. Serving in the lead mentor role meant that my ideas would no longer be fleeting thoughts shared with my advisor during check-ins—I would now have the position and authority to bring them to life. I was determined to equip new peer mentors with the tools, resources, and support needed to ensure the incoming BI students would have an easier transition into the UW than my cohort.

Despite possessing all of the right skills and experiences for the job, I still had many questions as I prepared to step into and shape the Peer Mentor Lead position. Namely, what did it mean to be a mentor to other mentors? What role did relationship building play in establishing a strong peer mentor team? Finally, how could I leverage my own skills and positionality to support my mentor team in guiding first-year BI students? Ultimately, these questions would shape my approach to serving as a Peer Mentor Lead.

In the BI Peer Mentorship Program's second year, three student leaders were hired to continue developing the program and to provide leadership for incoming peer mentors. This brief profiles the story of Daniel Garcia and his work in the inaugural cohort of Peer Mentor Leads in the BI Peer Mentorship Program. Daniel's story illustrates how critical mentorship strategies that focus on trust and reciprocity can help undergraduate men of color form meaningful near-peer relationships with one another and develop essential leadership skills.



PREPARING FOR NEAR-PEER MENTORSHIP

Mentorship programs can play a vital role in supporting the academic success of men of color. However, these programs are not one-size-fits-all—they require ongoing input and feedback to remain impactful and culturally relevant. Daniel Garcia's experience highlights the essential role student leaders can play in shaping mentorship programs that truly meet the needs of undergraduate men. As an education major and former peer mentor, Daniel understood the goals of academic mentorship. Yet, he found that building and sustaining meaningful mentoring relationships with his mentees was less straightforward. On the left, Daniel shares what motivated him to become a Peer Mentor Lead, along with his aspirations and concerns for strengthening near-peer connections.

SUPPORTING STUDENT-LED CRITICAL MENTORSHIP

Mentoring takes many forms, with traditional mentoring being the most common. This approach often helps mentees adapt to institutional culture and successfully navigate the institution. It



tends to be hierarchical, with benefits flowing primarily from mentor to mentee³. Critical mentorship, by contrast, challenges deficit-based assumptions and hierarchical norms⁴. Rather than positioning mentors as all-knowing and mentees as lacking, it supports and empowers mentees from marginalized communities to confront the systemic barriers that make mentoring necessary. Critical mentorship includes three core elements:

- **A focus on cultural relevance.** Critical mentorship strives to be culturally relevant by promoting students' culture as a tool for learning rather than an obstacle, and encourages students to engage in a broader critique of economic, social, and political issues that shape race and ethnicity.
- **An intersectional approach that acknowledges and integrates various social identities.** Critical mentorship recognizes the significant role identity plays in shaping mentees' experiences. It rejects the notion of identity groups as monoliths and instead encourages mentors to consider how many identities, such as gender *and* sexuality, or race *and* class, may compound the challenges a mentee faces.
- **A commitment to asset-based views and approaches.** Critical mentorship rejects deficit-based views common in traditional mentoring. It emphasizes building reciprocal, mutually beneficial relationships, where mentors recognize that mentees also bring valuable knowledge and experiences. Through this asset-based approach, critical mentors open themselves up to the wealth of knowledge and experiences their mentees possess.

Practitioners and instructors play a vital role in helping student leaders apply the principles of critical mentorship. By encouraging student mentors to reflect on their lived experiences, engage with the perspectives of those most impacted by program decisions, and challenge traditional power dynamics, staff can foster more inclusive and responsive mentorship practices. In Daniel's case, the support and resources provided by the Brotherhood Initiative's student success staff enabled him to lead with intention and advocate for meaningful program changes. In the quote on the right, he shares how this guidance empowered him to put critical mentorship into practice.

I can recall various moments during the early parts of the Peer Mentor Lead position where I was explicitly asked, "What do you think?" or "How do you feel about this as a student?" I think a great part about this role is that I had been a peer mentor before, and I could speak a lot better to the student experience. This strong foundation allowed me to develop my mentoring skills in my junior year as a peer mentor and gain the experience needed to provide meaningful feedback as a Peer Mentor Lead during my senior year. Moreover, my feedback on the program was consistently sought, which boosted my confidence and reinforced that my perspective was valued.

Weekly meetings with my fellow Peer Mentor Leads and our student success coordinators, where we were encouraged to provide updates, ensured that our team was always on the same page about our peer mentors and their needs. The feedback gathered during these check-ins was pivotal in identifying and addressing aspects of our program that weren't working for our mentors. For instance, I recall one check-in when a mentor raised concerns about an assignment that required photographic evidence of meetings with mentees. He explained that the interactions encouraged by the assignment often felt transactional, with mentees seeking him out solely for the picture. I had already begun to feel that this assignment didn't align with our program's goal of fostering mutually beneficial relationships, which made this mentor's feedback all the more impactful in emboldening me to voice my concerns to the peer mentor team. As a result of our conversation, we were able to reduce the required meet-ups for the quarter from four to three, creating more opportunities for organic connections between mentors and mentees.



3 Mullen, C. A., & Klimaitis, C. C. (2021). Defining mentoring: a literature review of issues, types, and applications. *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, 1483(1), 19–35.

4 Weiston-Serdan, T. (2017). *Critical mentoring: A practical guide*. Stylus Publishing.

REFLECTING ON NEAR-PEER CRITICAL MENTORSHIP

Although Daniel came into the Peer Mentor Lead position with questions about how his identity and lived experience would impact his ability to lead other peer mentors, he quickly learned how critical mentorship celebrates and encourages identity-informed practice. In the process of shaping the role, Daniel adopted many of the strategies supported in the literature on critical mentorship, but with a focus on its application to near-peer relationships for men of color. Reflecting on his experience, Daniel describes below how he ultimately developed program supports and interventions.



Daniel's Story

If I had to sum up my Peer Mentor Lead experience, I would say it was transformative. In particular, I came to better understand the importance of viewing my mentors as people first, making intentional and consistent efforts to show that I was there to provide support, and recognizing them as rich sources of knowledge.

Curiously, many of the challenges I faced as a Peer Mentor Lead mirrored those from my first year as a peer mentor. I recall one instance when I had trouble reaching one of my mentors who had missed several classes. When I finally got a hold of him, I shared my concern and asked how he was doing. During this conversation, he revealed that he was fasting for Ramadan and was having trouble keeping up with his classes. After thanking him for sharing, we worked together to set reasonable deadlines that allowed him to honor his religious duties and responsibilities to the program. The simple act of reaching out—rather than assuming negligence—made all the difference in fostering mutual understanding and strengthening our relationship.

Throughout my time as a Peer Mentor Lead, I made a deliberate effort to create a trusting environment where my peer mentors felt comfortable checking in about how things were going. Drawing from previous experiences, I knew that trust was earned through consistent effort – not something to be expected. I saw this most clearly with my first-year mentees, who only opened up about their struggles after I consistently reached out. The development of relationships with my mentor team followed a similar trajectory, as they gradually opened up to me after many check-in messages. Only then did they begin expressing their frustrations with the program—many of which later became agenda items at our peer mentor team meetings. I truly believe that my mentors wouldn't have felt comfortable sharing constructive criticism if I hadn't prioritized trust-building early in our relationship. Environments where men of color feel fully heard and acknowledged are few and far between. My hope was that by showing my mentor team I cared about them first as people and then as mentors, they would feel more comfortable sharing honest opinions about their experiences in the program.

Although I gained many lessons throughout my journey, what stands out most is how much I learned from my mentor team. While our team was entirely composed of men of color, each of them embodied that identity in their own unique way. Through working with them, I gained a deeper understanding of the intersections of being nonbinary and indigenous, of what it is like to balance religious duties and academics, where Guam is on a map, what being Chamorro means, and so much more. While learning about identity to better support my mentors may not have been in my job description, it proved to be the key to my growth and success as a leader. I can confidently say that my peer mentor team will always hold a special place in my heart as lifelong friends.



Daniel's journey as a Peer Mentor Lead illustrates the transformative power of near-peer critical mentorship. By centering trust, empathy, and mutual learning, he not only supported the growth of his mentor team but also deepened his own understanding of leadership. His experience underscores that effective mentorship—especially among men of color—requires more than guidance; it demands genuine connection and a willingness to learn from those we lead. In embracing these values, Daniel helped create a space where men of color felt seen, heard, and empowered to thrive.

LESSONS LEARNED

In reflecting on his experience, Daniel identified four important lessons about supporting undergraduate peer mentors. Practitioners and student leaders can draw insights from this work as they envision and implement strategies to establish critical or near-peer mentorship for undergraduate men of color on their own campus.

- **Trust is a must.** Supporting near-peer mentors requires intentional relationship building that can cultivate mutual trust and care. By prioritizing these relationships, Daniel better understood each mentor's needs and interests, seeing them as individuals first. When trust is established, near-peer mentors are more likely to share their authentic selves and offer honest feedback—both of which help create a more student-centered mentorship experience.
- **Cultivate relationships of reciprocity.** Traditional mentoring dynamics frame mentors as the sole source of meaningful insight, overlooking a rich source of insight from the mentee's perspective. Mentor leaders and mentors should seek to learn from their mentees just as much as they expect the mentees to learn from them by facilitating meaningful conversations where learning about mentees' experiences, areas of expertise, and aspirations are prioritized.
- **Encourage perseverance and criticality.** Critical mentorship involves more than just overcoming the systems of oppression that affect daily life—it also requires empowering mentors and mentees to actively challenge and transform those systems. While the BI Peer Mentor Program encouraged some level of critical consciousness by encouraging mentors to reflect on and share their experiences as men of color, more intentional efforts were needed to illuminate and address the institutional forces that contribute to these challenges. Leaders must work to create opportunities for participants to take action against these inequities.
- **Promote asset-based problem solving.** Traditional mentoring often imposes solutions without considering mentees' strengths. Daniel realized his team's lived experiences offered valuable insights. By creating space for mentors to develop their own mentoring praxis, rather than imposing his own strategies and framework, he supported more responsive, flexible leadership that encouraged mentors to develop unique approaches to supporting their mentees.



REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

For Practitioners

1. *How can I foster mentoring relationships that draw from the full identities and lived experiences of the mentors and mentees?*
2. *How can I support student mentors and mentees in identifying and challenging institutional barriers, while also helping them develop strategies for navigating and transforming those systems?*

For Student Peer Mentors

1. *How can I better incorporate my lived experiences into supporting and communicating with my mentees?*
2. *How can I build trust with my mentees by creating a collaborative relationship, instead of expecting them to trust me right away just because I'm the mentor?*

MENTORSHIP PROGRAM OVERVIEW

Mission:

To create a network of support between first-year and upper-class students; Identifying and advocating for individual student needs and academic success, all while emphasizing the importance of community within higher education institutions.

Program Objectives:

- Develop practical leadership and mentorship skills
- Gain hands-on experience in peer advising and student support
- Collaborate with a diverse and committed student services team
- Make a direct impact on the first-year experience of underrepresented students

Quarterly Topics:

Fall Quarter:

Introduction to Critical Mentorship, Common Institutional Barriers, Supporting LGBTQIAA+ Students, Supporting and Referring Students in Distress, Peer Advising on Class Selection

Winter Quarter:

Reflections on Critical Mentorship, Common Winter Challenges for First-Year Students, Financial Aid 101, Advising Support, Exploring Navigational Capital, Trauma-Informed Peer Support

Spring Quarter:

Integrating Mentoring Skills in Resumes and Interviews, Common Spring Challenges for First-Year Students, Designing Mentoring Tools and Resources, Reflecting on Mentorship Experience

“I was learning from my mentees just as much as they were learning from me. This looked like having in-depth conversations during our check-ins where I would prioritize hearing about them and their lives, particularly experiences I might not be familiar with (e.g. LGBTQIAA+ experiences, Ramadan, Native American issues, etc.). It also looked like attending events with them when I was invited (e.g. food sovereignty presentation, multicultural makers fair, etc.) or seeking advice from my mentors (both professional and personal) just as much as they would from me.”

– Daniel Garcia

Learn more

Brooms, D. R., Franklin, W., Clark, J. S., & Smith, M. (2021). ‘It’s more than just mentoring’: critical mentoring Black and Latino males from college to the community. *Race, Ethnicity, and Education*, 24(2), 210-228.

Lopez, E. F., Huerta, A. H., Torres, G. M., Castillo, A. J., & Salazar, M. E. (2025). Mentorship and Outreach: Exploring Students’ Feedback to Improve Men of Color Retention Programs. *Innovative Higher Education*, 1-25.

Weiston-Serdan, T., & Sánchez, B. (2023). *Critical mentoring: A practical guide*. Routledge.



Brotherhood Initiative Project

PI: Dr. Joe Lott

College of Education

University of Washington

<https://brotherhoodinitiative.org/>

AUTHORS:

Daniel Garcia, Kandi Bauman, Theresa Ling Yeh, Joe Lott

Suggested Citation: Garcia, M. D., Bauman, K., Yeh, T. L., Lott, J. L. (2025, July). *Near-Peer Mentorship: Empowering Men of Color Through Asset-Based and Student-Centered Strategies* (Student-Led Series: Brief No. 2). Seattle, WA: The Brotherhood Initiative, University of Washington.