

**Teaching and Educational Methods**

# Implementing Theory-Based Mentoring and Experiential Learning to Ease Undergraduate Multicultural Scholarship Recipients Transition from Community Colleges to a Large Research Institution

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## Abstract

The U.S. Department of Agriculture provides competitive grants to higher education institutions to support students from diverse backgrounds through scholarships, mentorship, and experiential learning opportunities. The Food and Resource Economics Department (FRE) at the University of Florida was recently awarded one of these grants. In this article, we discuss the theories utilized to develop the multidimensional mentoring and experiential learning programming aspects of FRE's Multicultural Scholar Program. Programmatic aspects were designed to ease the transition of multicultural scholarship recipients transferring from Associate of Arts (A.A.) programs at state and community colleges to a large research institution. We also highlight challenges and successes we faced in implementing the program. We share our experiences such that other agricultural economics programs seeking funding to support multicultural students and developing mentoring programs for multicultural transfer students aimed at increasing diversity and inclusion can learn from our successes and challenges.

## 1 Introduction

Approximately 42 percent of the nearly 60,000 projected annual jobs openings in food, agriculture, and related fields for graduates with bachelor's or higher degrees are expected to be in management and business (Fernandez et al. 2020). To help meet this need, the Food and Resource Economics (FRE) Department at the University of Florida (UF) recently received a competitive Higher Education Multicultural Scholars Program (MSP) grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA; n.d.). Leveraging FRE's strong bachelor's program with individualized mentorship and student engagement in supplemental experiential learning (SEL) opportunities, FRE's MSP aims to increase the diversity of FRE and, ultimately, the agricultural workforce by preparing scholarship recipients in agricultural and applied economics.

Historically, UF, the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences (CALS), and FRE attract a diverse set of students (Table 1), with many Hispanic students coming from South Florida and Central and South America. However, Table 1 shows a recent decline in FRE's enrollment and a slight decrease in diversity among the department's recent graduates. Although the percentage of white students enrolled in FRE has remained consistent, the percentage of FRE graduates that are white has increased. This suggests nonwhite students have lower retention rates and may take longer to complete their degrees.<sup>1</sup> Qualitative exit-interviews of multicultural FRE seniors and alumni, as well as anonymous survey data, collected from Spring 2021 FRE graduating seniors suggest gaps in student support, particularly

<sup>1</sup> UF does not calculate retention rates or time to degree for transfer students. Since 80 percent of FRE's students are transfer students, accurate retention rates and time to degree data for FRE are unavailable.

mentoring as students transitioned from their Associate of Arts (A.A.) degree institution. Table 1 also shows that while the majority of students enrolled at UF and in CALS (the college where FRE is housed) are female, less than one third of FRE students are female. Thus, the MSP aims to increase the diversity of FRE by awarding ten scholarships and providing individualized, holistic mentorship to transfer students pursuing bachelor's degrees in FRE from underrepresented gender, race, and ethnicity groups with preference given to first-generation college students.

**Table 1. Enrollment and Number of Baccalaureate Degrees Awards 2014—2019**

	2014-2015			2015-2016			2016-2017			2017-2018			2018-2019		
	UF	CALS	FRE	UF	CALS	FRE	UF	CALS	FRE	UF	CALS	FRE	UF	CALS	FRE
<b>Total Enrolled</b>	32,781	3,638	322	34,002	3,673	293	35,518	3,935	309	36,436	4,102	317	37,527	4,254	285
First-Generation	14%	16%	13%	13%	16%	13%	12%	13%	13%	12%	13%	11%	11%	12%	9%
Female	55%	63%	29%	55%	64%	27%	55%	65%	28%	56%	65%	28%	56%	67%	32%
Race/Ethnicity Unknown	3%	3%	2%	3%	3%	2%	3%	3%	3%	3%	3%	4%	3%	3%	4%
Asian	8%	7%	4%	8%	7%	4%	8%	7%	2%	8%	6%	3%	8%	7%	4%
Black	7%	7%	5%	6%	6%	4%	6%	5%	3%	6%	6%	6%	6%	6%	3%
Hispanic/Latino	20%	17%	21%	21%	19%	18%	21%	19%	17%	21%	20%	15%	22%	20%	17%
Native American/Alaska	0%	1%	1%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	1%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Two or More Races	3%	3%	2%	3%	3%	1%	3%	3%	2%	3%	3%	4%	4%	4%	3%
Nonresident Alien	1%	1%	7%	1%	1%	7%	2%	1%	8%	2%	2%	6%	2%	2%	7%
Pacific Islander/Hawaiian	1%	2%	0%	1%	1%	0%	1%	1%	1%	1%	1%	1%	0%	0%	0%
White	58%	60%	58%	57%	60%	61%	56%	61%	63%	55%	60%	62%	54%	59%	62%
<b>Baccalaureate Degrees</b>	8,603	1,111	124	8,451	1,060	113	8,569	1,093	108	9,115	1,154	115	9,965	1,229	122
First-Generation	13%	13%	10%	12%	16%	12%	10%	11%	13%	10%	11%	13%	12%	12%	6%
Female	57%	60%	35%	56%	62%	27%	57%	64%	27%	58%	64%	31%	58%	64%	26%
Race/Ethnicity Unknown	3%	4%	1%	3%	4%	4%	3%	3%	3%	3%	3%	4%	3%	2%	2%
Asian	6%	5%	2%	7%	6%	4%	7%	6%	4%	7%	6%	2%	7%	6%	5%
Black	7%	7%	4%	6%	7%	7%	6%	6%	4%	6%	5%	3%	6%	5%	3%
Hispanic/Latino	19%	16%	23%	20%	18%	20%	21%	19%	19%	21%	19%	18%	22%	20%	11%
Native American/Alaska	0%	1%	0%	0%	1%	2%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	1%	0%	0%	0%
Two or More Races	2%	3%	3%	2%	2%	1%	2%	3%	1%	2%	2%	1%	3%	3%	4%
Nonresident Alien	1%	2%	10%	1%	1%	4%	1%	2%	12%	2%	1%	5%	2%	1%	8%
Pacific Islander/Hawaiian	1%	4%	1%	1%	2%	0%	1%	2%	3%	1%	2%	0%	1%	1%	0%
White	59%	59%	56%	59%	60%	58%	59%	59%	55%	58%	63%	66%	57%	61%	66%

This article provides an overview of FRE's MSP and reflects on successes and challenges faced in designing and implementing the program. In addition, we discuss theories at the heart of the MSP programming. While the MSP is unique to FRE, we hope that individuals at peer institutions seeking funding to support multicultural students or developing mentoring programs for multicultural transfer students can learn from our experiences.

The remainder of this article is organized as follows. The next section provides an overview of FRE's MSP. The motivation for the MSP program is discussed in section 3. Section 4 presents a brief overview of the transition and student development theories employed to develop the programming. Section 5 discusses the key activities of the MSP linking these activities to the theories. Section 6 discusses challenges and successes of implementing the program, section 7 presents changes to the program to overcome the challenges, and section 8 concludes.

## 2 Multicultural Scholars Program Overview

Approximately 80 percent of FRE's undergraduate students transfer into the department after completing their A.A. degree or equivalent coursework. These students primarily transfer from community or state colleges while some join FRE after changing their major. Thus, we are working closely with academic advisors at state and community colleges and other departments at UF to recruit diverse scholars who demonstrate leadership and academic excellence, and are near the completion of their A.A. or equivalent coursework. Thus far, eight of the ten awards have been made. Currently, we are recruiting additional scholars for spring 2023 admission.

Scholarship recipients receive a stipend of \$6,500 per year for two years and an additional \$2,000 to support a SEL opportunity such as study abroad, faculty-guided research experience, extension internship, or agribusiness internship. In addition to financial support, each scholarship recipient receives mentorship from the MSP coaching team consisting of the project directors and departmental advisor and through the newly implemented departmental peer-mentoring program (Agricultural Mentoring Program, AMP). To recruit additional underrepresented students beyond those receiving scholarships, MSP recipients are required to participate in recruiting events at their high schools and A.A. institutions.

## 3 Motivation for MSP Programming

The MSP programming is motivated by the need to support transfer students throughout their transition to UF. Many first-generation, minority students experience homesickness, emotional distress, and culture shock due to an absence of mentors/role models, high expectations, familial pressures, and the contrast in cultures between their home and campus communities when transitioning to predominately white, nonurban, land-grant public institutions (McCoy 2014). Students transferring from community college settings to large research universities tend to need more support in their first semester to successfully transition than they typically receive (Townsend and Wilson 2006). This is especially true for minority students. If these students do not receive adequate support, feelings of isolation can occur (Owens et al. 2010).

Therefore, individualized, holistic mentorship,<sup>2</sup> particularly in the first semester, is an important aspect of the MPS program. Individualized transition or bridge programming facilitated by faculty, staff, and students and involvement in ethnic student organizations and multicultural center activities can help acclimate transfer students to campus life (McCoy 2014). For example, black students at Dealali Kobra Community College who received individualized, holistic academic coaching by faculty and academic advisors during their first semester indicated feeling more comfortable, noticed, cared about, needed, and appreciated because they had a personal connection with their coach who celebrated

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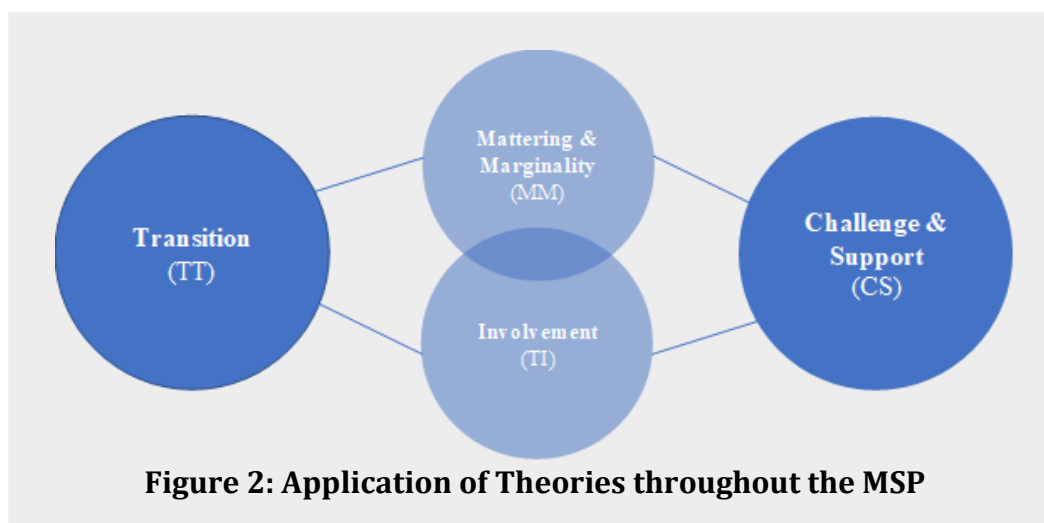
<sup>2</sup> Holistic mentoring is characterized by mentorship that considers the student's background, life outside of college, and emotions as well academics, during the mentoring process (Luedke 2017).

successes and sympathized with failures (Hathaway 2021). Furthermore, the development of positive mentoring relationships affects the likelihood of students persisting through the transition period and probability of students remaining in college one year after coaching (Robinson and Gahagan 2010; Bettinger and Baker 2011).

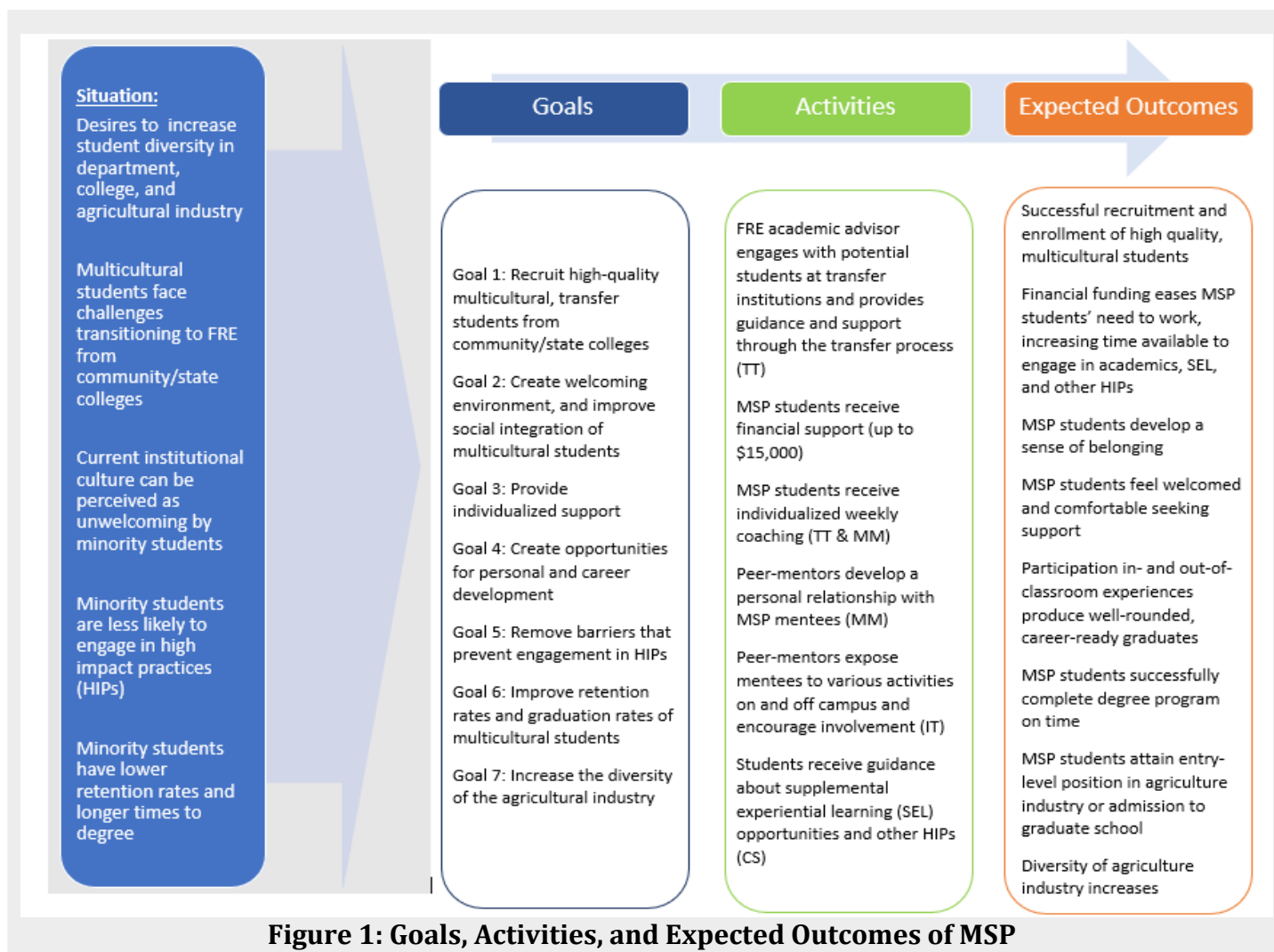
Once students have successfully transitioned to the university and developed a sense of belonging, attention can be turned to helping students develop career-ready professional skills and experiences. Participation in out-of-classroom activities such as study abroad, service learning, research, or internships can be life-changing for students (Kuh 2008). With many agricultural economics-related professions requiring an above-average competency in skills such as complex problem solving and critical thinking (Data USA 2020), engagement in these opportunities, often referred to as experiential learning or high impact practices (HIPs), is integral to students' long-term success in the workforce. Involvement in HIPs is positively related to GPA and retention with larger positive effects for students from historically underserved backgrounds (Sandeem 2012). Although first-generation students, transfers, and individuals from underrepresented racial or ethnic minority backgrounds benefit significantly from engagement in HIPs (Finley and McNair 2013), students of color and first-generation students are less likely to engage in these opportunities (McDaniel and Van Jura 2020). Thus, removing barriers that inhibit participation and encouraging engagement in HIPs is an important aspect of the MSP.

#### 4 Theory-Based Mentorship and Engagement in Experiential Learning

Brinkley-Etz Korn and Cherry (2020) provide a comprehensive overview of the evolution and application of theoretical frameworks applied to the study of higher education transfer students. Given that the MSP has several goals, including increasing the diversity of FRE, increasing the retention rate of multicultural students, and increasing engagement of multicultural students in HIPs, applying more than one theory was necessary (see Figure 1). We develop the MSP programming around four theories: Schlossberg's Transition Theory (TT; Goodman, Schlossberg, and Anderson 2006; Barclay 2017), Schlossberg's Theory of Mattering and Marginality (MM; Schlossberg 1989), Astin's Theory of Involvement (TI; Astin 1999), and Sanford's Theory of Challenge and Support (CS; Patton et al. 2006). These theories build on prior theories and highlight the importance of assistance throughout the transition process, need for targeted strategies to develop a sense of belonging and overall resiliency, and need to provide opportunities for professional growth. The relationships between the four theories and their application over the four semesters of the MSP is presented in Figure 2.



**Figure 2: Application of Theories throughout the MSP**



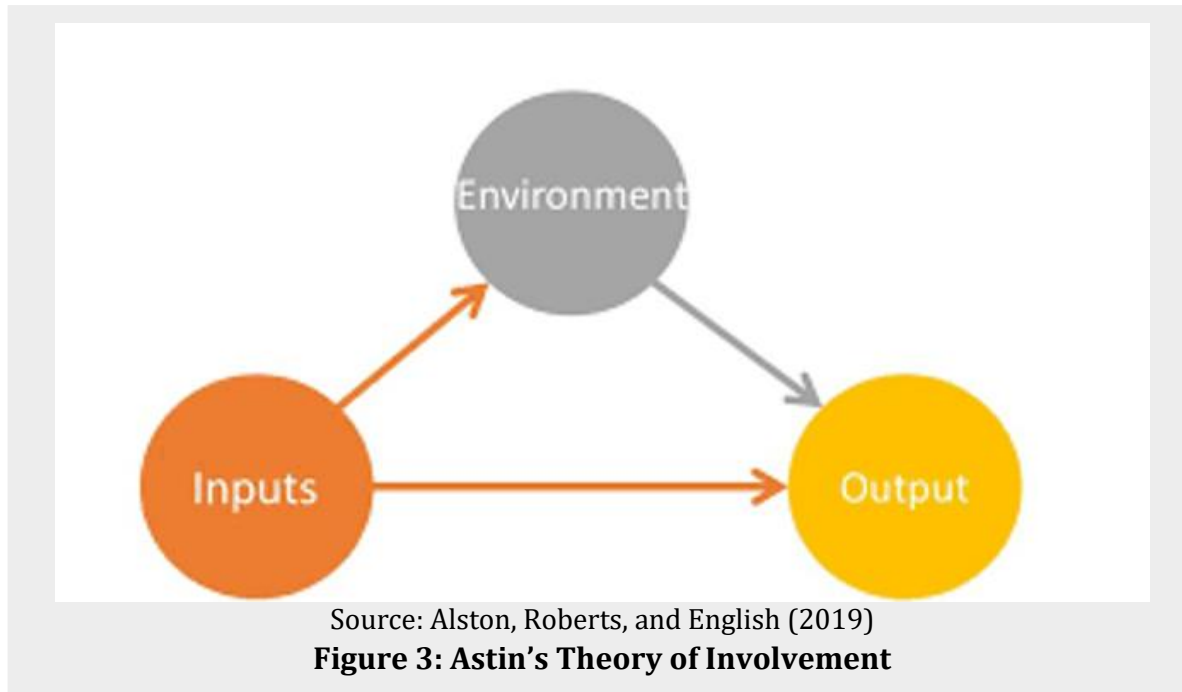
**Figure 1: Goals, Activities, and Expected Outcomes of MSP**

Schlossberg's TT identifies four factors known as the four S's (Situation, Self, Social Support, and Strategies) that influence a person's ability to cope with a transition. Situation is the assessment of the situation or event that the student is experiencing—in this case, a multicultural student progressing through the admissions process and transferring to UF. Self is the assessment of how the student identifies as well as their level of optimism and ability to handle ambiguity; it highlights the importance of considering the transition from the perspective of the individual student. Support is the external support system, including family, friends, and mentors, available to assist the student in the transition. Strategies are coping resources available to the student including those that the student brings to the transitional experience. The lens of TT has been used to understand the transition of various groups in educational settings including students transitioning from community colleges to larger institutions, male athletes transitioning from community colleges, and adult learners (Flowers, Luzynski, and Zamani-Gallaher 2014; McCoy 2014; Lazarowicz 2015; Burgess and Cisneros 2018; Collom, Biddix, and Svoboda 2021). The first semester of the MSP is grounded in TT. Although support and strategies can vary greatly across students, we developed programming that specifically targets these domains.

Activities early in the MSP program are designed to also incorporate aspects of both Schlossberg's MM and Astin's TI to instill a sense of belonging and promote engagement, respectively. The MSP program employs all five aspects of MM to create an environment where students feel they matter: (1) providing individualized attention, (2) demonstrating that they are important to us, (3) providing a dependable program, (4) offering opportunities to expand their ego through specific identity groups, and (5) demonstrating appreciation for our students.



Astin (1999) defines involvement as the investment of physical and psychological energy a student devotes to their academic experience. As shown in Figure 3, what students bring with them to college in terms of their characteristics (inputs) and the environment that a student experiences throughout college influences the outcomes (e.g., postgraduation attitudes, beliefs, knowledge, and values). The level of involvement directly impacts what the student gets from the university experience. This suggests engagement in on-campus activities is important for personal and professional development. Hence, these activities are an integral part of the MSP. MM and TI are often combined to provide full support as they are complementary. The previously discussed proactive support intervention at Dealali Kobla Community College is an example of an intervention that combines elements of MM and IT (Hathaway 2021).



Sanford's CS states that students grow and develop through experiencing internal or external challenges while also being supported to meet these challenges. This theory has been a centerpiece of designing programming to promote student success for several decades (Upcraft, Gardner, and Barefoot 2005). In a recent mixed-methods study, Longerbeam (2016) finds college environments that facilitate academic success are those with increased opportunities to find support and engage in challenge. Therefore, later in the MSP, while continuing to incorporate aspects of MM and IT, aspects of CS are incorporated to help students seek more advanced opportunities, such as their SEL and other out-of-classroom HIPs.

## 5 Implementation of Theory-Based MPS Programming

In this section, we discuss key MSP activities and link these activities to the four previously discussed theories. Figure 1 presents a logic model diagram of the MSP that summarizes the goals, activities, and expected outcomes of the MPS and links the key activities of the MSP to the theories.

Using the terminology of Schlossberg's TT, progression of the student's transition occurs into three phases: moving in, moving through, and moving out. During the moving in phase, as the student prepares to transfer to UF, the MSP scholars receive guidance from FRE's academic advisor regarding the admissions process. The MSP scholars also participate in a day-long, university transfer student orientation in which they meet with their advisor, administration, and fellow incoming transfer

students. Moving through incorporates actions taken throughout the student's program, with a focus on activities in the first year, to ensure a successful transition to the university. These activities include the weekly mentoring meetings with the coaches and participation in AMP. We hope that by the moving out phase students have developed a sense of belonging and are ready to tackle challenges such as engaging in their SEL in subsequent semesters and beyond.

## 5.1 Mentoring from Coaches

As discussed previously, higher education professionals play a vital role in easing the transition and instilling persistence in students. Thus, individualized, holistic mentorship is at the core of MSP programming; MSP recipients are required to attend weekly mentoring meetings throughout the program. The coaching schedule follows a three-week cycle such that each scholar meets with each of the three coaches over the course of a three-week period. The various strengths and skills of coaches creates diversity in perspectives and mentoring approaches. The meetings cover topics essential to the students' long-term success, including goal setting; time management; development of healthy study habits; discussion of available resources in the department, on campus, and in the community; resume writing; stress management; and internship identification. Most of these meetings are one-on-one. Occasionally, the weekly meetings are replaced with group activities such as attending the career showcase or study aboard fair.

Through these weekly meetings and applying TT, the mentors develop an understanding of each scholar's situation and self as a minority student transferring to a larger institution. Luckily, at UF, like many other R-1 intuitions, the structure of independent departments organized into colleges provides a community college feel in a large institutional setting that aids students' transition. During these meetings, we help the scholars identify existing support and strategies (part of the four S's) and introduce them to additional resources. We also consciously implement MM during the meetings. First, we ensure each student receives individualized attention by getting to know them on a personal level and suggesting activities that reflect their career goals and interests. For example, we connected one of the scholars who is interested in local government with opportunities to get involved locally. Next, other aspects of MM are incorporated, including ego extension through forming identity groups with other students in the program.

Prior research suggests the presence of faculty, staff, and other students of color is vital to minority students' acclimation during the transition process (McCoy 2014). Hence, lack of diversity in faculty and administration at primary white institutions can present challenges. Nevertheless, white faculty mentors in cross-race relationships can effectively support minority students and help them develop a sense of belonging (Hathaway 2021). All three members of the MSP coaching team were first-generation college white females with mentorship experience. Understanding the importance of providing positive mentorship, the coaches engaged in additional mentoring trainings prior to the MSP launch to better support multicultural students. The coaches completed the university's Multicultural Mentorship certificate and the Diversity, Equity, Inclusion: Insights into Anti-Racism online course. The project director also completed the semester-long Mentoring Academy offered by CALS that included modules on multicultural mentorship, inclusion, and ethics. Recognizing that most academics do not receive formal mentorship education, the academy was started to create a culture of effective mentoring within CALS. Prior to developing the MSP, the coaches served as university life coaches for first-generation college students and as coaches for academically at-risk students.

## 5.2 Peer Mentoring

Graduating FRE students frequently indicate during their exit-interviews that they wish they had gotten more involved in campus activities but were unaware of those opportunities or did not know how to get involved. For these reasons, as well as to provide peer-to-peer mentoring for the MSP scholars, AMP was developed. AMP is a peer-to-peer mentoring program that pairs incoming FRE students with continuing FRE students. Students are paired based on a variety of factors including career and graduate school aspirations, personality traits, hobbies, hometown, and demographic characteristics. AMP is a voluntary, department-wide program open to all students; however, MSP scholars are required to participate either as a mentee or mentor each semester that they are enrolled. AMP was first launched in Fall 2021 with nine sets of mentee-mentor pairs. Its framework of student leadership decreases the burden on FRE faculty and staff and ensures AMP will continue after the MSP award period ends. Past mentees are encouraged to become mentors to provide consistency in the program.

Peer mentors participate in a formal orientation and training and are given a resource packet that includes conversation starters, mentorship tips, and a detailed campus resource directory. Mentee-mentor pairs are asked to meet one-on-one at least once a month and are encouraged to participate in group activities organized by AMP advisors such as bowling, game nights, and exam reviews. This allows the student to develop an individual relationship with their peer mentor as well as a sense of community with other AMP participants, aspects at the heart of MM.

Peer mentors are encouraged to engage in practices consistent with IT. Transitioning students need guidance when seeking and exploring opportunities for involvement. Through peer mentorship, the mentees are exposed to and encouraged to engage in departmental and university activities such as Ag Econ Club, academic fraternities, and other on- and off-campus activities.

### **5.3. Supplemental Experiential Learning**

As previously noted, HIPs are important for student development; however, minority students often do not engage in these activities. Thus, we intentionally implemented CS to encourage participation in SELs. We provide information regarding these opportunities by accompanying the MSP scholars to the study aboard fair and passing on internship opportunity information, encouraging participation, and writing letters of recommendation. By providing a financial stipend of up to \$2,000 per student to support the scholars' SEL, the MSP aims to increase the likelihood of engagement in these activities by removing one of the largest barriers of entry—funding. Students typically engage in their SEL toward the end of their degree program (summer before senior year or third or fourth semester). SEL activities complement FRE's other experiential learning activities in the classroom (i.e., semester-long simulation games) and out of the classroom (i.e., Southern Agricultural Economics Association [SAEA] and Agricultural and Applied Economics Association (AAEA) quiz bowl and National Agri-Marketing Association (NAMA) marketing competition). The coaching team continues to meet with the scholars during their SEL to provide support, troubleshoot challenges, and provide continued encouragement; most students engage in SEL away from campus and therefore do not have their complete support network available to them, making continued support from the coaches even more important.

## **6 Reflection on Challenges and Successes**

In this section, we highlight the challenges and successes experienced in implementing the program.

### **6.1 Recruitment**

Recruitment of nontraditional, minority, low-income students to FRE's full-time, in-residence program can be difficult because competing online programs allow these students more flexibility in balancing their studies with other responsibilities such as employment and family obligations. Often online programs are also more affordable because students can forgo the cost of room and board. In recent years, recruitment of underserved students has become increasingly difficult as many competing



intuitions expanded their online programming during the COVID-19 pandemic while FRE remains an in-residence program requiring in-person classes.

Furthermore, many potential students' preconceptions of the agricultural industry, as well as economics as a major and UF, hinders recruitment efforts. While FRE has a diverse faculty and staff, the current relative lack of diversity in agricultural fields as well as business negatively impacts potential students' interest in the major. Academic advisors throughout the state are also unfamiliar with the career opportunities available to FRE graduates and hence do not encourage their students to consider it. In addition, potential transfer students do not apply to FRE because they think they will not be accepted. Admission into UF as a freshman is extremely competitive; however, students wishing to transfer into FRE simply need to meet the 2.0 GPA requirement and grade requirements in selected courses (economics, statistics, calculus, and accounting).

The COVID-19 pandemic presented additional challenges because recruiting events at many institutions were held online with these events having lower attendance rates than past in-person events. Furthermore, recruiting students online tends to be more challenging. At in-person recruitment fairs we can draw in potential students that are unfamiliar with FRE by approaching them or through attractive signage highlighting the careers of our alumni. The online recruitment fair environment limits such informal interaction, making it harder to engage with students who are unaware of the major.

Other recruitment challenges arose due to the admissions process at UF. We received notification of the grant only a few weeks before UF's deadline for potential transfer students to apply for admission for Fall 2021 semester. By this time, most of the recruiting and transfer fairs at the state and community colleges had already occurred. Furthermore, transfer students must be admitted by UF's Admissions Department. Thus, we encouraged eligible applicants to first apply for admission to UF. We then worked with college administrators to obtain a list of all admitted transfer students who met the scholarship criteria (i.e., U.S. resident, underrepresented gender or ethnicity/race, not previously enrolled in a bachelor's program in agriculture, and minimum GPA) and encouraged these students to apply for the scholarship. Surprisingly, only about 60 percent of the admitted students who met the criteria applied for the scholarship.

## 6.2 Retention

As discussed above, retaining transfer and multicultural students past their first year is challenging; this is particularly true in recent years due to COVID-19 and the rise in associated mental health issues. During 2020 and spring 2021, most courses at UF as well as those at state and community colleges were offered online. In Fall 2021, UF returned to an in-person format for all courses that were not online offerings prior to the pandemic. The MSP scholars that started in the fall cohort only had one semester of in-person instruction at their state or community college prior to starting at UF. Therefore, these students who would typically use their transfer institution as a stepping stone between high schools and larger institutions did not have the same experiences as students attending prior to the pandemic. Despite efforts to identify high caliber students and provide support throughout the transition process, one MSP scholar struggled with the transition and was dismissed from the MSP.

## 6.3 Peer Mentoring

Informal decisions with the scholars as well as anonymous surveys of the AMP mentees indicated that AMP successfully exposed students to various opportunities, eased their transition to UF, and provided a sense of community. While peer mentors and mentees were only required to meet during the mentee's first semester, we observed several of these relationships continued. However, the peer-mentoring aspect of the program was not without challenges. Some mentors did not meet with their mentees as often as required (at least once a month), and one mentor never met with their mentee.

## 6.4 Cohorts

Although not intended, having multiple cohorts of scholarship recipients has been a positive aspect of the program. The MSP students that started in the fall term served as peer mentors of the scholars starting in the spring. One of these mentor-mentee pairs even participated in a study abroad program together this summer.

## 6.5 Involvement and Engagement

Overall, the current scholars are excelling. The average GPA of scholars continuing in the program was above the average GPA of other FRE students. Four of the scholars completed their SEL requirement already: three completed study abroad programs, and one completed an internship. In addition to engaging in SELs, the scholars have engaged in various activities within the department and across campus, including Ag Econ Club, Quiz Bowl, and academic fraternities. The MSP scholars are also challenging themselves academically with one pursuing a CALS Honors Certificate, another starting a combined degree program (starting graduate studies while still an undergraduate), and another applying for a different combined degree program. These students indicated that the support they have received thus far from the coaching team has fueled their desire to continue their education and engage in additional HIPs.

## 6.6 Feedback

Another positive aspect of the MSP is our ability to allow the scholarship recipients to advocate for their needs and to incorporate feedback to improve the program. At the end of the fall and spring semesters, we request feedback from the scholars regarding the MSP and whether or not it is meeting their personal growth and professional development needs. Overall, the scholars are happy with their experiences so far. However, they indicated that weekly mentoring meetings are burdensome, particularly around midterms and finals.

## 7 Actions to Overcome the Challenges

In this section, we discuss the measures that we are taking to overcome the previously discussed challenges. Since recruitment was our biggest challenge, we are employing several strategies to increase the applicant pool. In addition to partnering with advisors at state and community colleges with diverse student bodies, we are engaging FRE faculty housed at UF's extension and education centers throughout the state in the recruitment process. We also updated our recruitment materials to highlight job placements of our recent multicultural graduates and lowered the GPA requirement for the scholarship from 3.0 to 2.5. Several excellent multicultural students who were already admitted to FRE and were planning to enroll were ineligible for the scholarship because their GPA fell just short of our original 3.0 requirement. We realized that the previous standard may have been exclusionary for students who were balancing the challenges of completing their A.A. coursework with other responsibilities like supporting themselves financially.

We also made adjustments to the mentoring aspects of the program based on the feedback we received from the scholars. To ensure meaningful experiences for the mentees, we are requiring mentors and mentees to report their peer-mentoring activities each month so that we can intervene and possibly pair mentees with a new mentor if the responsibilities of the mentor are not being fulfilled or the relationship is not working. Given the MSP purpose is to provide support for the multicultural students rather than burden them with additional responsibilities, we reduced the number of mentoring meetings with the coaches to twice per month for scholars in their first semester and once a month for the continuing scholars. The scholars indicated that group mentoring activities such as attending the career fair and study abroad fair were particularly valuable; thus, we added additional group mentoring

activities. We will continue to seek both formal and informal feedback from the MSP scholars to improve their experiences in FRE and the MSP.

## 8 Conclusion

This article provided an overview of FRE's MSP, highlighting the theories used to develop its programming and reflecting on the successes and challenges of implementing the program. We hope that sharing our experiences will aid others involved in designing programming for multicultural and underrepresented students. While the MSP only launched in Fall 2021 and hence the scholarship recipients have not yet graduated and thus we cannot evaluate the long-term goals of the program, we have already seen positive benefits of the program; the students currently funded by the program are succeeding in and out of the classroom. The early promising results of the program suggest that the coaching, peer mentoring, and experiential learning programs aspects of the program could be replicated at other institutions seeking to increase inclusion and aid the transition of multicultural transfer students. We will continue to evaluate the progress of the MSP scholars to determine if mentorship and engagement in SELs impacts retention and graduation rates.

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