Development of a Peer Mentorship Program for Aboriginal Youth Attending Post-Secondary Education: The Importance of Stakeholder Collaborations

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INTRODUCTION
Aboriginal youth often encounter many educational and vocational challenges. In Canada, approximately 46% of Aboriginal youth complete high school, compared to 65% of the general population (Mendelson, 2005). Among those students who continue to post-secondary education, roughly 27% of Aboriginal youth are more likely to drop out in their first or second year and 62% live away from home, compared to 13% and 49% of non-Aboriginal youth, respectively (Finnie, Childs, Kramer, & Wampler, 2010). Thus, there is a need to develop programs that engage lower-year Aboriginal students in their post-secondary education.

Mentorship programs are advantageous for school engagement and psychological adjustment (Janelle, Moore, & Scapura, 2002), although few programs have been developed for Aboriginal youth. It is important to develop programs that can address the needs of Aboriginal students attending a specific university. Further, successful youth programs are based on effective collaborations among stakeholders (Rawana & Nguyen, 2010). Components of effective collaborations include: length of partnership, stage of the program the collaboration is occurring in, how resources are shared, and whether the collaborations are reciprocal or mutually beneficial (Ring & Van de Van, 1994). Research has shown the positive relationship between effective partnerships and strengths-based outcomes in school-based programs, such as positive ethnic identity and resilience (Rawana & Nguyen, 2010). Thus, the primary objective of the current study was to describe the development and evaluation of the Aboriginal Leadership and Mentoring (ALM) Program. The program’s development was informed by a literature review and needs assessment. Secondary goals of the current study included: 1) Conduct a literature review of peer mentorship programs for Aboriginal students in English-speaking post-secondary institutions in Canada, highlighting key components of the programs including stakeholder collaborations, that contribute to the development of the program; 2) Complete a needs assessment involving stakeholders in order to inform the development of the ALM Program, including its structure, content, and participants; 3) Complete a mixed-methods evaluation of the pilot program with a focus on strengths-based outcomes.

METHOD
1. Literature Review
A systematic review of peer mentorship programs for Aboriginal students in English-speaking post-secondary institutions in Canada was conducted using PsyCINFO. A group of researchers also completed it by visiting the websites of Canadian universities and post-secondary institutions. Two independent reviewers completed the search strategy to identify the final programs for inclusion in the review.

2. Needs Assessment for the ALM Program
A needs assessment from program stakeholders was conducted via an online survey. Four stakeholders participated (Mage = 35.50, SD = 12.90, range = 20–48, 75% females). Two participants were First Nations Status, one was Métis, and one was Mixed. There were 2 undergraduate students, 1 graduate student, and 1 staff member.

3. ALM Program Evaluation
Participants completed pre- and post-measures and qualitative interviews at Time 1 (February 2011) and Time 2 (April 2011). At Time 2, participants (N = 9; mentors = 6, mentees = 3) were composed of students from 22–46 (Mage = 29.83, SD = 8.70; 89% females). Six participants identified as First Nations Status, 1 as Métis, 1 as Mixed, and 1 as Other. There were 7 undergraduate students, 1 graduate student, and 1 staff member.

RESULTS

1. Literature Review
A systematic review of peer mentorship programs for Aboriginal students in English-speaking post-secondary institutions in Canada was conducted using PsyCINFO. A group of researchers also completed it by visiting the websites of Canadian universities and post-secondary institutions. Two independent reviewers completed the search strategy to identify the final programs for inclusion in the review.

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4. Program Evaluations
Four programs, including the ALM Program, included an evaluation component. Evaluations were usually completed at the beginning and at the end of program participation. Two programs completed needs assessments, and 3 programs explicitly stated that a mixed-methods evaluation was completed.

ALM Program Development
During the 2010-2011 academic year, a pilot version of the ALM Program was implemented. The program was developed in partnership between the Centre for Aboriginal Student Services and the REACH Lab in the Department of Psychology at York University. The development of the pilot program involved recruitment of mentors and mentees, the creation of a mentor’s manual, and the delivery of a training session for mentors and mentees. The pilot program was designed to address the needs of Aboriginal students by providing a unique program for Aboriginal students at York (informed by a needs assessment), and fostering student leadership and program management skills.

DISCUSSION
In sum, a literature review of peer mentorship programs for Aboriginal students attending post-secondary institutions in Canada revealed that relatively more universities than colleges had mentorship programs for Aboriginal students. The majority of programs were based in Ontario universities. Few programs incorporated cultural components, conducted program evaluations, developed enduring collaborations, or described programs in peer-reviewed materials. In order to develop a mentorship program for Aboriginal students at York University, the program team adopted a strengths-based collaborative approach. Researchers and members of Aboriginal Student Services conducted a literature review and needs assessment that informed program components (e.g., training session, mentor’s manual). A mixed-methods program evaluation design focused on strengths-based outcomes, which included improved student engagement and social competence, as well as positive attitudes toward inter-ethnic group contact.

Limitations & Future Directions
A few key limitations should be noted. This current review only identified programs in English-speaking institutions. The ALM program evaluation did not include a control group, and the duration between pre- and post-measures was only one academic term. Proprietary reviews do not allow for a replication of the study. The evaluation only assessed the recruitment of Aboriginal students in Canadian colleges and universities.