Future Skills Centre / Centre des Compétences futures

Project Insights Report

Mentoring for Black Nurses—A Retrospective Study

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Executive Summary

Black nurses in Canada are well-represented in frontline roles but continue to face systemic barriers that affect their professional experiences and career progression. Formal mentorship plays a critical role in many professional settings that rely on "learning by doing," where a more experienced individual (mentor) actively guides and supports a learner (mentee) through hands-on practice and real-world application of skills. This allows the mentee to learn primarily through direct experience and immediate feedback rather than solely through theoretical instruction. Mentorship is a core part of formal nursing education, employment access and career advancement, but it can be fraught with challenges. It relies heavily on interpersonal relationships, subjective assessments and access to social capital, all of which may be affected by racial bias.

The project explored the role of mentorship in pathways to nursing, including education, employment and advancement, and how anti-Black racism manifests for both internationally and Canadian-trained professionals. It includes a preliminary case study of the Canadian Black Nurses Alliance's programs, which aim to support Black nurses at various stages of their career in order to better understand competencies as well as processes.

KEY INSIGHTS

1 Mentorship is a key mechanism for accessing education and employment across professions, but it often relies on subjective processes that can be fraught with embedded bias.

2 Mentorship is widely recognized as a critical support mechanism within the health-care sector, offering guidance, professional development and emotional support. In nursing, it plays a particularly vital role in supporting the transition from education to practice, integrating internationally educated nurses into the Canadian workforce, and helping mid-career professionals advance into leadership roles, yet the literature on mentorship in health care has often overlooked how racial identity and lived experiences influence mentoring relationships.

3 Black nurses face many obstacles in their pathways through education, employment and advancement, and require mentoring that takes into account these realities.

▶ The Issue

The research on the experiences of Black nurses reveals many challenges: Black nursing students often feel isolated, excluded and inadequately supported throughout their education. These challenges persist as they transition into professional settings, where Black nurses frequently encounter biases from colleagues, patients and supervisors, which manifest in various ways, including heightened scrutiny of their skills and qualifications, a lack of trust in their expertise, and discriminatory behaviours that erode their confidence. Compounding the issue, many workplace environments lack formal mechanisms to address racism or bias, leaving Black nurses to navigate these complex dynamics with little to no institutional support. Even those who advance into leadership roles face additional barriers, such as racial bias in performance evaluations, limited peer support, and the added pressure of navigating their racial identity in ways that their white colleagues are not expected to.

Many existing mentorship programs in Canada do not adequately address the specific challenges faced by Black nurses. To bridge this gap, the CBNA program has developed targeted initiatives that provide Black nurses with mentorship opportunities specifically designed to address their unique challenges.

The report examines the context, implications for mentoring processes, and competencies required for both mentors and mentees. It draws on the preliminary results of the CBNA program to offer recommendations for more inclusive mentoring for nurses and general practice.

🔧 What We Investigated

This report brings a gender-and-diversity lens to the process of mentoring in the context of nursing, with a particular focus on the experiences of Black nurses and the strategies needed to meet their needs. It has broader implications for mentoring in other contexts and the factors that must be considered in the design, implementation and evaluation of mentoring. Specifically, it considers 1) the definitions and role of mentoring in nursing education, employment and advancement, 2) the experiences of Black nurses at each stage of their career, 3) how mentoring practices in nursing need to take into account the needs of Black nurses (drawing on preliminary results from the CBNA pilot), and 4) implications for inclusive mentoring more broadly.

✔️ What We're Learning

While mentorship is widely regarded as an important strategy for professional development, retention and well-being, most existing programs do not sufficiently integrate equity-focused practices. This gap is evident even at the design and conceptualization stages of mentorship. A variety of mentorship models are present in nursing, including dyad, peer, group and constellation mentorship approaches. Each model offers distinct advantages, from personalized guidance in one-on-one (i.e., dyad) mentorship to the cultivation of professional networks and support systems in group settings.

However, the review found a critical gap in how each of these frameworks incorporates race and equity considerations. For example, while dyad models provide structured and tailored mentorship through one-on-one relationships, they often depend heavily on mentor-mentee compatibility. Unconscious biases can create barriers to trust and open communication, particularly when mentors are not aware of or do not fully understand the unique experiences of Black nurses. This gap in understanding can lead to missed opportunities for meaningful support, leaving Black nurses without the mentorship they need to navigate the systemic inequities they are likely to experience.

Black Nurses & Students Allied for Success and the CBNA's Professional Mentorship Program and are attempts to fill these gaps, and preliminary feedback is positive. However, these initiatives lack definitions of formal goals and objectives, competency frameworks, and assessment to determine "what works best for whom."

⭐ Why It Matters

While further research is needed, the following preliminary insights provide an initial understanding:

Representation matters
Research on racial concordance, along with the success of CBNA's programs, demonstrates that mentorship relationships thrive when mentors and mentees share similar backgrounds and experiences. This alignment fosters deeper trust, improves communication and creates a supportive environment where mentees feel understood and valued.

Establish formal and sustainable mentorship programs
Develop dedicated mentorship initiatives for Black nursing students and professionals within health-care organizations and professional associations. Ensure programs are long-term, institutionally embedded, and supported by sustained funding and infrastructure, moving beyond informal or volunteer-based models.

Strengthen mentorship in nursing education
Provide mentorship for Black nursing students to support retention, reduce isolation and foster early professional development.

**State of Skills:
Working with Black Communities**

Black peoples in Canada experience widespread systemic anti-Black racism in education systems and the labour market. More needs to be done to name and address anti-Black racism in the skills ecosystem, including efforts to change employer behaviour to make workplaces more inclusive.

Read Thematic Report

Build leadership-focused mentorship pathways
Create targeted mentorship programs for Black nurses aspiring to leadership roles, offering guidance on career advancement, executive decision-making and professional development. Support Black nurses entering specialty fields to increase representation in advanced practice and executive leadership.

Strengthen evaluation of mentorship programs through competency-based frameworks
Develop competency-based frameworks to assess the effectiveness of mentorship programs in advancing career growth, retention and leadership development for Black nurses. Race-disaggregated metrics are essential for tracking participation rates, measuring impact and identifying disparities.

Have questions about our work? Do you need access to a report in English or French? Please contact communications@fsc-ccf.ca.

How to Cite This Report
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The Future Skills Centre acknowledges that the Anishinaabe, Mississaugas and Haudenosaunee share a special relationship to the 'Dish With One Spoon Territory,' where our office is located, bound to share and protect the land. As a pan-Canadian initiative, FSC operates on the traditional territory of many Indigenous nations across Turtle Island, the name given to the North American continent by some Indigenous peoples. We are grateful for the opportunity to work in this territory and commit ourselves to learning about our shared history and doing our part towards reconciliation.