

## 60-Second SoTL

### Episode 24 – Relational Supports and Peer Mentoring for Under-Represented Students

(Piano Music)

0:03

#### Jessie L. Moore:

How do relational supports and peer mentors improve entry rates and progression through university by students from marginalized communities? That's the question for this week's 60-second SoTL from Elon University's Center for Engaged Learning. I'm Jessie Moore.

0:16

(Piano Music)

0:19

In "The Whole World was Lifted Off Me': The Importance of Relational Supports and Peer Mentoring for Under-Represented Students in Accessing University in Ireland," published as an open access article in the *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, Sinéad McNally, Paul Downes, Laura O'Halloran, Gráinne Kent, and Sandra O'Neil share data from their evaluation of a peer mentoring program designed to support secondary education students in accessing university.

0:46

The researchers conducted focus groups with secondary education students participating in the peer mentoring program, parents of those students, university students and graduates who were peer mentors in the program, and university students who had participated in the program as secondary students. The team also completed semi-structured interviews with past participants who had not continued to university, secondary education guidance counsellors, and university staff.

1:12

Using inductive coding guided by Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis frame, the researchers identified four themes related to barriers to accessing higher education and ways to improve access. Many participants highlighted **socio-cultural constraints** and amplified the importance of having peer mentors who looked like them or who shared other identities and who had successfully navigated access to university. These peer mentors were able to offer practical recommendations about selecting courses and developing travel plans, but they also offered relational support.

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1:45

A second theme focused on minoritized students encountering **low expectations for their success** at university. Participants experienced their family members, peers, and even secondary school staff questioning why they would attend university rather than going straight to work and voicing doubts about whether participants would succeed at university.

Participants also identified **economic and structural constraints**. Under-represented students often lacked information about the cost of university and the financial supports available to them. As a structural constraint, participants also questioned the validity of Ireland's Leaving Certificate exam as an assessment of students' abilities to succeed at university.

2:26

Finally, the researchers note that an **information and knowledge gap** compromises minoritized students access to and persistence in university, with guidance on admission routes, financial resources, and other information about university shared only with a subset of secondary students.

The researchers suggest, "University students who had received peer mentoring supports before moving on to HE emphasized the importance of relational supports to enhance: (1) motivation, (2) academic preparedness in getting into university and (3) knowledge of their specific course and of university life more generally."

3:04

While this study focuses on higher education in Ireland, it contributes to the growing international scholarship on the importance of fostering relationships – including peer relationships – to support students' access to and success in higher education. To learn more about this study, follow the link in our show notes to read this open access article and to review our supplemental resources for this episode.

3:25

(Piano Music)

3:28

Join us next week for another snapshot of recent scholarship of teaching and learning on **60-second SoTL from Elon University's Center for Engaged Learning**. Learn more about the Center at [www.CenterForEngagedLearning.org](http://www.CenterForEngagedLearning.org).

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3:40

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