

Rockford University Peer Mentoring Program Goes Digital

By Leslie Joan Millenson, ACI Director, Special Projects

When the COVID-19 emergency threatened to shutter [Rockford University's](#) campus, Dr. Karen Walker acted fast to connect with the mentees in the school's Men of Color Mentorship Program. Part of the network of [ACI Peer Mentoring Programs](#) on 11 member campuses around the state, Rockford's Men of Color Mentorship Program provides three mentors to support 15 students at high risk for failure to thrive at college. Walker, transition coordinator for Rockford's Center for Learning Strategies, knew the sudden shift from classroom instruction to online learning plus dislocation from campus life could be a real stumbling block for these young men.

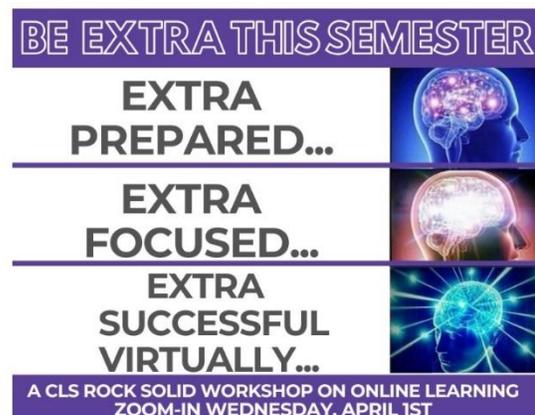
"When all this started going down, our students were on spring break," explains Walker, "so many were not checking their email, so social media really was really important for us." Rockford's Men of Color Mentorship Program has always had an active social media presence on both Facebook and Snapchat. To leverage the program's social media presence in response to the COVID-19 emergency, Walker held a virtual meeting with the three mentors. "We used Zoom, and we got them totally comfortable with the platform," Walker recalls. "Of course, these students are digital natives, so they picked it up really quickly."

Walker assigned each mentor to post on one day each week, "so we're communicating at the beginning, middle and end of each week," she explains. "Initially, criteria for the posts was just that they be uplifting, motivational. But as we moved forward, we've been using social media to give campus updates and directions on how to use digital tools to keep up with their classes."

Next, Walker switched the Men of Color Mentorship Program's tradition of "Chop it Up," (talk sessions from in-person gatherings in Walker's family room to using Zoom conferences. "We would naturally have been doing mid-semester check-in," Walker observes, "but now the focus was less on mid-term grades than on survival: Do you know what's going on? Where are you? Are you on campus? At home? Do you have a digital device you can use to learn online?"

Assessing students' living arrangements was critical, Walker says. "At first, our students were allowed to stay on campus, but then they had to vacate in early April, unless special arrangements were made." Walker found students who had no internet access and students whose family situation wasn't conducive to home study. "I worked with residence life to secure exceptions on a case-by-case basis, so students could continue in the dorms when necessary."

A recent Zoom Chop It Up session featured Cory Espensen, director for advising and retention. He talked with the group, many of whom are student athletes, about policies and procedures

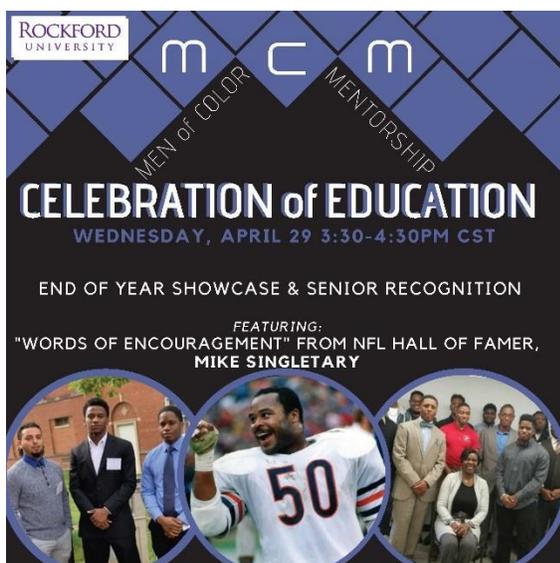


This is a Facebook post to help keep participants in Rockford's Men of Color Mentorship Program on track.

associated with online learning and discussed the pass-fail option, including the influence selecting that option can have on eligibility for athletics.

"We had 12 students participating on that call. That's more than we have under ordinary circumstances," Walker acknowledges. She believes that higher participation in the session reflects some unexpected benefits of the shift to online learning. "First, not all the classes are synchronous – students don't have to be available at a specified time to complete the coursework, and that gives students who have jobs much more flexibility. We're also hearing that they feel a little less pressure because open book/open notes exams take some stress out of the classes. But at the same time," Walker observes, "students have to be more disciplined in time management so as not to not fall behind."

To combat this problem, Rockford University held a campus-wide workshop on succeeding in online learning. Rockford senior Joshua Davis, one of the three Men of Color mentors, was part of the student panel delivering the workshop. All the mentees received a link to a recording of the workshop. "Joshua Davis is an extremely studious, successful student, and the workshop was a great opportunity for a male of color to be seen as a knowledgeable peer," says Walker.



Mike Singletary, Chicago Bears great and member of the Pro Football Hall of Fame, will address the Rockford Men of Color Mentoring Group in a year-end celebration, via Zoom.

Singletary. "He a great motivational speaker who can help encourage our students and strengthen their connection to Rockford and to the Men of Color Mentoring Program," says Walker, "even if they're sitting in their own bedrooms or dorm rooms."

Rockford University has hosted an ACI Peer Mentoring Program for the past four years. The program supports 15 freshmen men of color, all first-generation, low-income students. The mentees are organized into three teams, each with its own mentor, an upper classman of color from similar socioeconomic background as the mentees. ACI funds two of the teams, and Rockford University funds the third. "The great thing about our program is that the young men stay connected with us," says Walker. "Although the program targets freshmen, many of our young men stay in touch with us throughout their college career, and our Chop It Up sessions and other activities sometimes attract other men of color on campus who just want to be part of the group."

With the semester rapidly coming to a close, Walker and her team have scheduled a virtual end-of-semester celebration via Zoom. The April 29 event will feature Chicago Bears great Mike