AI in the Loop: College Student Attitudes Toward AI-Assisted Peer Mentoring

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Introduction:

- College students face significant mental health and academic challenges, yet only a small percentage receive needed support.
- Peer mentoring programs can help address service gaps and are associated with positive student outcomes; however, these programs can be difficult to scale.
- AI is increasingly being used to promote college student well-being.
- AI could enable peer mentors to scale support by suggesting personalized resources and responses and offering just-in-time training.
- Integrating AI tools into peer mentoring raises critical questions about student acceptance and perceived authenticity, factors that are fundamental to mentoring relationships.
- Few studies have examined youths' attitudes toward the integration of AI into mentoring and other paraprofessional roles, highlighting the need for additional research.

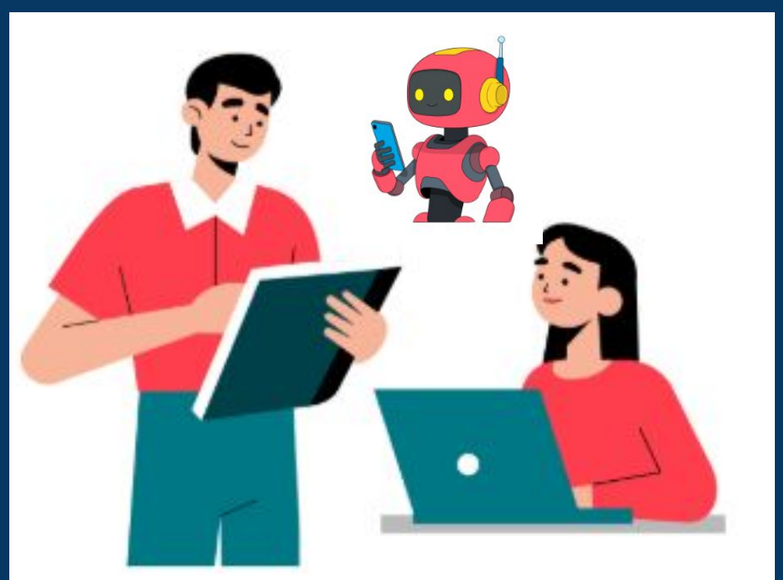
Methods:

- Undergraduate students at a large public university in the US were invited to complete a mixed-methods questionnaire assessing their perceptions of peer mentors' use of AI to augment support.
- Students were asked open-ended questions:
  - How would you feel about your peer mentor using AI Assist to support you?
  - What are your reactions (positive or negative) to the idea of peer mentors using AI to provide support to their students?
- Responses were double-coded and analyzed using thematic analysis.

Participants:

- Participants included 65 students (*M*age = 19.58; 81.5% female; 40% White; 27.7% Asian; 15.4% Black/African American; 12.3% other/unknown racial identity; 26.2% Hispanic/Latine.)
- 40% of participants identified as first-generation students.
- The majority of students (76.9%) had never been a mentor or mentee in a university peer mentoring program.

College students want AI to **supplement,** not **substitute** authentic peer mentoring relationships.



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Results:

- **Theme 1: Students often held negative or mixed attitudes toward the use of AI-assisted peer mentoring.**

1) Participants expressed concern about AI's impact on the mentoring relationship: ***"When it comes to peer mentoring I feel like it is a way to be able to connect with someone about your experiences, it wouldn't feel the same if they were using AI."***
2) Students reported that AI use would make interactions seem impersonal and less genuine: ***"I personally feel like if AI provided responses for peer mentors the advice would be less authentic."***

- **Theme 2: Students discussed role expectations for mentors and provided recommendations for AI use.**

1) Participants indicated that AI should serve as a supplementary tool and not a substitute for effective mentoring: ***"Using AI in peer mentoring can be helpful for quick answers and academic support, but it shouldn't replace real human connection. It's good as a tool not a substitute."***
2) Students were more comfortable with AI use for academic support than for emotional support, emphasizing that mentors should rely on their own expertise when responding to mentees: ***"I think that for certain things it is acceptable to use AI but when it comes to things like mental, physical health issues or personal issues it would not be acceptable."***

- **Theme 3: Students raised important ethical concerns and emphasized the need for transparency in AI use.**

1) Many students preferred that peer mentors disclose when they are using AI. Participants said they would feel disappointed, ***"tricked"***, or ***"definitely a little sad"*** if they found out their mentor was using AI.
2) Some participants said they could use AI tools independently, rather than relying on their mentor to use them on their behalf: ***"I could easily just find AI and use it myself, I wouldn't need a peer mentor at that point."***

Discussion:

- While AI tools may enhance the scalability and effectiveness of peer mentoring, students expressed concern that AI could diminish the quality of the mentoring relationship.
- Students emphasized that AI should supplement, not replace human mentoring, underscoring the need to preserve the authenticity and relational nature of peer support.
- Universities should design AI-integrated support systems that align with student values and train mentors to balance the use of AI with their own expertise.
- Future research should identify strategies for ethically and effectively integrating AI into peer support and test the effects of mentor disclosure on mentee perceptions and outcomes.