

Peer Mentoring Initiative at Howard University- The role of Race and Ethnicity

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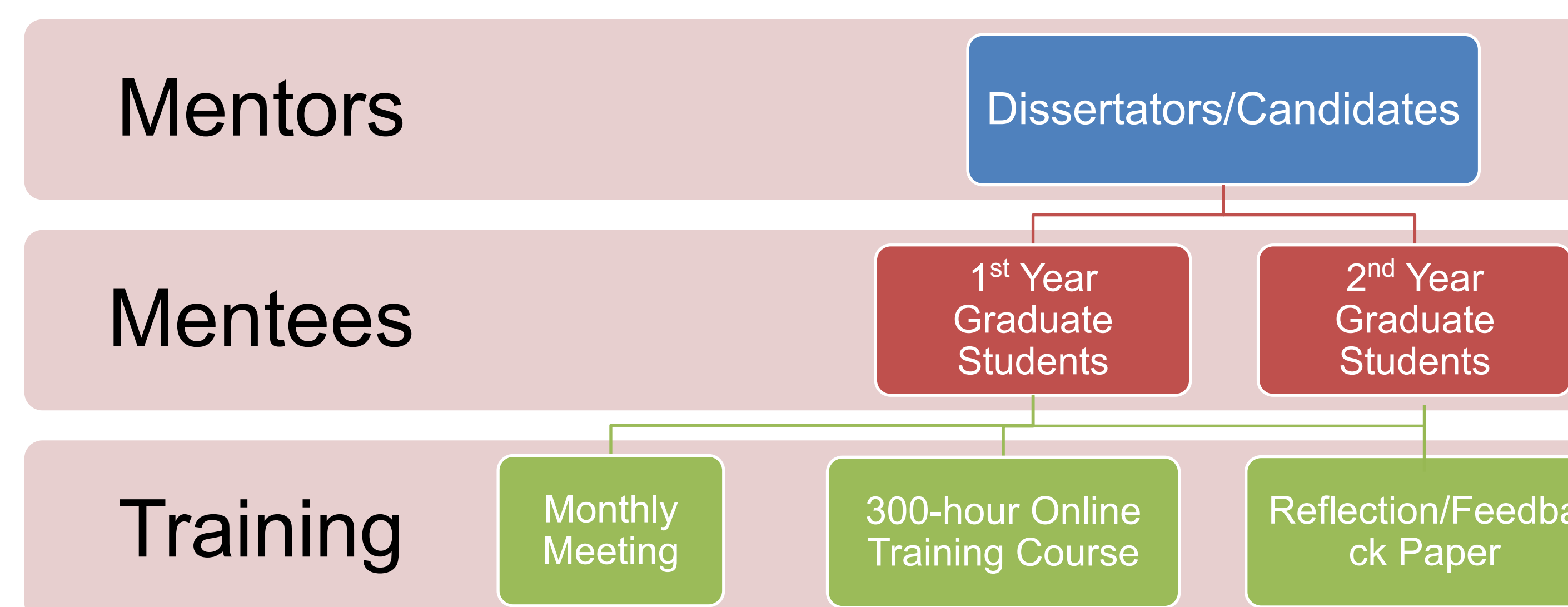
Introduction

The academic and professional success of students from historically underrepresented backgrounds appears to be strongly linked to peer mentorship from students with similar social identities. The advice and support received may be perceived as more meaningful and relevant due to shared commonality in backgrounds, values, attitudinal similarities, and lived experiences. This notion of preference and familiarity has been amply studied, and the research indicates that students of color prefer mentors of color, underscoring the importance of developing strong mentoring skills in faculty of color. Against this backdrop, Howard University initiated a pilot peer-mentoring program in 2018 to develop and enhance mentoring skills in doctoral dissertators/candidates interested in entering the professoriate.

Method

The Howard University Peer Mentoring Initiative (PMI) supports new doctoral students as they acclimate to academic life. This is critical because of the historical exclusion of Black, Indigenous, and other students of color in higher education, and the lack of social and cultural capital to navigate the PhD as compared to their white counterparts. The structure of the PMI is such that advanced-level students (dissertators/candidates) at Howard University are assigned to serve as mentors to first- and/or second-year PhD students in the Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) disciplines. Mentors and mentees are selected through outreach to STEM graduate departments across the University. Once in the Program, mentees and mentors receive training that guides the mentor-mentee relationship and then attend monthly focused groups for as long as in the program. Each academic year culminates in the submission of a reflection/feedback paper by both mentors and mentees describing their experiences in the Program and recommendations for improvement.

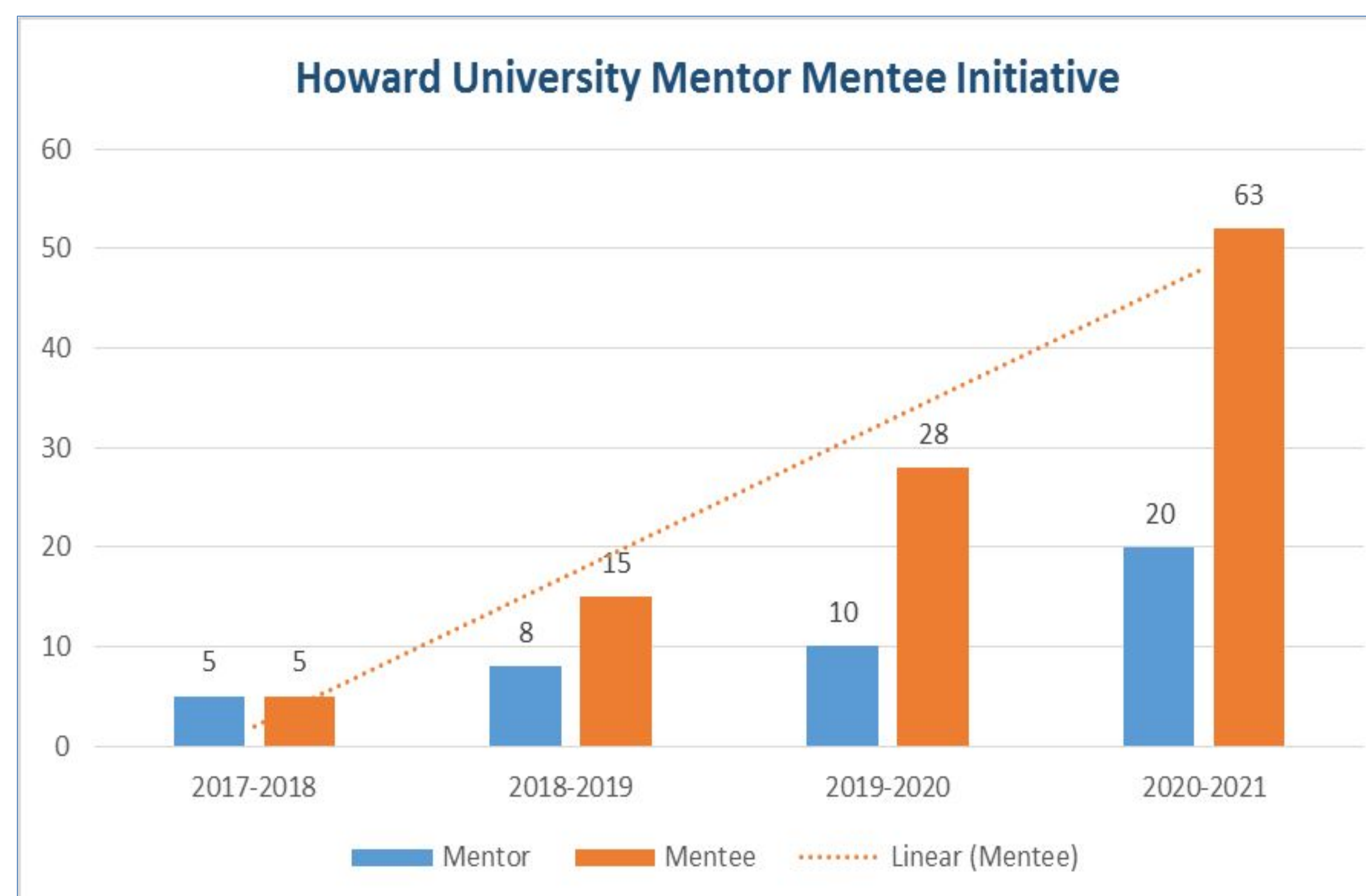
Peer Mentoring Structure



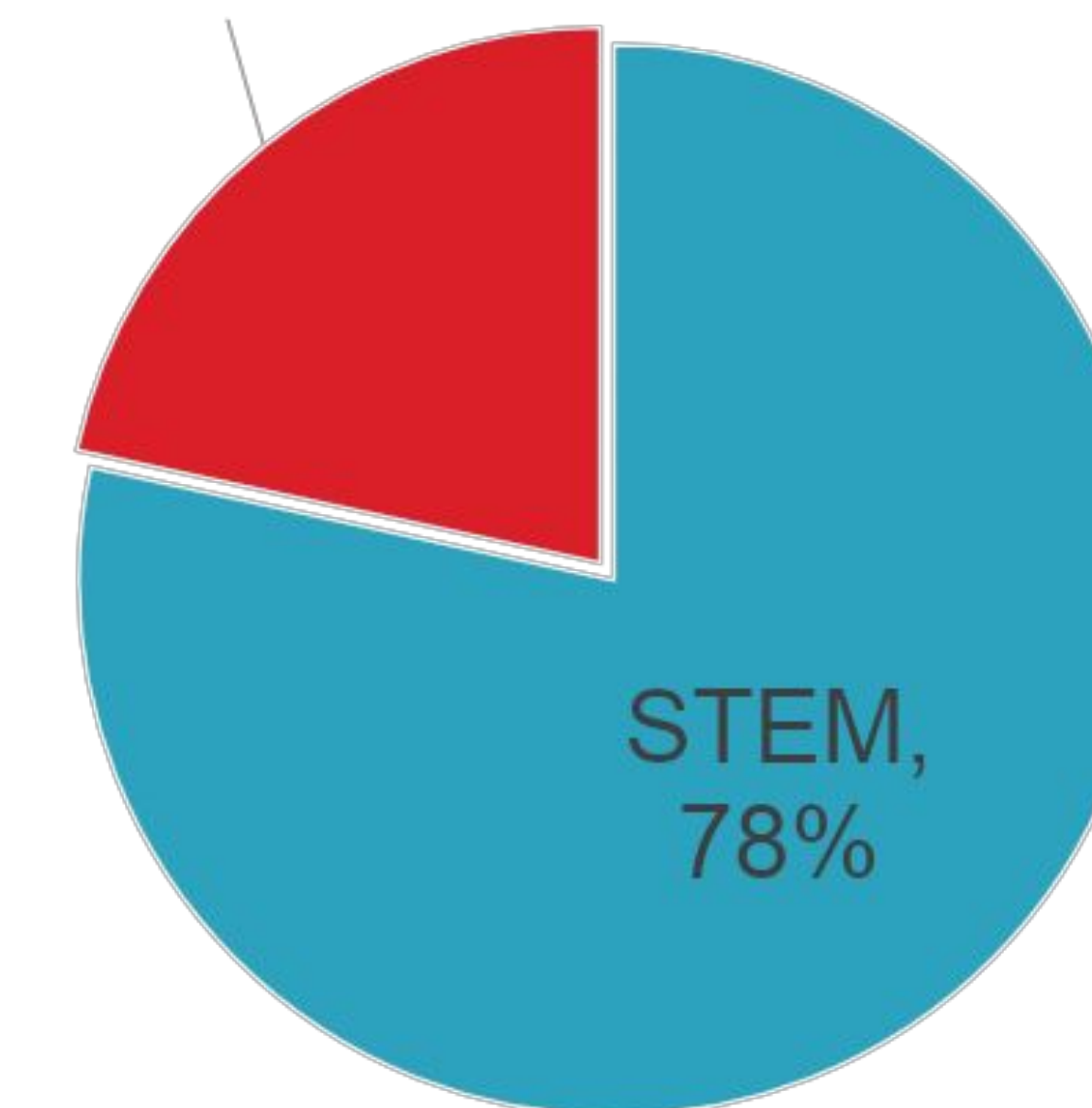
Results

Key indicators of programmatic success for the PMI include:

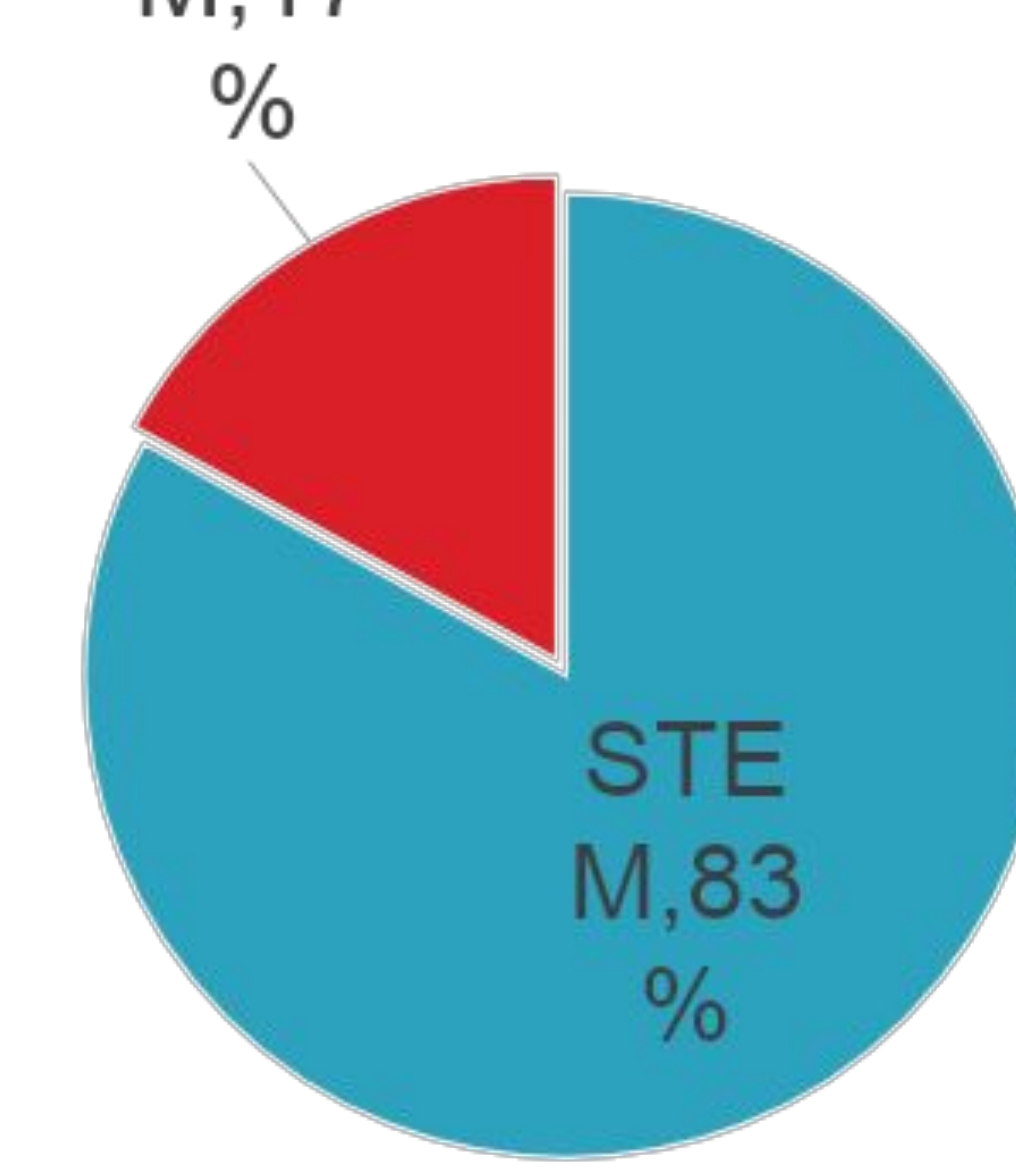
- The increase in the number of constituents that the program serves from 5 mentors and 5 mentees in the academic year 2017-2018 to 25 mentors and 63 mentees in the year 2020-2021
- Broader program expansion within the graduate enterprise. The PMI has exceeded all expectations
- Greater sense of connectedness and efficacy in meeting academic and research requirements for candidacy



Non-HU PMI
STEM, 22%



Non-HU PMI
STEM, 17%



Discussion

Ancillary benefits of the Mentoring Program include but are not limited to:

1. The identification of needs that PhD students have at the University
2. An understanding of the barriers to success that doctoral students may encounter at the University
3. Building PhD student capacity as mentors to support their peers

Conclusions

Our results add to extant research indicating that students of color prefer mentors of color, underscoring the importance of developing strong mentoring skills in faculty of color.

Against this backdrop, the Howard University PMI is committed to training a cadre of future faculty who are prepared to mentor a diverse student population, and who understand the intersectionality and importance of race, gender, ethnicity, and other background characteristics in academic and career achievement.