

# The Mentoring Matrix: Developing More Meaningful Mentoring Relationships

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## **BACKGROUND**

Mentoring has long been associated with training future leaders, but the process of mentoring has only received attention within the scholarly literature within the past 25 years. Kram (1988) first suggested that mentoring relationships are developmental, both in the nature of the relationships themselves and in their impact upon participants. Drawing from this perspective, Daloz (1999) placed mentoring relationships at the heart of his model of transformational learning for adults, and Parks (2000) emphasized the importance of mentoring communities to the development of young adults. Thus, mentoring is not only critical to long-term leadership development, it also plays a central role in the personal development of young adults including those entering the student affairs profession as graduate students and new professionals.

Research examining mentoring within student affairs has found that these relationships yield numerous positive outcomes (Blackhurst, 2000; Langdon & Gordon, 2007; Twale & Jelinek, 1996). However, Méndez-Morse (2004) has noted that the mentoring literature has afforded limited attention to gender and ethnicity. Further, Amey and Reesor (2002) suggested that most mentoring relationships tend to be among pairs of the same gender and race. Since many new professionals in student affairs come from under-represented populations, pairing with a mentor of similar race, culture, gender, and experience can be challenging.

To address this challenge, the presenters drew upon recent trends in student development theory that have addressed changing student demographics to inform their research and the design of this session. For example, Astin (1984, 1999) advocated institutional efforts to enhance involvement as a means of promoting learning. Schlossberg (1989) and Rendón (1994) have extended this theory by emphasizing the importance of mattering and validation as pre-requisites to involvement and development for under-represented students. Likewise, Clifton and Anderson (2002) have popularly promoted the importance of positive psychology and “strengths” as related to student success, while the work of Yosso (2005) among others has charted multiples assets of community cultural wealth for under-represented populations.

## **THE STUDY: PHASE 1**

The researchers conducted focus group interviews with graduate students and new student affairs professionals who attended the New Professional and Graduate Student Institute (NPGSI) held at the NASPA Region V-VI Conference in San Jose, California. A total of 29 individuals participated in three focus groups. The sample included 8 males and 21 females. Fifteen participants identified as White, six as Asian, four as Latino, three as multiracial, and one as Indian. Eleven participants were first generation college students. The interview protocol examined participant perceptions regarding (a) the nature of current mentoring relationships, (b) how their mentoring relationships have formed and evolved, and (c) perceived benefits of the mentoring relationships. The findings clustered around three themes as summarized below.

**Getting Started.** Most participants stated that their mentors were individuals they met while still undergraduate students; among those who developed mentoring relationships since graduating from college, there was an even split between relationships initiated by the participants themselves and those initiated by mentors.

*“My first mentor was a faculty member, not in student affairs but he said I think you could be a faculty member here some day and so I’ve had several mentors tell me things that, the similar thing, like you can do my job someday and that’s like the golden ticket for me in terms of [mentoring].”*

**What I Want in Mentor.** The richest themes that emerged from the focus groups related to what participants valued or looked for in their mentoring relationships.

- **Pairing** – A majority of the non-White participants shared comments about desiring a mentor who shared their gender and/or ethnicity; others desired a mentor who shared similar interests or formative experiences.

*“My professor that I see as a mentor, he’s a Black male, and I mean I think we connect on the minority level like issues that come up that maybe our difficulties and things like that, but, other than that no, I think that’s why, I think that’s the biggest issue, I mean if there was a Latina I would go straight to her easily, I know I could.”*

- **Validating and Confirming Comments** – Many participants also noted the importance of mentors who supported, validated, or confirmed their educational or career decisions.

Following a comment in which one participant noted the value of being told that she was not crazy but a situation at work was crazy, another participant shared, *“I would definitely agree with that, because especially when you are a new professional and you are not quite sure, and you don’t have the confidence to go ahead and you are not sure what you are doing, if you are doing it correctly, and you are surrounded by people who are more seasoned than you to have that voice telling you, you know you are doing it.”*

- **Trust** – A final theme that emerged regarding what was valued in mentoring relationships had to do with trust.  
*“She’s definitely someone that I can talk to and the most important thing for me is I’m very comfortable with her and I trust her...whatever I say is between me and her especially...um...when we know the same individuals and we work in the same field in the same university...um...she’s definitely someone that I can trust and she has an understanding.”*
- **Seeing Potential** – Many participants shared the importance of mentors who saw potential in them, oftentimes potential that they did not see in themselves.  
*“Yea I, I think that the mentor, the relationships that I have that are the strongest are the ones where the mentor hasn’t just done it to be a mentor, but who has like seen something in me that they want to...you know...bring out and help me develop.”*
- **Setting High Expectations** – Similar to seeing potential, many participants noted the importance of mentors who raised the bar of expectation for their work or career.  
*“One of the senior student affairs practitioners that I interviewed – she works at Cal Poly Pomona – said that he could really see me doing, being like becoming more of an administrative role somewhere, once I get my doctorate and that kind of stuff. And that was the first time I had ever heard somebody say, I could really see you doing this, I can really see you getting your doctorate and like that was just from our thirty, sorry, our hour interview, aah, that was just amazing to me.”*

**Benefits of Mentoring.** Participants identified help with “navigating the system” as the most significant benefit of mentoring.

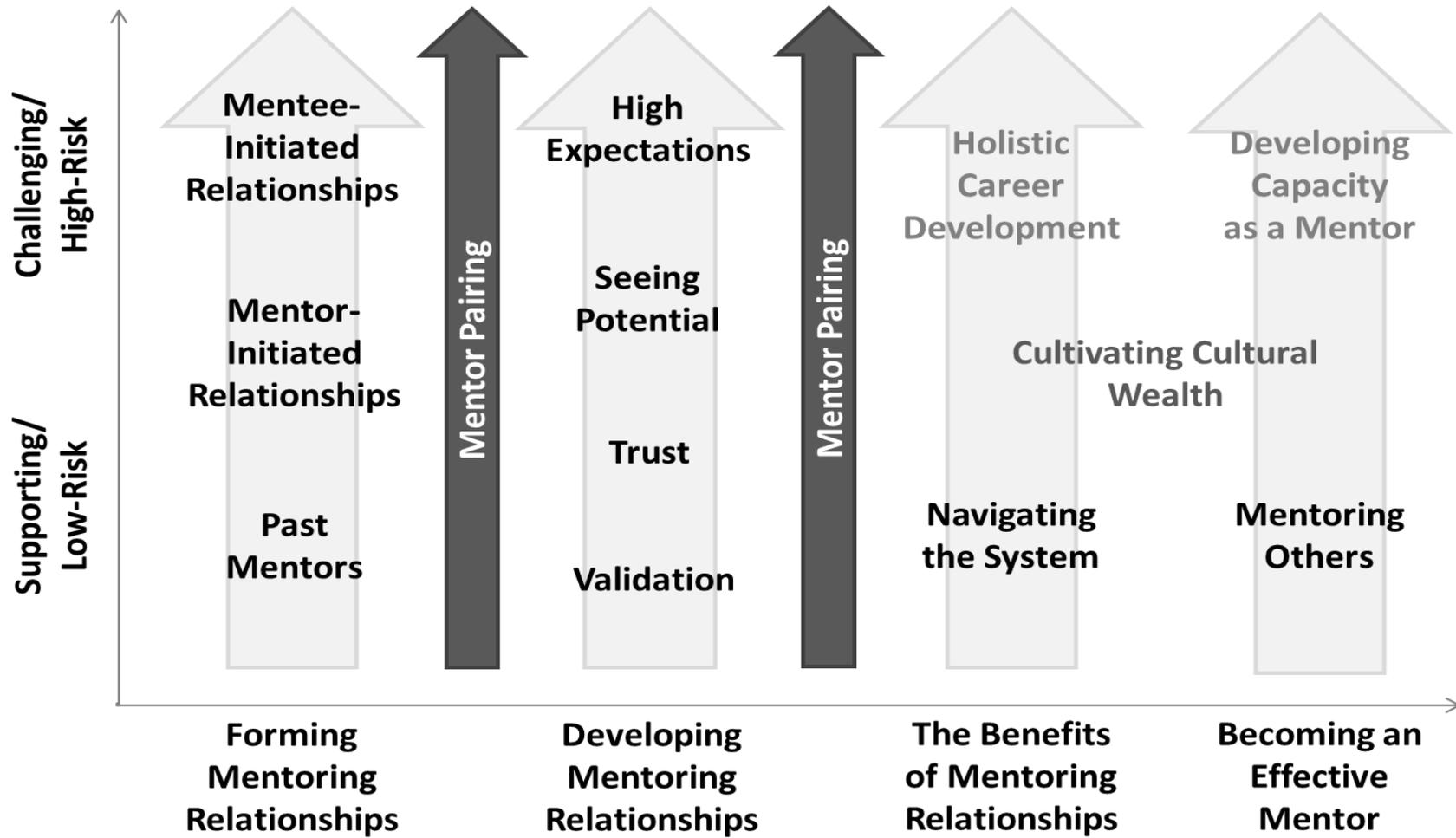
*“When I told her I was interested in student affairs and interested in the same program, she was in...she kind of helped guide me through the process and what the professors are like and what they’re looking for; [she] helped me to write my personal statement and told me what to expect from the NAFTSA regional conferences and like to look for tips and talking to people at conferences or even to say she’s always giving me advice and saying like when I need to do a cover letter, when I need to get my resume...”*

## **THE STUDY: PHASE 2**

The research team is currently conducting qualitative interviews with senior student affairs officers – attend our session at the NASPA National Conference in Phoenix to see the results!

THE MENTORING MATRIX

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