Mentoring Outside the Line: The Importance of Authenticity, Transparency, and Vulnerability in Effective Mentoring Relationships

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As increasing numbers of women and underrepresented minorities (URMs) gain access to colleges and universities (American Council on Education, 2011), they are likely to encounter academic and social barriers to their success and retention (Hurtado & Guillermo-Wann, 2013; Swail, Redd, & Perna, 2003). Connections to campus agents like faculty and staff are the strongest predictors of success among college students in general (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), and evidence suggests that faculty also play a critical role in the success of racial and ethnic minority students (Davis, 2010; Museus, Palmer, Davis, & Maramba, 2011; Pascarella, 1980; Patton & Harper, 2003; Waldeck, Orrego, Plax, & Kearney, 1997). The importance of having mentors for women and URM students is well documented (Davis, 2010; Fries-Britt & Turner Kelly, 2005; Grant, 2012; Pascarella, 1980; Patton & Harper, 2003; Turner, 2002). At predominantly White institutions (PWIs), URMs can encounter feelings of isolation and uncertainty about their capabilities in their respective fields of study. Mentoring can be an effective strategy to combat many of these challenges.

This chapter examines important aspects of mentoring that impact women and URMs in higher education. This work is shaped in two important ways. First, we turn to the mentoring literature as it pertains to women and URMs in higher education. From the literature we highlight several key factors impacting mentoring for women and underrepresented populations. Second, we turn to our own professional experiences as mentees and mentors. We each present a brief narrative in which we share key
components of our own mentoring experiences and philosophy. As Black women, our racial identities have been important factors in our own experiences in higher education and thus add meaning to how we understand the mentoring process. We conclude this work by offering recommendations that reflect a set of guiding principles to cultivate underrepresented students’ authentic professional development in higher education.

Literature on Mentoring URMs and Women

In a review of the literature on mentoring, Museus and associates (2011), in an Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE) report, suggest that underrepresented minorities across institutional types found that “faculty and other institutional agents (advisors, counselors, and student affairs staff) who shared common ground with students humanized the educational experience, provided holistic support, and were proactive in serving minority students had a positive influence on those participants’ success” (p. 72). These relationships have the potential of removing feelings of isolation that many undergraduate and graduate students, as well as faculty of color, experience at PWIs. In a recent study, Strayhorn’s (2010) participants described faculty as mentors and “cultural navigators” throughout the educational and professional process. In this chapter, we examine three key themes addressed in the mentorship literature: (1) academic and/or psychosocial needs of students, (2) role modeling, and (3) same versus cross race and gender mentor relationships.

Academic Versus Psychosocial. Kram’s (1988) seminal work focuses on two dimensions of mentorship: academic and psychosocial development. Academic development refers to the socialization of graduate students and junior faculty into their specific fields. Mentoring is particularly important at the graduate level as students attempt to navigate their academic process. Connecting with faculty for research opportunities, gaining publication experience, and presenting at national conferences are critical at the graduate level. Positive relationships between faculty and students based on trust, integrity, opportunity, and understanding have a critical impact on student persistence (Patton & Harper, 2003).

While academic development addresses professional opportunities, the psychosocial supports attempt to address the protégés’ personal well-being and confidence in their academic abilities and in personal identity. Black women provide a unique style of mentorship focusing on the holistic development of future scholars. African American women understand the complex intersectionality of race and gender in higher education that is unique to their population (Grant, 2012). Fries-Britt and Turner Kelly’s (2005) work demonstrated this complexity well. Over the course of a decade, they established a level of connection that allowed them to rely on one another during critical times in their academic careers. What started as a faculty mentor and graduate student relationship emerged into a deeper
connection. In their work, Fries-Britt and Turner Kelly write about the risks they each took in their relationship to move outside of the formal roles into a more reciprocal relationship that allowed for more depth and growth in their relationship over time.

**Role Modeling.** It is important that URMs and women have access to colleagues who can help them negotiate their experiences in the academy. Research demonstrates that Black faculty model success for students of color (Banks, 1984; Fries-Britt & Turner Kelly, 2005; Griffin, 2012; Plata, 1996). Griffin (2012) found that faculty view themselves in a broader context, describing themselves as a link in a “longer chain of relationships” (p. 45). Black faculty learned how to mentor by mimicking the positive characteristics of their mentors. Not only is mentoring important to improve the academic and social experiences of students of color at PWIs, but Griffin found that these critical relationships shape mentoring behaviors for future generations. Role modeling is critically important in the mentoring process for minorities. “By their very existence, mentors provide proof that the journey can be made” (Daloz, 1999, p. 207). Although the academy can be harsh and can present barriers, mentors provide a roadmap for their students or junior-level faculty that can sustain them in the field and offer lasting benefits.

**Same and Cross Race/Gender.** Students of color seek out faculty of color as mentors to gain “support, guidance, and mentorship, perceiving those professors as having a unique understanding of their experiences” (Griffin, 2012, p. 32). If available, African American doctoral students prefer same-race mentors (Patton, 2009; Tillman, 2001). Traditionally, mentor relationships have been defined through a Eurocentric lens, which is typically a short-term and more academically focused experience (Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007; Waldeck et al., 1997). For African American students and faculty, their relationship is reciprocal and both parties benefit from these close relationships (Fries-Britt & Turner Kelly, 2005).

Researchers have found that within some same-race interactions, faculty members can inspire students by sharing their own struggles and empathizing with their fears (Fries-Britt & Turner Kelly, 2005; Fries-Britt, Younger, & Hall, 2010). Same-race/gender faculty can relate to feelings of marginality that students may be experiencing at a PWI (Davis, 2010). While the literature states that African American doctoral students prefer same-race mentors, given the low number of Black doctoral students and subsequently low numbers of faculty of color, these pairs are unlikely to be found in their own department, if at all (Adams, 1992; Fries-Britt et al., 2010).

The low number of minority faculty available to mentor students in the academy only increases the importance of cross-race mentorship (Davis, 2007). Students seek mentors with a commitment to foster their academic success (Patton, 2009). Consequently, the racial/ethnic makeup of the faculty mentor is not a major factor in terms of support (Adams,
Mentoring as Transformative Practice

Most racial/ethnic minority undergraduate and graduate students have mentors who are male and White (Ong et al., 2011). The most important criteria for choosing a mentor should be the amount of time available and interest in accepting new protégés with the intention of providing the proper guidance, support, and encouragement (Adams, 1992, p. 3). As long as nonminority faculty members are culturally aware and open to working with diverse populations, these relationships can be fruitful (Fries-Britt, 1998; Patton & Harper, 2003).

Typically, White faculty members serve primarily as academic advisors and less as personal mentors for students of color. In some cases, African American students feel as though they cannot be vulnerable with cross-race mentors because they will be perceived as weak (Patton & Harper, 2003). Although challenging, cross-race mentor relationships are common and can provide students with the information and support they need to persist. Patton (2009) submits that if students are engaged in cross-race mentorships and are not being supported emotionally, these students can find alternative outlets, such as friends and family, to supplement the lack of nurturing from their professors. Mentoring is critical at all levels of development, and research affirms the need for these relationships at every stage in the professional career of URMs and women.

Reflections From Practice

As coauthors we both work extensively with diverse communities of students on our campus and nationally in the field of higher education. Our own experiences reflect many of the findings in the literature about the importance of same-race, and same-gender, mentors and role models in higher education (Adams, 1992; Banks, 1984; Daloz, 1999; Davis, 2007; Fries-Britt & Turner Kelly, 2005; Fries-Britt et al., 2010; Griffin, 2012; Ong et al., 2011; Patton, 2009; Patton & Harper, 2003; Plata, 1996; Tillman, 2001). We believe that our own experiences in the academy, combined with the literature, offer important insights and lessons for practice. We turn next to our personal narratives and mentoring philosophy, and then offer suggestions for practice.

Jeanette. I discovered the powerful impact that mentors could have on the success of students on a personal level when I enrolled at a competitive PWI. As I contemplated transferring to another institution, potentially exposing myself to transfer shock (Laanan, 2001) and even greater episodes of isolation, I experienced the invaluable benefits of mentor/mentee relationships. Three administrators at my undergraduate institution took an interest in my life. Little did they know that their willingness to mentor me would lead to my successful undergraduate experience and later would directly influence my career goals. As a higher education professional, I try to embody similar traits as my mentors had (Griffin, 2012). Through my own
personal experiences as a protégé and my lived experience as a mentor to similarly gifted minority students, I have learned how to reach my students and maintain a long-lasting relationship well after they graduate. Successful characteristics that lead to impactful mentoring behavior include being genuine in my interactions, exhibiting transparency, and being open to reciprocity. Students can sense authenticity. I joined this profession because I genuinely care about the success of students. I approach them with tough love and a sincere heart. I celebrate their successes and encourage them to push harder when I see they are not maximizing their potential.

The final two elements work together: transparency and reciprocity. Although I am in the early stages of my career, I have made mistakes and encountered numerous barriers in the academy. I hope my transparency will result in students’ ability to (1) relate to my experiences (role modeling), (2) feel comfortable sharing their experiences, and (3) avoid some of my pitfalls in the future. My willingness to share my experiences results in my students’ willingness to be more transparent with their experiences. Even more important, they are comfortable providing me with feedback about my mentoring. I struggle with many of the same insecurities and life challenges as my students. At times, my mentees sustain and encourage me. Relationships are nothing if they are not reciprocal. This is one of the many elements of the mentorship process that has been powerful in my journey. By simply coauthoring this article with my mentor, this collaboration is a product of the very same advisory elements that have sustained me in the academy and now contribute to my own mentoring practices.

Sharon. In 2011, I received the mentoring award from the Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE). While I certainly consider myself to be committed to mentoring and intentional about the ways that I interact with students, I was nevertheless deeply moved by this recognition.

How we were mentored matters. Like others, my commitment to mentoring grew as a result of my own experiences with critical adults and professionals in my life. I can point to my parents, aunts, and uncles as well as other family members who played an important role in helping me recognize my talents. Another layer of mentors came as a result of my interactions with effective teachers who affirmed my academic and nonacademic abilities. Although I encountered some negative teachers and can recall incidents that caused me to question my own competence, I was able to use these as motivation to succeed.

A pivotal group of mentors came along in the early part of my professional career. This was a diverse group of individuals by gender, race, religion, and certainly philosophical perspectives. I quickly labeled this group as my core team (e.g., doctoral advisor, senior-level administrators, and several college presidents). In hindsight I now know that they were, in fact, a “dream team” of mentors to have access to. They are straightforward in sharing their perspectives. They talk very directly with me about race and gender and my experiences as an African American woman; however, they
never have placed limits on me based on these factors. Rather, they understand that these identities can play a role in my experiences, so they deal with them directly. While they each have unique strengths, what they share in common is their own psychological well-being. At first glance, this may seem like an odd characteristic to identify; however, it is directly connected to their mentoring effectiveness. I believe that effective mentoring requires a degree of personal well-being. Fortunately, my mentors have been able to offer me guidance as secure individuals with a sense of purpose and passion in their own lives. I leave their company feeling inspired and challenged and knowing that I matter. I know that I carry some of what they taught me into my current philosophy of mentoring.

Over time I have consciously developed guiding principles to inform and establish meaningful and authentic relationships with my students. I have learned that it is important to help students cultivate their own lives and not clone my ambitions in them. I strive for transparency in my relationships. Admittedly, this can be a challenge given the complexity of issues that manifest over the course of a student’s career, yet it is important to be clear and honest about expectations. I have learned to be okay with vulnerability as a faculty member. I know I don’t have all the answers and I encourage my students to ask when they don’t understand, and I would like to think that I model this often. Last but certainly not least, I try to be as authentic as I can be in my interactions. This is not always easy, but I try to show up in my professional life in ways that are in alignment with my personal values.

**Guiding Principles for Mentoring URMs and Women**

As coauthors we are at different stages in our careers; however, we have experienced similar truths about what matters in mentoring. When we consider our own experiences and the literature on mentoring women and URMs, we recognize several consistent themes worth highlighting for practice. We offer these as additional factors to add on to what is already working in mentoring programs and in the personal approaches of faculty. They are offered as guiding principles and not requirements of mentoring, and they reflect increasingly what we see in the literature about the importance of (1) building authentic relationships, (2) transparency and trust, and (3) learning to live with vulnerability.

**Build Authentic Mentoring Relationships.** Minority faculty and students seek meaningful relationships that may start from a formal connection; however, over time they develop respect, a strong ethic of care, and sincere value for one another (Griffin, 2012; Patton & Harper, 2003). These deeper levels of appreciation allow the relationship to expand and withstand more significant incidents over time. Building authentic relationships is not an excuse for lack of accountability. In authentic relationships, both faculty and students should feel comfortable expressing concerns and
disappointments while developing a strategy for moving forward. Mentoring relationships that seek authenticity will strengthen and not diminish over time (Fries-Britt & Turner Kelly, 2005), especially if both parties understand that authenticity can be maintained when things are going well and when they are not.

**Transparency and Trust Are Essential.** Transparency and trust are not always easy to establish. It is important for minority faculty, students, and women to have someone they can talk to about their experiences without fear of reprisal (Fries-Britt & Turner Kelly, 2005; Fries-Britt et al., 2010; Patton & Harper, 2003). Even more important, they need someone to talk to who is in their corner who can help them academically as well as psychologically (Davis, 2007; Patton, 2009; Tillman, 2001). Effective mentors seek to establish transparency and trust early in the relationship. One strategy for building both is when mentors model these behaviors (Griffin, 2012). When transparency and trust are in place, the relationship can deepen and gain strength that fortifies the relationship for decades.

**Learning to Live With Vulnerability.** Anytime a relationship is established between two individuals, a space of vulnerability has been opened. The values and expectations that many minority and women faculty and students bring to the mentoring process suggest that even greater degrees of vulnerability are likely to be experienced. Given that typically academic and psychological needs are being considered in the interactions that minority faculty have with minority students, many potentially challenging topics can surface. As revealed in the literature (Patton & Harper, 2003), minority students often feel like they cannot show their vulnerability for fear that they will be seen as weak. When both minority faculty and students are comfortable allowing vulnerability (Fries-Britt & Turner Kelly, 2005), this moves the relationship to a new level.

When appropriate, senior faculty should model these behaviors and not wait for students and junior faculty to acknowledge what they already know to be true about the challenges in the academy. Before asking students to share their perspectives, faculty should be willing to provide appropriate examples of challenges that they have encountered. We are not recommending that a state of vulnerability be seen as the norm. Rather, we suggest that it not be avoided in instances where discussing critical issues can help students feel affirmed and validated.

**Conclusion**

Mentoring is a very complex process, and clearly there are different outcomes that can occur between URM students and minority faculty. The factors we identify from the literature and our own experiences may not reflect others’ experiences and needs. Nevertheless, we know from research that increasingly the needs of URMs are not easily met by standard mentoring approaches. Faculty must be willing to mentor outside the lines
defined by formal relationships. It is important for faculty to be authentic in their interactions with students and to model behaviors that encourage students to share the challenges they are encountering in the academy. When supportive conditions are created within an environment of trust, both faculty and students report very beneficial relationships that grow and develop over time.

References


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