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While many cite the importance of having a mentor, focusing on the quality and nature of specific interactions between students and faculty can lead to better strategies promoting student agency. This chapter presents narratives from students who work with the same mentor, focusing on their interactions and how they shaped students' experiences and outcomes.

Digging Deeper: Exploring the Relationship Between Mentoring, Developmental Interactions, and Student Agency

Kimberly A. Griffin, Jennifer L. Eury, Meghan E. Gaffney, with Travis York, Jessica Bennett, Emil Cunningham, Autumn Griffin

Although it is often assumed that relationships between faculty and students will promote more positive educational outcomes, it has been challenging to identify what makes some mentoring relationships work better than others (O'Meara, Knudsen, & Jones, 2013). This is due, in part, to the fact that mentoring is a poorly defined construct. The distinctions between mentoring and other important developmental relationships such as advising, coaching, and serving as an advocate are rarely made (Baker & Griffin, 2010; Crisp & Cruz, 2009; Jacobi, 1991; Johnson, Rose, & Schlosser, 2010). Further, mentoring is often treated as a behavior in and of itself, although there is little consistency in how this behavior is or should be performed. This has translated to inconsistencies in academic research and difficulty establishing consistent connections between mentoring and student outcomes (Jacobi, 1991).

The purpose of this work is to add texture to our understanding of mentoring relationships, address the quality of interactions between students and faculty, and show how what happens within these relationships can relate to student outcomes. This is accomplished through close examination of the relationships among the authors of this chapter. Their scholarly personal narratives examining their mentoring relationships with one faculty member (Kimberly, the lead author) highlight the specific behaviors in which they engaged, and how these interactions related to their ability to

reach their educational and career goals through the development of agency and purpose.

Background: Graduate Students and Agency

Agency can be defined as “assuming strategic perspectives and/or taking strategic actions towards goals that matter” (O’Meara, 2013, p. 2). Agency acknowledges the space between the power of social forces and individual decision making (Archer, 2000; Emirbayer & Mische, 1998), and focuses on the extent to which individuals feel they have the power to enact change and shape their own lives in a given context (Elder, 1994; O’Meara, 2013). O’Meara (2013) identifies two kinds of agency that are particularly relevant for graduate students: agentic perspectives and agentic actions. Having an agentic perspective addresses how an individual sees a situation, and whether the person perceives options or a role in creating his or her own reality and experience. Agentic action is related and often follows, focusing on behaviors “enacted with self-awareness of goals and contexts” (p. 3).

Agentic perspectives and actions are related to personal satisfaction, growth, and development (Archer, 2000; Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). Satisfaction, growth, and development may be particularly relevant for students as they face unfamiliar and challenging situations, make decisions about their careers, and strive to perform at the highest levels. While not always referred to as “agency,” researchers have often shown the importance of feeling and exercising control over one’s educational experiences (e.g., Hopwood, 2010; Lovitts, 2008; McAlpine & Amundsen, 2009). For example, faculty participating in Lovitts’s research noted that successful graduate students were more willing to take control over their own research and learning. McAlpine and Amundsen also highlight the importance of student agency, noting that it must be modeled and encouraged to promote more positive student outcomes.

Rethinking Mentoring

O’Meara (2013) recommends mentoring as a way to promote graduate student agency, and encourages both deeper student understanding of what can be gained within these relationships and more faculty incentives to support student interaction. Limitations in extant literature and understandings of mentoring make this recommendation challenging to implement. There is little understanding about the nature of interactions between faculty members and students, what happens within relationships, and how specific interactions may be linked to student outcomes (Johnson et al., 2010; O’Meara et al., 2013). For example, Kram (1988) suggests that developmental relationships can serve multiple functions that, while not completely distinct, generally fall into two categories: career or psychosocial. A relationship focused on psychosocial functions, attending largely to

building competence and identity, will likely entail a very different set of behaviors and interactions than a relationship that emphasizes career development and advancement.

Rather than assuming that all interactions are the same or focusing on whether students were mentored, our work emphasizes the importance of understanding “developmental interactions” (D’Abate, Eddy, & Tannenbaum, 2003), which represent both brief and long-term interactions that result in personal or professional development. This chapter examines the developmental interactions taking place between one faculty member and her students, focusing on specific behaviors and activities in which the students and faculty member engaged. This level of analysis allows for a deeper understanding of how mentors may facilitate certain student outcomes within their mentoring relationships, focusing specifically on agentic outcomes that promote student success.

Methods

Similar to Fries-Britt and Turner Kelly’s (2005) examination of their own mentoring relationship, this chapter utilizes scholarly personal narrative due to its ability to highlight authors’ voices and share their perceptions and interpretations of their lived experiences. Sharing one’s story can reveal insights and depth not usually found in research, and can be a unique way to construct new knowledge (Nash, 2004).

Participants

The data for this project were drawn from scholarly personal narratives from students with whom the lead author, Kimberly, worked at the first institution at which she was employed. *Kimberly* is an African American woman who is an associate professor at a research university. Six current and former students (four women, two men) participated in the study: *Autumn*, *Emil*, *Jennifer*, *Jessica*, *Meghan*, and *Travis*.

Autumn is an African American woman who met Kimberly while she was a sophomore in college. She is now a sixth-grade teacher with Teach for America, and has an interest in pursuing graduate studies in the near future. *Emil* is an African American man who recently received his doctoral degree and aspires to become a senior student affairs officer. He met Kimberly as a master’s student; she served as his doctoral program advisor and was a member of his dissertation committee. *Jennifer* is a White woman, recently completed her doctoral degree, and is also an administrator and instructor in the business college of a research university. Kimberly was her advisor before her departure from the institution. *Jessica* is a White, female doctoral candidate in higher education. She recently transferred to another research university, where Kimberly accepted a new position. *Meghan* is a White female student affairs professional at a research university. Kimberly

served as her master's degree program advisor. *Travis* is a new assistant professor of higher education. He is a White male, and Kimberly was on his dissertation committee.

Data Collection

Kimberly initiated the study with an invitation to the coauthors about writing an article reflecting on their perceptions, experiences, and educational outcomes as related to mentorship.

All coauthors were asked to submit scholarly personal narratives of approximately 500 words on their interactions with a mentor—in this case, Kimberly. Scholarly personal narratives are personal reflections, organized in intentional ways around specific themes or concepts (Nash, 2004). Thus, everyone was asked to: “Describe the nature of your relationship and interactions with Kimberly. Think and write about what you did and how your interactions and the activities in which you engaged within the relationship related to your efforts to reach your goals.” Coauthors were provided with chapters from Nash's (2004) *Liberating Scholarly Writing: The Power of Personal Narrative*, for guidance on the process of writing their own narratives. After an initial review, some authors were recontacted to clarify or add to their narratives.

Data Analysis

In an effort to establish similarities and differences across the relationships formed and interactions between students and one specific faculty member, data were aggregated and coded, and are presented thematically rather than in a conversational format (e.g., Fries-Britt & Turner Kelly, 2005). The structure for data analysis loosely followed the guidelines for team-based analysis outlined by MacQueen, McLellan, Kay, & Milstein (1998), and the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Kimberly, along with Jennifer and Meghan (the two student lead authors), read and reread each narrative, memoing to capture their perceptions on themes that emerged from the data (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). They then met to discuss their memos, including their perceptions of emerging themes. Groups of behaviors were identified, as well as resulting outcomes. The lead authors then discussed the connections between these behaviors, the mentoring literature, and student agency.

The emerging themes were translated to a list of codes, and applied to the data for analysis. The coding of the data was largely completed by Meghan, who edited and added to her preliminary codes, applied them to the data, and submitted them to the lead authors for review and use in developing the findings. Sections were drafted by Meghan and Jennifer, collectively discussed, and revised by Kimberly, revisiting the data to ensure that there was enough evidence to support each theme.

Findings

Each mentee entered into the mentoring relationship with Kimberly with specific areas of interest and different personal and professional goals in mind. For some, establishing and developing research skills were a priority. Jennifer “wanted to be actively involved in research projects.” Autumn aimed “to gain as much research experience as I could during my undergraduate career,” and Jessica “wanted to be thrown into the deep end of research.” Similarly, Travis “was looking for a committee member who had experience with student outcomes and mixed methods” and “an opportunity to TA [be a teaching assistant] for a class related to students to round out my CV.” Others centered on administrative career paths in student affairs. Meghan was “focused on defining my path in student affairs,” and Emil, while initially committed to pursuing a position as a residence life director, now admitted “that my interactions with this woman [Kimberly] would completely alter my perspective on my chosen field.”

While articulating different goals, analysis of the six scholarly personal narratives revealed three groups of behaviors that were consistent across the relationships and connected to the development of students’ agency: approachability through psychosocial support, support and challenge, and development of professional voice. The final emerging theme, discovering purpose, speaks to the ways in which these groups of behaviors ultimately translated to students’ outcomes.

Approachability Through Psychosocial Support

This section defines a brief, yet critical, connection between the perceived approachability of the mentor, the development of trust and comfort, and the cultivation of student agency. Most narratives described initial contact with Kimberly as surprising in its warmth, timeliness, and genuineness. Autumn shared, “I sent an e-mail expecting to be contacting some fire-breathing professor who would tell me they didn’t have time to help an undergraduate facilitate her first research project. . . . I received a warm and welcoming e-mail back.” For some, Kimberly’s approachability was familial, as Emil described: “I remember thinking that this woman was oddly and truly more genuine than I had expected. . . . I experienced a bond that I have with many Black women in my family.” For others, the relationship was defined by something more simple and overt, like a sense of style, booming laughter, or “soft tissues and dark chocolate” described by Meghan, who said, “The combination of personal care and academic encouragement further developed my self-efficacy.”

No matter the circumstances used to initiate and build the relationship, the advisees all reflected on Kimberly’s ability to make them feel comfortable, included, and valued in their personal and professional spheres. For Jessica, Autumn, and Jennifer, the experience was mostly framed in

research. Emil, Travis, and Meghan described more unconditional support and friendship. Meghan wrote, “Kim made me feel significant. I faced a number of challenges during graduate school and she encouraged me the whole way. . . . I never felt like an imposition reaching out.” Each mentee saw a relationship between trusting Kimberly and developing the skills to work through challenges with competence and self-belief. Perhaps Travis summed it up best saying, “Kim became a mentor with whom I could share my best and worst ideas, doubts, insecurities, and triumphs while providing encouragement and guidance without condescension.”

Challenge and Support

Analysis of the scholarly personal narratives suggests that the process by which Kimberly mentored was consistently grounded in challenge and support (Sanford, 1966). She challenged the students with new assignments and opportunities and even new perspectives, but provided support by way of encouragement and academic insight. Narratives suggest Kimberly assessed and individually addressed the specific needs. Her level of both support and challenge evolved over time, moving from each student’s initial areas of interest to new opportunities for learning and development.

In her relationship with Jessica, for example, Kimberly challenged her to explore and try new opportunities. While other colleagues were “making copies and writing annotated bibliographies,” she had autonomy and responsibility on shared projects. She noted, “At the start of every new project, manuscript, or semester, Kimberly asked me what I wanted to experience next, what activity I wanted to try, what role I wanted to play.” Similarly, Kimberly challenged Autumn to get involved with a research project and “worked extremely hard to make sure that I was never singled out because of my age.” Meghan also acknowledged that “Kimberly could never ask me enough questions,” and challenged her to enroll in “difficult classes” to explore all of her areas of interest. While there were times when Meghan felt uneasy about pursuing course work outside of the program, Kimberly supported her in saying, “You’re smart enough to do this. It’s hard to be out of your comfort zone!”

By way of offering both challenge and support, Kimberly assumed an agentic perspective; her specific discussions with the mentees, as well as her recommendations, were strategic in nature. For some of the mentees, like Jennifer, Autumn, and Jessica, who were eager to embark on research, Kimberly offered one degree of challenge and support, and for other mentees, like Travis, who was eager to identify a full-time employment opportunity, she offered another degree of challenge and support. Drawing on O’Meara’s (2013) application of agency, Kimberly was aware of individual differences, especially as they relate to students and professional goals, as well as the contexts of individual situations, and therefore strategically provided the relevant challenges and supports.

Encouraging Exploration and Supporting Development of Voice

The findings suggest that the mentees each gained greater understanding of their personal and/or professional identities, as well as a sense of voice, through Kimberly's efforts to encourage exploration. Jennifer recognized the challenges associated with at one point being both a part-time student and a full-time employee, while Autumn recognized the challenges related to being "the youngest and only undergraduate [student] on the research team." In both situations, Kimberly offered comfort and coaching to address Jennifer's academic and professional role identities and Autumn's ability to find a voice. For Meghan, Kimberly supported her desire to be seen as a scholar. In reinforcing her good work and encouraging her, she helped Meghan develop a sense of belonging as a student who was transitioning from part-time to full-time status. Kimberly supported Jessica in readjusting her goals of becoming a scholar-practitioner as she worked on her university's sexual assault prevention efforts. Emil credits "the opportunity to explore my own voice and believe that my opinion and perspective could be valued" to his decision to apply to and enroll in the PhD program. He revealed that his "interactions with Kimberly allowed me to overcome my insecurities as well as gain a sense of self-confidence." Travis and Kimberly had the opportunity to engage in lengthy discussions about identity development. For Travis, the validation he experienced in conversations about race, power, privilege, and oppression helped to move him into a realm of research that resonated with him. "I had always been passionate about these topics, but had felt like an outsider in terms of researching or teaching them. . . . Kim encouraged me to pursue these passions in my research, and empowered my voice in that process."

Discovering Purpose

The mentees also described working through a unique pathway in their narratives. Each mentee identified a problem or question early on in the mentoring relationship, and made steady strides to address challenges or to create solutions that contributed to a sense of agency and accomplishment. In Meghan's case, Kimberly's mentorship encouraged her to explore different disciplines and truly understand the meaning of mentorship. Emil developed a similar appreciation for mentoring through his relationship, saying, "Kimberly saw in me the potential to be better than I imagined myself being." For Travis, the comforts of his friendship with Kimberly led to highly impactful discussions about power, privilege, and layers of identity. He wrote, "Kim didn't engage me, she engaged with me." Jennifer described feeling connected to her mentor through common research interests, which also created space for candid discussions about balancing personal and professional life. "I know there will continue to be challenges, but I am also working hard to celebrate my successes along the way, too—something that I also learned from Kim."

Conclusions and Implications

Archer (2003) states that assuming agentic perspective “means noticing constraints and potential opportunities, acting as a strong evaluator of situations, and then moving forward with a belief in choices and possibilities” (O’Meara, 2013, p. 3). By all accounts, Kimberly provided genuine relationships that enabled students to work through their constraints and opportunities, and supported them in weighing their options, either in real time or in preparation for the future. Developmental interactions that established accessibility and fostered trust, challenged students while providing instrumental and emotional support, and offered encouragement as students found and expressed their voices and individual interests formed strong foundations for students to find their own voices. Narratives demonstrated common themes regarding how a willingness to share resources, make time for them, and pose intentional questions can lead to psychosocial development. Discovery of purpose emerged as a core theme for all of the coauthors. Mentees felt comfortable with progress, partially because of the ways they were engaged in their mentoring relationships. Thus, in many ways, these behaviors could be understood as fostering their agency, particularly their respective agentic perspectives and perceived control over their own development and experiences.

In reviewing her mentees’ narratives, Kimberly laughed at all of the similarities, saying, “I thought I was treating everyone differently, but it looks like my approach is the same!” Many of the behaviors in which the authors were engaging appear to reflect emotional intelligence as described by O’Meara et al. (2013). These authors note the importance of displays of personal and social competence by students and mentors in fostering strong relationships and positive student outcomes. Optimism (the assumption of success despite challenges), empathy (attention to others’ emotions), and developing others (having an awareness of the needs and strengths of those who are being worked with) appeared particularly important to the students, as they connected behaviors that fell within these categories to their agency and development of purpose. Encouraging faculty to consider whether and how they are engaging in these behaviors may be particularly important, and providing faculty with professional development opportunities that identify these behaviors as important components of mentoring relationships would be a useful strategy to implement.

Finally, while the themes were consistent across the coauthors’ narratives, it is important to note that the specific actions employed within each category varied across participants. This speaks to the need for faculty to adapt their behaviors to reflect not only their own strengths, but also the needs of their students. Not all students will have the same goals, seek the same opportunities, want to develop personal relationships, or respond well to the same ratio of challenge and support (Johnson, 2007). Thus, while the same fundamental principles may compose a faculty member’s mentoring

style, it is important to encourage and provide faculty members with opportunities to consider how they are applying those principles in each of their relationships and to tailor their developmental interactions in ways that promote distinct outcomes relevant to their students. Further, encouraging students to reflect on their needs and goals and to share them with their mentors can also promote better relationships, enabling faculty to engage in behaviors that best facilitate their growth and sense of agency.

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KIMBERLY A. GRIFFIN, PhD, is an associate professor in the College of Education at the University of Maryland, and director of the student affairs academic program in the Department of Counseling, Higher Education, and Special Education.

JENNIFER L. EURY, PhD, is the honor and integrity director and instructor in management at the Smeal College of Business at the Pennsylvania State University.

MEGHAN E. GAFFNEY, MEd, is the associate director of fraternity and sorority life at the University of Pennsylvania.