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# Dear Mentor: A Reflection on the Impact of Mentorship in Higher Education

## Patrick Griffin Long

*The purpose of this paper is to understand the importance of mentoring in the field of student affairs in order to help potential and emerging professionals in various ways. Mentoring has strong implications for the proliferation of the field as well as the resilience of emerging professionals and the reduction of professional attrition. In constructing this narrative, the author chose to use two approaches. First, the author created a scholarly personal narrative to understand the effects of mentorship as is reflected in scholarship. Second, through the collection of letters, the author designed a qualitative content analysis to understand how mentors have helped current professionals gain insight, confidence, and direction. Key themes identified in the analysis are the modeling of professional behaviors and success, belief, empowerment and validation, challenge and support, and identity development.*

Mentorship is a practice common across professions, but within higher education and student affairs, mentorship is becoming increasingly necessary to develop a new generation of competent, connected, and resilient professionals. Taub and McEwen (2006) described the field of higher education as one that is "hidden," in which potential professionals needed to be engaged in a pursuit of discovery by current professionals. Mentorship ushered me into a field I never knew existed. During my time in undergrad, I had many passions but lacked direction and the work of current professionals marshaled me onto this path. Now as I work my way through a graduate program in higher education, I reflect on relationships as the common thread that introduced me to higher education, and continues to mold my professional identity. Relationships have the power to change how we view ourselves and the perspective we take on the world at large.

In alignment with classic definitions of mentoring, Santos and Reigadas (2005) viewed mentoring as a continuous and reciprocal process. This is characterized by a person at a higher professional level or status who uses their connections, knowledge, and accomplishments in the field to intellectually, personally, and professionally develop emerging professionals. "A mentor is a counterpart in an

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interpersonal narrative, in which two distinct players, the mentor and mentee, operate together towards certain end goals" (Healy, Lancaster, Liddell, & Stewart, 2012, p. 85). Both mentors and mentees bring distinct pieces to a learning relationship to construct a story of success. A mentor is not there to give all the answers; they show the path to take. Healy and colleagues said the primary obligation of the mentor is as a guide that initiates questions to promote growth and critical introspection. The mentor engages the mentee in critical thought through difficult dialogue, but it is up to the mentee to trust in and integrate this information.

In the field of higher education, mentorship gives new professionals a sense of connectivity, belonging, and responsibility (Calhoun & Taub, 2014). Mentorship galvanizes potential professionals to enter the field and it gives them a roadmap to navigate their first positions. Calhoun and Taub found that the strong social network formed through intentional mentoring leads to higher rates of satisfaction, productivity, and active involvement in the field. Although I had many mentoring relationships in undergrad, my most impactful mentor was and continues to be my supervisor from my time as an AmeriCorps VISTA (Volunteers In Service to America), Dr. Lane Perry. Lane acted as a guide to professional socialization and he also helped me articulate my strengths. Before developing my mentoring relationship, I lacked professional confidence and had a hard time enjoying my job. However, as I established a mentoring relationship, I began to find fulfillment in my work and was able to learn how to trust in my instincts and lean into my professional capabilities. Lane taught me to believe in my abilities and myself. He modeled for me what a driven, successful, and admirable higher education professional should look.

Mentoring personally and professionally transformed me. From validating and empowering me, mentoring gave me the power to believe in myself, my personal and professional convictions, and my professional abilities. As professionals, mentorship shapes our past and informs our present. For many professionals, the influence of mentoring shaped our decision to enter the field. It also gave us a certain lens through which we operate in the professional world. In reflecting on my own interactions with mentorship, I seek to understand the experiences of other professionals in the field.

## Qualitative Content Analysis

In order to understand the impacts of mentorship in our field, I compiled a series of letters from five professionals at different stages of their career paths. I center my narrative on personal connection and social networks because it is important to consider how professional connections have influenced my positionality on the topic. In designing a scholarly personal narrative and content analysis, I hope to place myself in position with my contributing authors to give voice to their stories, but to show also how their collective voices influenced my view of mentorship. I want to stray away from the idea that personal narratives cannot be true sources of data, and toward a viewpoint that personal narratives expand

theory to help guide behavior and practice.

## Theoretical Framework

The way Santos and Reigadas (2005) framed mentoring within a social network theory (SNT), guided the participant selection of this study. SNT calls for the investigation of social phenomena by focusing on social connections, ties, members and all links in between (Thompson, 1995). Santos and Reigadas (2005) integrated social network theory into their understanding of mentoring because they recognized that individuals with large and diverse networks more often have stronger resource mobilization, upward mobility, and social adaptation. The key to the social network is mentorship because a mentor acts as a strong connection point and catalyst to growing one's professional network. Each professional has a social network they build as they go along, but a mentor can give them access to a tier of professionals with far more resources, status, power, and experiences. The social network of professionals is the community and as Solorzano (1998) stated, "the psychosocial functions of acceptance and confirmation associated with mentoring relationships are similar to the social support functions of the family" (p. 100). I chose to recruit my own mentor, as well as other professionals in my social network. Keeping in mind that this social community affects my own professional identity development and conceptions, I want to recognize that their views on mentorship need to be a part of my narrative.

## Participant Selection and Data Collection

I gleaned contributing authors from my social and professional network. They are professionals at various stages of their professional careers, ranging from current graduate students and pre-graduate professionals to emerging professionals and professionals far advanced in their careers. Participants received a concise prompt that described the topic of the publication and basic directions. They received a general structure to follow, materials to review, and questions to consider.

## Data Analysis

When I reviewed these letters, I identified key themes and ideas about mentorship from each letter. Then, I compared commonalities between letters and took note of significant differences across letters. Pulling these themes, I used scholarship to frame these vignettes as part of a larger conversation. For the sake of brevity and space, the letters will not be included in their entirety in this document; instead I pulled important quotes as examples to guide analysis. The letters act as data integrated into a qualitative content analysis. This analytical approach provides flexibility and authenticity by not requiring preset categories for data to fall into. In this form of analysis, the researcher captures the complexity and diversity of participant context (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Instead of fitting data into theory based categories, the researcher pulls out key themes, ideas, and comparisons from the collected data and expands upon them with additional theory and scholarship .

## Key Findings and Discussion

Although each author chose a different direction and style for their letters, I identified some common themes across their varying narratives. Using theory and scholarship, I organized, analyzed, and expanded on the information provided by my participants. I discuss the below themes with direct quotes pulled as examples.

### Modeling of Professional Behavior and Success

Several of the writers thanked their mentors for how they both academically socialized them, but also how they modeled behavior and success.

> *I have had mentors, like you, who have not only demonstrated what the "professional good life" looks like, but also what the "personal good life" looks like. That good life that includes partners, family, friends, spiritual development, healthy hobbies, and exercise. I look to you and the course you have charted… I look to them like constellations that help those who follow in your footsteps to navigate new territory.*
> *– L. Perry (personal communication, October 11, 2017)*

> *It was through seeing all of you succeed, that I was finally able to see myself succeed. It reminded me of a quote from Oprah about the passing of her friend, Mary Tyler Moore. "thank you for being a light that shined so brightly, it let me see myself in you." (this may not be the exact quote).*
> *– K. Woodford (personal communication, October 13, 2017)*

Mentoring professionals are in a unique position to help potential student affairs professionals build a better understanding of the demands, rewards, and expectations of the field. Mentors can model a proper work-life balance and highlight key strategies for preventing burnout. Learning balance and resilience through mentoring could have strong implications for attrition rates in the field. According to Calhoun and Taub (2014), a mentor can act as "an example of a well-integrated professional, supporting and challenging the protégé to find a balance between personal and work responsibilities" (p. 376). In addition, honest discussions and set expectations could counterbalance the decrease in job satisfaction that many new professionals feel during the first few years in the field. Pittman and Foubert (2016) stated that 50-60 % of new professionals leave the field within their first five years. They also went on to add that the main reason stated was lack of job satisfaction. Strong mentoring relationships could set expectations of the field on a more realistic level, and lend to stronger sense of resilience and direction in new professionals. Mentors model success, but can also help mentees understand their own ability to be successful in this field, as are present in the writings of Woodford above.

### Belief, Empowerment, and Validation

A common discussion across letters was the idea of belief, empowerment, and validation. A strong mentoring relationship gave these professionals the space to

find power and agency in themselves:

> *You helped me find clarity through the haze. You might not have fully realized it, but you were one of the first mentors in my life who I felt like didn't place any external pressures on me... you gave me your full attention and validated my emotions. Soon I began to realize that I didn't even know whose plan I had been trying to follow. I felt like you believed in me for who I was, which helped me to believe in myself and to follow my gut to serve in AmeriCorps.*
> *– K. Kenneally (personal communication, October 23, 2017)*

> *For years, I constantly felt paralyzed by my own consuming self-doubt. I had aspirations for myself, but could never reach them, mostly because I was standing in my own way. I would see my peers and friends succeed in ways I never thought was possible for myself. It took multiple interactions, heart to hearts, and pep talks before I could finally believe in myself the way all of you believed in me.*
> *– K. Woodford (personal communication, October 13, 2017)*

> *...all throughout my academic development you reinforced my confidence in my own narrative and valued my input. This was an invaluable tool you helped me develop: confidence in my abilities and the reassurance that my life direction could physically point wherever I chose*
> *– A. C. Medal (personal communication, October 24, 2017)*

A mentor could be the first person of perceived power to show interest and belief in the abilities of an emerging student affairs professional. Mentors can offer clarity, direction, and comfort when young professionals are blinded by uncertainty. They can show their mentees that they hold value, long before they know how to believe in themselves, and help them develop professional confidence and resilience.

## Challenge and Support

A mentor needs to support students and mentees in their endeavors but also challenge them to think more critically and act outside of their comfort zones. Mentors must strike a balance between empowering students, but also asking them to strive to be their best selves.

> *"Your constant motivation to keep pushing and to keep fighting "the good fight" despite the many tribulations I had already faced and had yet to face, have made all the difference. You gave me inches of extra support, cushioning my falls and empowering me to assume the agency I had to change my circumstances."*
> *– A. C. Medal (personal communication, October 24, 2017)*

A mentor can act as the driving force that encourages students and potential professionals in directions they might not have expected or even thought possible. As previously discussed, a mentor has a duty to engage their mentees in difficult and often uncomfortable dialogue. This helps the mentee critically grapple with

assumptions and personal truths, so that they can experience true growth (Healy et al., 2012). However as Healy and colleagues pointed out, challenge and support often occur at the same time. A mentor must inspire hope, belief, and pride in their mentee to be effective. This duality is what differentiates a mentor from a friend. A friend can support, validate, and empower, but a mentor asks a mentee to sit in discomfort, and expect more out of a mentee.

**Identity Development**

For potential and emerging professionals, higher education can be a confusing collection of options, functional areas, and career moves. Mentors can serve as a guide to navigate the creation of a professional identity. Professional identity is the set of skills and techniques necessary for success in functional areas, but also an understanding of how new professionals can best operate in this field.

> *Through your mentorship I have learned broad brush stroke approaches, techniques, and attitudes, and specific, surgical phrases and tools that inspire and guide those who I supervise, lead, and in turn mentor myself… I had the opportunity to learn from and with you in action. I had the opportunity to not only listen, but to watch, and in turn apply these ideas and then seek feedback from you.*
> *– L. Perry (personal communication, October 11, 2017)*

> *Because of your brilliant guidance, I am the confident Student Affairs Professional who advocates for those students who don't feel like they belong and despite that overwhelming feeling still push through. I will advocate and dedicate my professional life to ensuring that the barriers that continue to slow down our students of color disappear.*
> *– A. C. Medal (personal communication, October 24, 2017)*

In addition to this idea of professional identity, writers also discussed the ways in which their mentors helped them process their personal identity development.

> *Your guidance, encouragement, and most of all kindness helped me redefine not only my own identities but also shape what my ideals and values would look like later on in my adult life, all throughout my academic development you reinforced my confidence in my own narrative and valued my input.*
> *– A. C. Medal (personal communication, October 24, 2017)*

Mentors provide opportunities for advancement of learning and skill accrual, and can also have a larger impact on the functional area and professional style adopted by their mentees. Shared affinities and identities can strengthen the mentoring relationship, and increase its importance.

### Call to Action

Based on both the findings in my research and in my content analysis, I believe that a culture of mentoring needs to be more ingrained into higher education. It is important for professionals to integrate professional mentoring into their

professional responsibilities. It would be beneficial to have departments of student affairs offer mentoring programs to undergraduate students at their campus with their professionals. If the practice of mentorship were to become more widespread and intentional, it could have large-scale implications on both the proliferation of the field and also on the worrisome new professional attrition rate. Further research needs to focus on best practices for mentoring, how to formally establish these relationships, and what mentoring looks like for mid-level professionals. As professionals, we need to seek ways to develop deeper, more intentional, and more meaningful relationships with potential professionals and our own mentors.

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