

Mentorship Matters: An Instrumental Case Study of Mentorship in a Student Affairs Graduate Preparatory Program

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Problem Identification & The Why of The Study

- Attrition is a major issue in the field of student affairs (Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008)
- Graduate students leaving before they graduate (Richard & Sherman, 1991; Silver & Jakeman, 2014) with few studies focusing upon this population (Kuk et al., 2007).
- Research agenda focused on standards (Herdlein et al., 2013), without capturing student experience (Silver & Jakeman, 2014)
- A shift in focus to student voice within their educational journey represents an opportunity to understand learning and areas for improvement (Dinise-Halter, 2017).



Why Focus on Mentorship?

- Mentoring relationships help student develop beyond the competency curriculum (Amey et al., 2009; Arminio & Creamer, 2001; Hirt & Strayhorn, 2010; Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008; Strayhorn, 2009; Tull, 2006)
 - Socialization
 - Identity formation
 - Reconciliation of preconceived ideas of the profession to the reality of the work
- A mentor's role can be a major component in retaining new professionals (Wilson et al., 2013)
- Mentorship in student affairs is becoming increasingly necessary to develop competency and resiliency (Long, 2012)



Research Questions

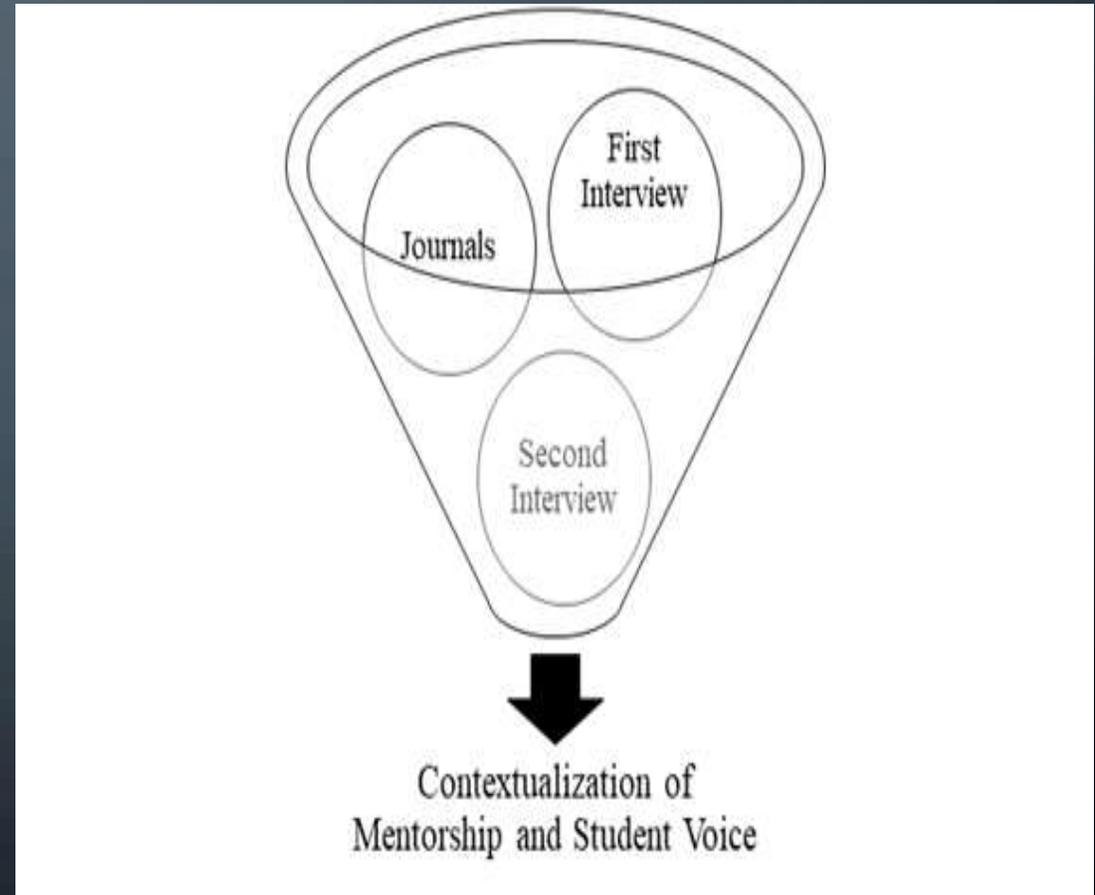
The questions guiding this study were:

- In what ways have graduate students in a master's program in student affairs experienced mentorship?
- How has mentorship impacted their (graduate students) personal and professional development?



Methodological Approach

- Combined approach to instrumental case study, informed by Stake (1995) & Merriam (1998)
- Case parameters evolved through the study's progression, developing the idea of "space" created by the graduate program at *State University* to reflect on educational journey
- Data collection through a modification of Bevan's (2014) phenomenological interview structure



Results: An Overview



- Participants shared both positive and negative mentorship experiences with faculty and professional staff during their educational journey to student affairs
- Participants reflected on the implications of positive and negative mentorship on their personal and professional development within the context of student affairs
- Discovery of the potential for more structured mentorship via combining faculty and professional staff efforts during a graduate program
- Participants created a definition and characteristics of mentors within the context of student affairs

Mentorship Experiences with Faculty and Professional Staff



- Three themes emerged from participant reflections:
 - Guidance
 - Professional development
 - Student affairs knowledge development
- Positive experiences and space to reflect led to a more holistic understanding of personal and professional praxis in student affairs
- Negative experiences led to feelings of rejection, isolation, and a lack of support within the developmental process that is graduate education in student affairs
- **Positive:** “[Mentor] was my rock through all of that. [Mentor] was able to give me advice [on] how to work through the system of the hierarchy, how to combat those difficult conversations and tried to make sure that I was okay mentally physically, and emotionally.”
- **Negative:** “I don't think I've ever been treated this badly from anybody in my entire life. It was two years of incessant passive aggressive abuse [wiping tears from eyes]. My first day at [institution], [mentor] didn't even come and visit me. I was put into an office. It was a converted closet. No one came to talk to me throughout the entire day [voice shaking and getting emotional]. I just sat there.”

Student Perceptions of The Implications of Positive Mentorship Experiences



Career Learning Outcomes

- **Collaboration:** “[Mentor] taught me how to be resourceful, how to be able to use your connections.”
- **Patience:** “You can't throw all of your energy into one fight and only just be burnt out for the rest of your professional experience, we need marathon runners in this industry.”
- **Working with Students:** “Treat them [students] with respect. I've always just try to embody the [mentor] model of just going above and beyond for that student.”

Personal Development

- **Confidence:** “[Speaking of mentors] even when you don't have the faith in yourself, they still have the faith in you, which is really all you can ask for.”
- **Perseverance:** “I think [mentor] just made my whole outlook on student affairs a little bit more positive and that anything can get done with a little bit of can do attitude.”
- **Reflective Practice:** “They [mentors] helped with my understanding of how to bring one experience from another experience and through reflection [become] unapologetically me.”

Student Perceptions of The Implications of Negative Mentorship Experiences



- “It [negative experience] just felt very dehumanizing...I felt like...I just have to do work for them [assistantship placement] and not for myself”
- “I would rather they [negative experiences] have not happened and I feel like I could have learned in other ways.”
- “[Negative Experience] showed me that we're not where I thought we were within higher education.”
- “I do think I have this lingering sense of imposter syndrome...from my time spent at [institution], where it got bad very quickly.”

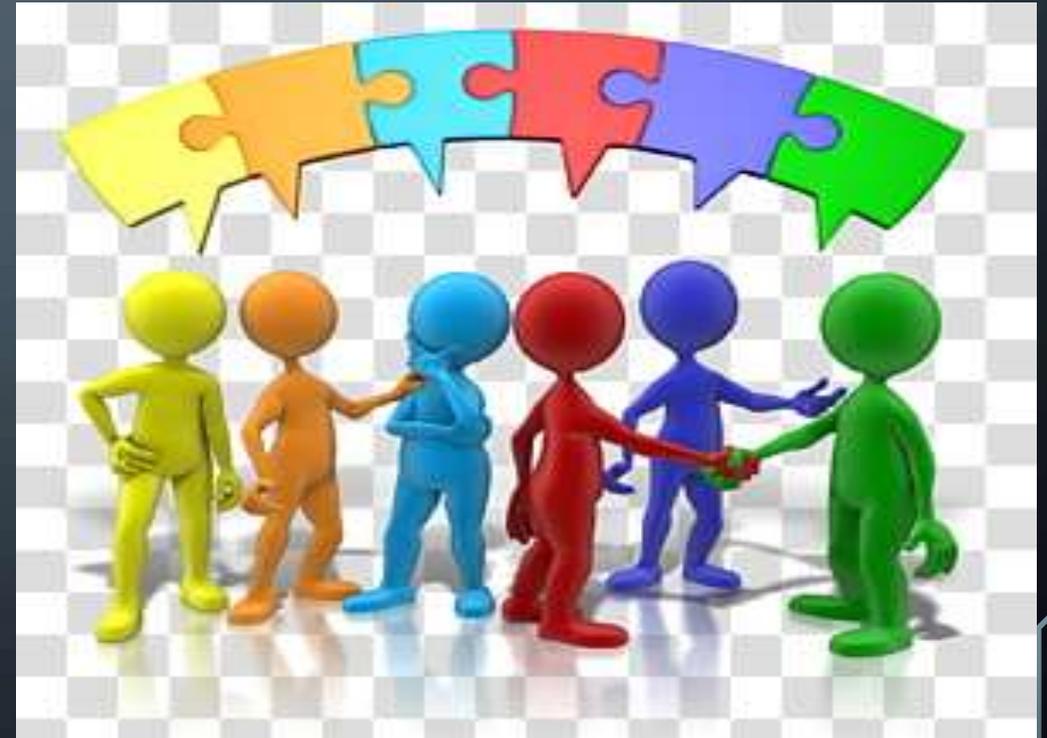
Student Perspectives on The Value of Mentorship

- “[Mentorship] should be the foundational bedrock of the [graduate] program.”
- “I just feel that having that extra sense of preparedness [pause] makes you better equipped to function in the student affairs world, and I think it [mentorship] gives you a glimpse into the politics that might be required to navigate it sometimes.”
- “I think you wouldn't really be able to go through the process of graduate school without a mentor.”
- Participants’ responses show the value of *State University's* space for reflection and collaboration with a variety of mentoring relationships



Faculty & Professional Staff Mentors: A Potential Combination

- “I think it's really that systematic approach of healing mis educative experiences that they [graduate students] might have received in undergrad or even prior to that.”
- “I think that it's [combination] something that should be embedded within the culture of student affairs.”
- “I feel like if you have a dual relationship there doesn't have to be this code switching. They [faculty and professional staff mentors] know exactly who I am, exactly what I'm working on right now. And I don't have to fill them in or sanitize any versions as I'm going back and forth.”



Definition & Characteristics of Mentorship in Student Affairs



- Three themes emerged:
 - Human Connection
 - Longevity
 - Mentors as colleagues
- Participants articulated the importance of a mentoring relationship lies within the people engaged and space mentors establish for comfort and reflection
- Interestingly, participants were somewhat mixed on the importance of long-term relationships
- “I feel like it's just someone who happens to be a student that you [mentor] see a little bit of yourself in, and then you want to help them explore themselves, as well as give them tips and tricks of how you've maneuver through your experience and then to give them that knowledge and wherever they take themselves they are able to use it.”
- Four themes emerged:
 - Empathy
 - Guidance
 - Role Models
 - Displaying Student Affairs Knowledge
- Participants focused their characterization of mentors as a function of the relationships they had experienced and the learning that had occurred throughout the educational journey, as well as within the reflective space created by *State University's* graduate program
- “Even though I was uncomfortable or anxious or awkward or feeling weird about it...[mentor is] still guiding all of us...[mentor is] always there.”
- “I think, [mentor] teaches people how to be a good student affairs practitioner because though you can't be just like [mentor], [mentor] wants you to be knowledgeable.”

Importance of The Findings



- Actual student mentoring experiences represented
- Reflections show the importance of mentorship in personal and professional development
- A potential faculty and professional staff structure of mentorship explored
- Participant creation of a definition of mentorship and a set of mentor characteristics within student affairs
- An opportunity for self reflection and programmatic reform

Implications for Future Research & Practice

- Implications for practice:
 - Mentor self-reflection
 - Graduate program evaluation
- Implications for future research:
 - Replicate - more students and less COVID!
 - Investigate other graduate programs
 - Focus upon mentor perceptions
 - Longitudinal study - graduate students through education and into first years of employment



Key Points to Take Away



- Student voice and perceptions are important to consider
- The “space” created by *State University* provided an opportunity for participants to experience mentorship and reconcile past encounters
- Collaboration is important between faculty and professional staff mentors
- Future inquiry is needed
- The value of a mentoring relationship can be life changing (Ragins & Kram, 2008)