“I Feel Like It Made a Difference”: The Experience of Mentoring

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Abstract

While much research focuses on student outcomes in mentoring relationships, little is known regarding the experiences and motivations of mentors in higher education (Britner, Balcazar, Blechman, Blinn-Pike, & Larose, 2006; Haddock et al., 2013). This descriptive qualitative study examines mentor perspectives in a mentoring leadership program for first-year students. Self-Determination Theory provided a theoretical foundation for understanding the meaning(s) mentors assigned to their experiences and what contributes to mentors’ perceived satisfaction and personal growth. Data for this study were collected from 20 mentors via four focus groups. Focus group data were organized into five primary themes that captured mentors’ experiences: a) motivations for participating, b) relationship building and connection, c) difficulties and areas to overcome, d) sharing of resources, and e) personal and professional development (i.e., what mentors learned). The data also revealed how serving as a mentor provided opportunities for mentors’ personal and professional growth and demonstrated how the work of student affairs influences the larger priorities of the university. This study also helps further understanding of the transformative nature of leadership opportunities for university faculty, staff, and systems.

Keywords: mentoring, higher education, leadership, student affairs
Though many mentoring programs exist that match students with faculty/staff (e.g., at universities like the University of Michigan, Penn State, and Texas Christian University), little is known about the perspectives, experiences, and/or motivations of the mentor in mentoring relationships between higher education professionals and college students, or if these mentoring relationships have benefits for mentors. Additional scholarly work on the mentors’ perspectives is needed in order to fully understand the efficacy of these programs, especially since collegiate mentoring programs are common and cost time and resources, and because research on mentoring in student affairs has mainly focused on student outcomes (Campbell & Campbell, 1997; Salinitri, 2005; Sorrentino, 2007) or the relationships between professionals (Calhoun & Taub, 2014; Davis & Cooper, 2017). Thus, the purpose of this study is to understand the experiences and motivations of higher education professionals serving as formal mentors for first-year students. This study was guided by the following research questions: a) What were the experiences of mentors as they interacted with first-year students? b) How did the mentoring experience affect mentors’ professional growth?

**Literature Review**

While the definition of mentoring has been ambiguous (Crisp, Baker, Griffin, Lunsford, & Pifer, 2017), undergraduate mentoring is characterized by the structure and development of a relationship within a supportive program (Crisp et al., 2017; Long, Fish, Kuhn, & Sowders, 2010). Undergraduate student mentoring has been identified as a contributor to student persistence and degree completion (Gershenfeld, 2014; Tinto, 2014) as well as reducing first-year student dropout rates (Satyanarayana, Li, & Braneky, 2014). In 2005, Girves, Zepeda, and Gwathmey cited collegiate mentoring as a national priority, providing evidence of an increased number of formal programs at both the graduate and undergraduate levels. A positive correlation has been found between having a mentor, sustaining enrollment, and completing a university degree (Hurd, Tan, & Loeb, 2016). Further, Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, and Whitt (2010) tout “meaningful student-faculty interaction through mentor programs” (p. 211) as a contributing factor to student engagement and success. While research focuses on student outcomes in mentoring relationships, little is known regarding the experiences and motivations of mentors (Britner, Balcazar, Blechman, Blinn-Pike, & Larose, 2006; Haddock et al., 2013).

In 1991, Jacobi examined empirical research spanning from the mid-1970s through 1990 and found definitional, methodological, and theoretical deficiencies in the body of research on mentors’ experiences. The same deficiencies were again found by Crisp and Cruz (2009) and Crisp et al. (2017), 26 years after they were first identified by Jacobi (1991). Despite citing lack of information about mentor’s experiences, Crisp et al. (2017) found evidence of some advancement in theoretical foundations for mentoring, as well as support that mentoring in higher education promotes civic engagement, social justice, and equity. Taken together,
the body of research reveals (a) conflicting definitions of mentoring, (b) vagueness in purpose and functions of mentoring programs, (c) a lack of empirical and theoretical support linking mentoring and academic success, and (d) methodological concerns that limit outcome interpretations (Crisp et al., 2017; Crisp & Cruz, 2009; Jacobi, 1991).

Additional research has been conducted regarding peer mentoring (Colvin & Ashman, 2010; Skipper & Keup, 2017) and faculty mentoring (Anderson & Shore, 2008; Brodeur, Larose, Tarabulsy, & Feng, 2017; Yaffe, Bender, & Sechrest, 2012). The mentoring of underrepresented groups has also received attention (Amaral & Vala, 2009; Hurd et al., 2016; Kervin, McMahon, O’Shea, & Harwood, 2014), as has the impact of mentoring on at-risk youth (de Anda, 2001; Faith, Fiala, Cavell, & Hughes, 2011; Hughes, Boyd, & Dykstra, 2010). Despite increases in mentoring studies, few studies have focused on mentors’ perspectives and experiences, and those that have are specific to a particular group or setting (Dobie, Smith, & Robins, 2010; Lunsford, 2011; Shillingstad, McGlamery, Davis, & Gilles, 2015; Varga & Deutsch, 2016). In 1995, Anderson, Dey, Grey, & Thomas concluded their study on the impact of mentoring undergraduate college students by calling for more attention to the stories behind mentoring, but little has been done on this topic to date. Davis and Jacobsen (2013) examined faculty perspectives in mentoring relationships with students conducting undergraduate research and concluded that mentoring opportunities should be increased and be incentivized for both faculty (mentors) and students (mentees), suggesting a need for further investigation into the mentors’ perspectives. It is important to know more about mentor experiences in order to understand how to best recruit competent mentors, help them be satisfied enough in the experience to want to participate in future years, and be more effective in their mentoring role.

Theoretical Framework

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Ryan & Deci, 2000) provides a theoretical foundation for examining the role mentoring undergraduate college students plays in motivation and personal growth of both mentor and mentee. SDT is a broad theory that addresses the study of self-organization, personal growth, and intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2017). The theory considers how varying contexts and conditions impact motivation, which in turn impacts self-regulation, satisfaction, personal growth, and well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Additionally, the theory delineates distinct types of motivation, “each of which has specifiable consequences for learning, performance, personal experience, and well-being” (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 70). While SDT describes a range of different types of motivation, intrinsic motivation is the distinct type of motivation considered in this study.

Intrinsic motivation, defined by Ryan and Deci (2000) as “the inherent tendency to seek out novelty and challenges, to extend and exercise one’s capacities, to
explore, and to learn” (p. 70), was examined as a means of informing the research questions of this study. Cognitive evaluation theory (CET), a sub-theory within SDT, examines and seeks to explain what facilitates, accelerates, and impedes intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Ryan and Deci (2017) posit that in order for humans to remain intrinsically motivated, three needs must be met: (a) autonomy, (b) competence, and (c) relatedness. Autonomy, competence, and relatedness, according to SDT, thus drive individuals to be actively, willingly, and persistently engaged in activities, which facilitates personal growth, satisfaction, and overall well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2017). SDT, specifically related to intrinsic motivation, has the potential to provide a theoretical understanding of what meaning mentors assigned to their experiences and what contributed to mentors’ perceived satisfaction and personal growth.

**Method**

In line with the purpose and appropriate application of descriptive qualitative research, the data in this study were collected in order to provide an in-depth understanding of the experiences, perspectives, and motivations of mentors serving in a mentoring program for first-year students (Creswell, 2014). Descriptions of the program, participants, sampling, data collection, and findings in this study are reported with sufficient detail to provide context, allow a framework for comparison, and facilitate judgments about transferability (Creswell, 2014; Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993).

**Program Overview**

Data were collected from a semester-long mentoring program based at a large, public land-grant institution in the southern plains. Overseen by the Office of the Vice President for Student Affairs, the mentoring program was designed to a) pair at-risk students with a faculty or staff member who would provide individual support through conversation and resource referral, and b) expose students to campus programs and facilities through special tours and events. Student participants did not meet the institution's assured admission criteria and enrolled at the university through the alternative or holistic admission process. This group of students was identified by university administrators as having a potentially higher attrition rate than the overall first-year student rate. Students who identified as first-generation college students were not included in this mentoring program, as there was a separate program available for first-generation students specifically. Qualifying students (N=230) were sent letters of invitation prior to the start of the fall semester. The Division of Student Affairs and the Faculty Council recruited mentors from among their membership. In total, 78 students (mentees) and 81 faculty and staff (mentors) volunteered to participate in the program; there was no incentive offered for participation beyond the opportunity for students to have a mentor and participate in programs and events. Mentor-mentee matches were paired based on academic majors, hobbies, hometown,
gender, and ethnicity. The program was successful in terms of student retention and grade point average (GPA), with nearly all students who participated in the program returning to campus the following fall and having higher GPAs than a comparison group of their peers who did not participate in the program.

Participants and Data Collection

Mentors in the program represented a variety of academic colleges and administrative departments on campus and included vice-presidents, deans, tenured and early career faculty, seasoned practitioners in student affairs, executive administrators, and entry-level professionals. Mentors also represented a variety of self-reported races and ethnicities, including Asian American, Black, Hispanic/Latino, Middle Eastern, Native American, and White. All mentors who participated in the program were sent a satisfaction survey at the end of the program. At the end of the survey, mentors were asked to provide their name and contact information if they were willing to participate in a focus group to further provide their perspectives and experiences. In total, 47 mentors (58%) responded to the survey, and 20 (25%) also participated in one of four focus groups. Focus groups were conducted by two of the researchers (a white, female, executive student affairs administrator and a white, female assistant professor) and lasted approximately one hour. Focus group questions centered around mentors’ experiences in the program, special moments they remembered from their interactions, and what they learned from their experience as a mentor. Focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Focus group participants were 50% female (n=10) and 50% male (n=10) and represented a variety of races and ethnicities.

Analysis

Responses to focus group conversations were analyzed using Saldaña’s (2013) and Creswell’s (2014) coding guidelines. Specifically, two members of the research team (a white, male, senior student affairs administrator and a white, female, assistant professor) coded each transcript individually, then met to discuss the codes, categories, and themes that emerged; in vivo coding was used when possible in order to maintain the participants’ own language (Saldaña, 2013). Researchers reflected on concepts associated with SDT (such as relatedness, motivations, satisfaction, and personal growth) during the analysis process. However, findings were not explicitly organized around SDT terms in order to allow for emergent coding and to honor the participants’ language and experiences within context. To strengthen trustworthiness and credibility, the other researchers (two white female doctoral students and a white, female, executive student affairs administrator) served as auditors, reading over the initial codes and highlighting areas they perceived needed further discussion, clarification, and/or categorization. All researchers worked together to advance
how the data would be represented, discussed, and interpreted in the final manuscript (Creswell, 2014).

Limitations

It should be noted that this study is qualitative in nature and therefore not generalizable. However, the results of this study may be transferable to other contexts and groups, and the authors took care to provide sufficient context to allow the reader to make a determination regarding transferability. Further, the results of this study pertain to mentors (i.e., higher education professionals) at one university. As such, the researchers and some (but not all) participants knew each other, and some worked together in the same division. Rather than being a detriment, the researchers felt this helped add rapport, both in the recruitment of participants and the focus group conversations, and participants were encouraged to provide open and honest feedback at all times.

Findings

Analysis of the focus group data revealed that mentors’ experiences included five primary themes, each with several sub-themes; the themes and subthemes are summarized in Table 1 and in the supporting paragraphs below.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Subtheme</th>
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<td>Motivations for Participating</td>
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<td>“Time management”</td>
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Motivation

The reasons for mentors’ participation helped shape their experiences in the program. Most notably, mentors were driven by the ideal of mentoring itself, the opportunity to give someone else what they themselves had needed, the ability to help the university meet one of its core goals, and the opportunity to support students in a hands-on way.

The ideal of mentoring. Some of the mentors believed in mentoring regardless of the context. As one mentor said, “I am a big supporter of mentoring, always have been…and I wanted to be a part of it.” For those mentors, the specifics of the mentoring program didn’t matter as much as the opportunity to be a mentor.

The opportunity to give what they wish they’d had. Other mentors identified needs that they had when transitioning to college and viewed this program as an opportunity to meet those needs for others. One mentor noted, “I wanted to do this because I had trouble adjusting to college when I first went…So I figured that experience and having gotten on the other side was something that might be helpful to someone else.” Another mentor felt that it was important to be the role model he did not have: “I didn’t have any role models in my family to help me to know what to expect, if I had it would have saved me a lot of pain when I got to [college].” It was clear that for some mentors, using their own experiences to help the next generation of students was an important reason for becoming a mentor.

The ability to help the university accomplish its goals. This program was marketed to mentors as a retention initiative, with retention being a major strategic initiative of the university. Some mentors found that the ability to directly help the institution accomplish one of its goals was a driving factor for their participation. One mentor noted, “I felt like what I was doing was contributing to retention at [the institution] and so I personally feel strongly that that’s a good thing.” A few mentors also noted that they were participating in this mentoring program in part to determine if a similar program should be created in their academic colleges.
Providing support to students. Finally, several mentors were motivated by the opportunity to build relationships with an individual student and provide hands-on support. Additionally, some mentors also saw this as an opportunity to educate themselves about students in order to be better at their day-to-day jobs:  
… the biggest reason [I became a mentor was] I just wanted to figure out ways that I could further engage [with students]. Not only support my mentee but also support other students, because the way I see it, what one student is going through is what the majority of students may be going through.

Relationship Building and Connection

Mentors and students had to work to build trust, search for points of connection, and negotiate preferred communication styles. Once the relationships were established, mentors created milestones that provided evidence of the relationship and then broadened the relationships to include other resources from the mentors’ own social networks.

Building trust. Mentors and their students first had to work to build trust with each other. As one noted, “It was a big challenge for them to really open up and trust. Really getting them to open up and understand who you are and how you could help them.” In these initial meetings, before trust was established, mentors found themselves evaluating the relationship and trying to understand their own role as it aligned to their student. Most mentors agreed that it was around the second meeting when the relationship began to be established. One mentor noted, “It took a while to find some points of commonality but [when we] got into that second lunch….we found a connection and really enjoyed visiting.” This trust-building phase seemed to be a critical part of establishing a meaningful mentor-mentee relationship, not just for the mentees but also for the mentors.

Points of connection and “common interest.” Mentor-mentee pairs ended up finding several points of connection that they could use to build a relationship. Sports and athletics came up several times as a key point of commonality. Whether it was actual athletic participation, shared interest in certain sports or teams, including the university’s own athletic teams, conversation around sports allowed mentors and mentees to begin to build a relationship, even if they felt like they had nothing else in common. A mentor reflected, “His major was not a common interest major with my background, but we found a common interest in sports and….once we found [that commonality it] made it a lot better.”

Other pairs connected around academic interests. Even if the mentor was not involved directly in the student’s major, if the mentor had studied something related to that major and/or know faculty who taught in a given field, then the
mentor was able to use that as a connecting point. One said, “He was interested in finance and accounting. I knew people in the school of accounting, so I could connect him with people.” Some mentors connected their student’s experience to the experience of a family member, enabling them to more closely empathize with their student’s perspective and needs. For example: “I have a daughter that’s a freshman…I could say, ‘My daughter did blah, blah, blah. Did you find that that was a problem?’ That did make it easier at first.”

Some pairs never found that point of connection but used that to build a relationship. Mentors found that asking questions about aspects of the university with which they were not familiar enabled their students to share the experience through their own eyes:

…..I’m not Greek and so a lot of [our connection] was him telling me his story and what he was going through as a first-year student. So that was pretty cool because he told me his story, and I think it gave him kind of a safe space to talk about some things and having someone who doesn’t know.

Negotiating preferred communication methods. As a part of building trust, mentors and their students had to negotiate their preferred communication styles. Mentors were used to using email to communicate with colleagues and students. Students, though, generally did not check their email and were missing messages about the program and requests from their mentors to meet. One mentor recalled, “She doesn’t check her email. So I called [the program coordinator] to get [my mentee’s] phone number, and she responded to text messages.” Mentors generally were comfortable texting with their students and found that to be the best way to communicate. Some students, though, advocated for using Snapchat or other forms of technology beyond the comfort level of their mentors.

Evidence of connection. Mentors found themselves looking for evidence that the relationship was progressing. Some mentors indicated feeling a sense of pride when their student followed their advice, took initiative, or succeeded in their own work: “So I was really proud of her for that even though she didn’t get it, she stuck her neck out.” For other mentors, that evidence of connection came when the student displayed ownership of or excitement about the relationship. One mentor noted, “[my mentee]…gave me a hug [when he saw me at an event]. And I am kind of a huggy guy anyway so I thought that was a big moment that we had made a connection.” Many mentors noted a sense that a bond had been formed between the pair as evidence of success. For example, one mentor shared:

With my student, I got the perception that when we would meet and have our discussions, it was almost like it was a relief for him to be able to talk to someone outside of his classes, outside of his fraternity, and to
not only get an older individual’s perspective, an employee’s perspective, but just to have that adult perspective.

Using connections and networking. Finally, many mentors felt that the pairing was successful when they were able to connect their student to others in their networks who could help them achieve their goals. Many times, this connection was linked to the mentor’s personal responsibilities or role on campus. One mentor explained:

He had an interest in potentially finding a job that he was interested in in the sports arena. So that was a win in being able to introduce him to the staff, and in turn, to encourage him to make that connection as a growth opportunity for him was, I think, a big win because he seemed to really perk up his interest when he realized that there was an opportunity, not only to get paid, but to do something that he was genuinely interested in.

Other mentors, though, went beyond the professional and used their personal social networks to benefit their students. One mentor shared:

My mentee was interested in an internship at NASA and it just happened that I had a friend that works at NASA who had gone through that internship, so I was really proud of myself that I was able to connect. ….It made me feel useful to make that connection.

Difficulties/Areas to Overcome

While the mentors overall reported having a positive experience, there were some difficulties they faced in developing a connection with students. Some difficulties were procedural, such as scheduling, while others were more relational, requiring mentors to probe and make meaning out of students’ vague comments.

Scheduling. Finding a mutually agreeable time to meet up was a common challenge. Sometimes, the issue seemed to be due to the students’ schedules; for example, one mentor noted how his mentee "was overly committed...so connecting was sometimes difficult." Other times, the mentor’s schedule was the problem. In particular, several mentors shared that the nature of their jobs require them to schedule events and meetings well in advance, and that does not always match students’ way of life. One mentor lamented, “between their schedule and my schedule, I had a lot of [things] booked way ahead of time, so trying to get us to connect and get that when we could both do that was hard.”

Transparency and opening up. Mentors shared that getting students to open up to them was sometimes difficult. Occasionally, this difficulty was because the student was shy, reserved, or unsure:
My mentee was very introverted. I remember in the opening ceremony he wouldn’t even look at me. I mean, he would answer my questions but he wouldn’t ask any questions, so I felt like I was bombarding him with questions trying to find something to hang onto.

At other times, it was the mentor's role at the university that created awkwardness:

Something came up about a conduct case and I had to write him up for that, and it was kind of awkward. I don’t think that necessarily put a strain on our relationship, but getting him to open up from the beginning was tough.

When students did open up, what they said and what was actually happening didn’t always match up. One mentor shared:

I really had to probe my student because if we would go to lunch and I would say ‘So, how are things going?’ he would be like ‘Everything is great, I have this all figured out.’ And so then you drill down and you would find that there were things he was working through, but he had this façade that he had to put up that was to overcompensate for maybe his feelings of not having it figured out. So, we really had to….probe to get him to really talk about ways I could help him. Because if I had just asked him how things are going, he said ‘Fine.’

Several mentors shared that they believed students did not want to or know how to appear vulnerable. This impediment was especially true when mentors tried to discuss academic issues. One mentor recalled:

I had checked in with [my mentee] several times early [in the semester] and asked him about classes and everything....and his answers were always vague. Then he decided to declare our school as his major, and I found out that his GPA wasn’t going to be high enough and that he was actually struggling in a couple of classes. If I could have been able to identify that earlier, that might have been helpful...maybe I should have been better at asking the right questions early on and not accepting the vague ‘Oh everything is great, I am enjoying it.’

Mentors agreed that once they were able to “peel back the layers,” they were better able to understand their mentees’ experiences and needs, and thus better understand how they could be helpful as a mentor.

Sharing of Resources

Almost all mentors in this study talked at length about the resources they shared with their students. Mentors agreed that most resource referrals came from conversations with students, so discussions about helpful resources “were contextual with what the student was experiencing” and talking with their mentors about. Table 2 shows common resources that mentors shared with their students.
Table 2

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**Personal/Professional Development**

The final theme that emerged from the data regarding the mentor experience centered on the personal and professional development of the mentor. Data in this theme was often coded as “what they (the mentors) learned.” Four subthemes stood out in this area; most prominently, mentors seemed to learn about the institution itself and the student experience. They also reported growth in developing more personal relationships and feeling as if they made a difference.

**Learning about the institution.** When reflecting on their experience, some mentors highlighted that they learned things about the university that they would not have known otherwise. One mentor, in his first year working at the institution, said, “this interacting helped me to understand some of the unique qualities of [the institution] and the culture and the different things that students can do here.”

**Learning about the student experience.** Another very common lesson learned for mentors was that of “the student experience.” Some mentors shared that they learned about things they never would have thought of, like students having a difficult time meeting dietary needs for religious or medical purposes in on-campus facilities, one noting, “that would not [have otherwise] crossed my mind!” Another mentor reflected on his time in a residence hall, noting, “It was
my first time in the [residence halls] in 15 years, at least. It was interesting…there was a lot going on. It was a nice reminder of what that experience was like.”

Many mentors often recalled learning that their students were stressed out, under pressure to succeed, sleep-deprived, and sometimes over-committed. One mentor noted that she felt her mentee was under a great “amount of stress and burden” and that she hadn’t reflected on that aspect of student life in a while: “I guess I am just sometimes far removed from that and so it wasn’t a shock to me, but I had just maybe forgotten about [the stress]. He was very, very stressed, [and I think this is true for] a lot of our students.”

**Developing more “personal” relationships.** Mentors reflected on their experience as a time of personal and professional growth as well. Several mentors mentioned that they enjoyed interacting with students outside of their more traditional role. This was especially true for faculty members, with one noting, “When I have undergraduates, they’re taking a statistics course and so I tend to be the bad guy and so it was nice to not be the bad guy.” Mentors seemed to enjoy this shift in the normal context of their relationships with students, and many appreciated being “invited into [the students’] personal life and not just [their] school life.”

**Making a difference.** Finally, many mentors reflected on the importance of their mentor work in making a difference in students’ lives. For many mentors, this is why they joined the program in the first place, so evidence that they made a difference was both professionally and personally fulfilling. One mentor noted:

“I felt that having just a bit of support or….safety net to help them or guide them was definitely instrumental in having the first few weeks of their campus life as a positive experience or more positive than it would have otherwise been.”

Another mentor agreed, sharing that hearing her mentee “express that [I] really made a difference in her life” was fulfilling for her as a mentor.

**Discussion, Conclusions, and Implications**

This study sought to better understand the experiences of mentors in a mentoring relationship involving higher education professionals and first-year college students. The study makes a unique contribution to the literature by providing an in-depth look at mentors’ experiences and motivations working with first-year undergraduates. The findings of this study have several implications for future research as well as for student affairs professionals who oversee mentoring programs; namely, understanding the motivations of mentors helps to recruit mentors, understanding the experiences of mentors helps to prepare mentors, and understanding the impact on the mentors and the institution helps tie the work of student affairs to the larger priorities of the university. This study also helps
further understanding of the transformative nature of leadership opportunities for leaders and systems.

Understanding Motivations of the Mentors

Mentors in this study were motivated to serve as a mentor because they liked the ideal of mentoring, appreciated the opportunity to give what they wish they had been provided, wanted to help the university accomplish its goals, enjoyed the chance to provide hands-on support for students, and felt as though they made a difference. These motivations for being a mentor can be attributed to the need for competence, autonomy, and relatedness, which according to SDT, must be met in order to thrive and continue in a behavior (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Mentors feeling as though they had made a difference, for example, aligns with the need to feel competent. Wanting to help the university accomplish its goals addresses the need for autonomy, and enjoying the hands-on support for students addresses the need for connection or relatedness. The motivations to mentor align with the tenets of SDT, which suggests that when individuals are actively, willingly, and persistently engaged in activities that meet specific needs (in this case, mentoring) personal growth, satisfaction, and over-all well-being are nurtured (Ryan & Deci, 2017).

Implications. Understanding these motivations helps those professionals who oversee mentoring programs to better recruit and retain mentors. Many calls for mentors are blanket requests for help with little attention paid to the reasons people mentor. More explicitly linking participation requests to the motivations outlined in this study (and understanding the general underpinnings of SDT), may help potential mentors get excited about and see themselves acting as mentors. For example, a well-crafted invitation to mentor could connect the program to the larger goals of the university or stories of how previous mentors in the program provided direct support to their students. Understanding what motivates people to serve as mentors helps to better recruit and retain mentors.

Understanding the Experiences of Mentors

Mentors in this study, built trust by finding common interests, figuring out the best ways to communicate with their mentees, and working to discern happenings in the students’ lives beyond the surface-level conversations they were having. Once mentors were able to find points of commonality, they saw evidence of a connection with their mentees and could then help them open up and thus broaden the relationship. This is consistent with findings outside the higher education context that attunement, authenticity, collaboration, companionship, empathy, and trust are important factors contributing to the successful mentor-mentee relationship (Dobie et al., 2014; Shillingstad et al., 2015). Additionally, this
finding is aligned with SDT, which emphasizes the fundamental psychological need for relatedness in elective relationships (Ryan & Deci, 2017).

**Implications.** Anticipating the needs and concerns of mentors helps to prepare those mentors before they find themselves facing difficult situations. In this study, mentors struggled with scheduling, getting students to open up, transparency, and communication. Thus, it is important that the training for mentors addresses these topics in the future so that mentors are not surprised when these issues arise and are equipped with strategies to address them. Future research should also focus specifically on mentors’ experiences to further understand their part of the leader-follower dyad.

**Tying the Work of Student Affairs to the Larger Priorities of the University**

As a program overseen by Student Affairs that incorporated faculty and staff from across the institution, a mentoring program is a good example of how student affairs professionals' training and abilities tie-in to an academic function of the university. Mentors in this program worked directly in support of the institution's academic missions, helping students figure out majors, learn study skills, and navigate institutional structures. Because this was a program overseen by Student Affairs professionals who utilized their training and capacity to help students and faculty develop meaningful relationships, it further speaks to the vital functions and role student affairs divisions and staff members play within universities.

Further, this study also demonstrates how a student affairs program was able to help university faculty and staff better understand the students with whom they work. Mentors in this study specifically learned about two important areas: 1) the experience of being a first-year college student, and 2) being a first-year student at their own institution specifically, which then translated into helping mentors be better higher education professionals. This is clearly of value to the institution—serving as a mentor helped faculty and staff develop as professionals, which in turn can improve the university systemically. Further, mentoring programs such as this one, are low-cost yet have important implications for student success and faculty/staff connection to students and the university as a whole.

**Mentoring Transforms People and Systems**

The data in this study demonstrate that leadership endeavors (in this case, serving as a mentor) provided support for students and helped the university achieve its goals (such as retention), while also providing opportunities for leaders’ personal and professional growth (e.g., feeling as though they made a difference, learning about the student experience, and better understanding the university culture). The data in this study support future research using grounded theory such as transformational leadership to understand the experience of those involved in mentoring relationships. For example, the findings of this study support the transformational leadership idea that leadership is bidirectional (Burns, 1978;
Dugan, 2017) and positively influences systems and organizations (Dugan, 2017, Geier, 2016; Sun, Chen, & Zhang, 2017); these ideas could help future researchers design studies and questions that help better understand the mentor experience. Specifically, for student affairs professionals, the results of this study provide further evidence that student affairs work in overseeing leadership opportunities such as mentoring programs can be transformative, helping participants become better higher education professionals in addition to improving student outcomes.

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