

May 2022

Understanding Mentorship for Underserved Undergraduate Students: A case for holistic mentorship, effective messaging and the removal of silos

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<https://doi.org/10.33015/dominican.edu/2022.EDU.05>

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<https://doi.org/10.33015/dominican.edu/2022.EDU.05>

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This thesis, written under the direction of the candidate's thesis advisor and approved by the program chair, has been presented to and accepted by the Department of Education in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Education.

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**Understanding Mentorship for Underserved Undergraduate Students:
A case for holistic mentorship, effective messaging and the removal of silos**

by

Jennifer Lewton Labovich

A culminating thesis submitted to the faculty of Dominican University of California
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Education

Dominican University of California

San Rafael, CA

December 2022

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Abstract

Mentorship for historically underserved undergraduate students at their institutions of higher education is a much-studied area of research (Crisp et al., 2017). Existing research has explored how students' individual aspects of identity impact their access to mentoring (Crisp, 2009; Lund et al., 2019). However, there is a lack of research that studies access to mentoring for the whole student, particularly at small liberal arts schools like TU. Intersectionality has been recognized as an important concept (Crenshaw, 1991) which this study drew on to understand how identity impacts mentorship (Bass, 2012).

I conducted a transformative mixed methods case study, which involved the collection, analysis, and interpretation of quantitative and qualitative data. Student participants responded to a question series presented in survey, interview, and focus group format. Administrator and staff leader participants responded to a single question series presented in interview format. All questions were formed based on the following central questions: (1) How do underserved undergraduate students access mentoring at a specific institution (TU) using an equity model of Integrative Coaching and other mentoring programs? (2) What factors contribute to undergraduate students' engagement in Integrative Coaching and other mentoring programs? (3) How does mentoring, through Integrative Coaching and other sources, meet the varied needs of diverse students?

The findings show that, when they understand how to access mentorship and believe that their needs will be met by a mentoring relationship in which they experience fit, diverse undergraduate students access mentorship from different sources: themselves, peers, and staff or faculty. Finally, the study illuminated both short-term and long-term opportunities to enhance the student experience of mentoring including effective messaging about mentorship, creating a central location on campus where students know they can access a variety of support, the inclusion of mentorship as a High-Impact Practice, and a general movement towards removing problematic silos at institutions of higher education.

Acknowledgements

I feel compelled first to acknowledge the unearned privileges from which I benefit, and which ease my path. As I conducted this research, I came to a concept of reaching forward, reaching back and a mental image of extending one hand forward and one behind. I strive to wield my privilege in all its forms in this way: reaching forward and behind to offer and receive support.

I am indebted to Giulia Welch and Jane Cunningham whose serendipitous words of encouragement inspired me to pursue a graduate degree at a time when doing so seemed highly illogical. To Dr. Susan Cabello, my undergraduate thesis advisor whose understandable exhortation that I "...make a plan and post it everywhere!" planted a seed that bears fruit to this day.

Thank you, to Dr. Matt E. Davis, my second reader and Integrative Coach colleague, whose simultaneously playful and grounded approach is an example I aspire to emulate. To Dr. Katie Lewis, my first reader, whose measured, kind, and warm encouragement, in combination with her masterful editing, organizational and hyperlinking skills have conspired to make this undertaking scalable. Your commitment to social justice inspires me. You are a model educator.

Everyone has a unique story to share, and that matters. Thank you, to my student participants and to all the students I have worked with, for sharing their *testimonios* so that I might learn from their myriad unique experiences. It is a humbling honor to experience your trust.

Thank you, to my village of cheerleaders, and to my exceedingly supportive family. To my son Oscar Labovich, who has been a source of levity and welcome distraction thanks to being away from home as he pursues his own undergraduate degree. To my daughter Sidney Labovich, from whose daily example I learn persistence, focus, resilience and care. Your well-timed hugs lift me up. Oscar and Sidney, thank you for allowing me to workshop my coaching skills with you throughout your lives. To my husband Jonathan Labovich, without whose support of every kind, silliness, encouragement, and all-around "stepping up" this undertaking never would have been possible.

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	iii
Acknowledgements	iv
List of Tables	vii
Chapter 1: Introduction	1
Statement of Purpose	1
Overview of Research Design	2
Significance of the Study	4
Research Implications.....	4
Chapter 2: Literature Review.....	6
Understanding Student Cultural Capital	8
Paulo Freire’s Critical Pedagogy	8
The Emergence of Critical Race Theory.....	9
Community Cultural Wealth.....	10
High-Impact Practices and Promising Instructional Programs.....	12
Mentoring as Promising Instructional Program	14
Mentoring as an Impactful Practice for Supporting Underserved Students	15
Definition of Mentoring	16
Supporting Underserved Students Across Aspects of Identity	18
Students of Color (SOC).....	18
First-Generation College Students	19
Implications of Mentoring for Socioeconomically Disadvantaged Students (SED)	20
Intersectionality as It Relates to Holistic Mentoring	21
Chapter 3: Methods	25
Research Questions.....	25
Description and Rationale for Research Approach.....	26
Research Design	28
Research Site.....	28
Participants and Sampling Procedures	29
Methods.....	30
Data Analysis	32

Validity	34
Chapter 4: Findings	37
Holistic Mentorship	38
Go to Someone with Authority	38
Being Seen and Valued	41
“We’re Here to Help Each Other”: Sources of On-Campus Mentorship	42
“My Advice is Way Better”	43
“I Know They Won’t Judge Me”	44
“My Growth is Your Job”	45
Fit	46
Capacity for Connection	48
How a Mentor “Shows Up”: Impact of Mentor Personality on the Mentoring Relationship	50
Logistics: “When Are You Actually Going to be Able to do the Mentoring?”	52
Reasons Students Avoid Mentoring Relationships: “I Will Never Ever Reach Out to Her Ever Again”	53
Critical Convergence: Knowing about Support versus Choosing to Access It	55
Conclusion	56
Chapter 5: Discussion	59
Implications for the Literature	60
Implications for Practice and Policy	62
Limitations of the Study	63
Directions for Future Research	64
Conclusion	65
References	67
Appendix A: Student Participant Survey	72
Appendix B: Student Participant Interview Questions	75
Appendix C: Focus Group Questions	77
Appendix D: University Leader Interview Questions	79

List of Tables

Table 1 Table showing demographic information for student participants	39
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Chapter 1: Introduction

The diversity of college students has seen a steady increase over time (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021). What has remained consistent is that college students from historically underrepresented backgrounds assume significant risk when they pursue a college education (McCallen & Johnson, 2020). Measured by future income and status, the potential gain for these students and their families is also significant (McCallen & Johnson, 2020). Mentorship, delivered by colleges and universities, can have a profound impact on whether a student completes their degree or instead drops out, often leaving the student with expensive loans to repay and no college degree (Bass, 2012; Hatch et al., 2016; McCallen & Johnson, 2020; McCoy et al., 2015; Stanton-Salazar, 2010).

Statement of Purpose

In order to identify, explore and address existing institutional or programmatic barriers to access, this project intends to understand how undergraduate students at TU (a pseudonym) from historically underrepresented backgrounds, specifically Socioeconomically Disadvantaged (SED), Students of Color (SOC) and first-generation, access mentoring. This project also intends to understand what existing research has determined to be reliable practices in increasing both equity of access to and the components of mentoring as a way to positively impact outcomes for students from diverse backgrounds, defined as persistence through college to degree completion. Existing research has not yet adequately addressed the holistic needs of undergraduate students and so this project has sought to apply an intersectional approach to considering how best to address the unique and individual needs of each student in order to understand how the program of Integrative Coaching can adopt practices to increase student access to mentoring.

Critical pedagogy offered an invitation to educators to consider the student as a co-creator of knowledge (Shih, 2018). While this project is not centered on classroom teaching of content, its purpose is to support undergraduate students' pursuit of a college degree and so the focus remains on outcomes for learners. Existing research provides a strengths-based approach of utilizing the Critical Race Theory (CRT) methodology of counterstories, explained by Solórzano and Yosso (2002) as "...a tool for exposing, analyzing, and challenging the majoritarian stories of racial privilege" (p. 32), which is a practice that can inform this project. The American Association of Colleges and Universities' (AAC&U) and Center for Community College Student Engagement's (CCCSE) list of High-Impact Practices (HIPs) offers much-studied practices which institutions of higher education provide for undergraduate students as a way to improve student outcomes, but access to those HIPs is inequitable, with underrepresented students on the losing end across each practice (Hatch et al., 2016; Kuh et al., 2017).

What distinguishes this project from previous research is (1) using the concept of intersectionality as a way to inform a holistic approach to mentoring for students, and (2) the use of a mixed methods case study design which included qualitative and quantitative components to understand mentoring at a specific university.

Overview of Research Design

I am an Integrative Coach and Accessibility Counselor at the research site, which is a small private university in the Western United States, and which recently earned designation as a Minority Serving Institution (MSI). Approximately one third of TU's undergraduate students are Pell-eligible, meaning that they come from low-income families, and nearly a quarter of TU's undergraduate students are first-generation college students (*University Facts*). Integrative Coaching, which connects individual students with skilled practitioners of student support,

Integrative Coaches, who act as *honest brokers* to support students in pursuit of their goals, was developed by TU leadership with the intention of improving retention and graduation rates (N. Elvove, personal communication, September 20, 2021).

The design of this project was deeply influenced by a variety of sources. I set out to explore mentoring, offered through Integrative Coaching. Initially, I intended to consider behaviors of the student mentee and how that aspect of the mentoring relationship could be improved. What I came to understand was the importance of centering the experience of student participants who would be able to describe their first-person experiences of accessing and engaging in mentoring relationships. Instead of focusing on changing the behaviors of the student participants, influenced by the tenets of Critical Race Theory and Community Cultural Wealth, I decided to focus my research on understanding the student experience as a way to improve TU systems (Brydon-Miller & McGuire, 2008; Seidman, 2019; Tuck, 2009). I was also deeply influenced by the concept of Universal Design for Learning, which encourages practitioners to design systems and experiences for participants *in the margins* which ultimately benefits all participants. Using that same logic, knowing that different students experience barriers to accessing mentoring differently, once we deeply understand how underserved students access mentoring we can then increase access to mentoring for students across a broad spectrum of identity.

Ultimately, I designed a transformative mixed methods case study project which sought to answer the following questions: 1) How do underserved undergraduate students access mentoring at a specific institution (TU) using an equity model of Integrative Coaching and other mentoring programs?, 2) What factors contribute to undergraduate students' engagement in Integrative Coaching and other mentoring programs?, and 3) How does mentoring, through

Integrative Coaching and other sources, meet the varied needs of diverse students? In order to answer these questions, through purposeful selection, I identified five student participants and three university administrator or staff leader participants. My data collection and analysis focused on student participants' descriptions of their lived experience and featured both qualitative and quantitative components.

Significance of the Study

The results of this study are critical to understanding and improving how undergraduate students access and experience mentoring. Unlike other studies, this study focused on mentorship provided through Integrative Coaching and other university sources of support at the institution of research through an intersectional lens, examining in particular the experience of students from historically underrepresented backgrounds.

A key finding of this research is that diverse undergraduate students access mentorship at a specific institution when they know about and understand how to access mentoring opportunities. The data shows that undergraduate students seek guidance from a variety of sources: themselves, peers and university faculty and staff, which is an important finding that can impact how TU approaches improvements to systems of support. Findings also show that students opt into mentoring when they believe that their specific needs will be met within a particular mentoring relationship in which they experience fit.

Research Implications

In order to provide equitable access to an equity model of mentorship, which will have the impact of improving persistence and degree completion of all undergraduate students, and particularly for students from historically underrepresented backgrounds, colleges and universities should develop high-quality messaging about existing impactful sources of on-

campus support. This presumes that on-campus sources of support are already in place and are known to be effective. This project is grounded in the theoretical concept of student cultural capital which, traveling backwards, traces its origin from Community Cultural Wealth and Network Strength to the concept of *intersectionality* from Critical Race Theory and back to Critical Pedagogy. Through this lens, my research considers the student's experience as a central phenomenon to be understood, recognizing the flaws of the system and not the student.

A key finding of this research was that high-quality messaging about the support that is provided by colleges and universities, and how to access support is critical. Improved messaging will increase the likelihood that students will have access to reliable information which will allow them to make informed decisions as they navigate complicated university systems. Another key finding centers on the idea of *fit* in a mentoring relationship. Mentorship should be holistic in design, addressing the myriad aspects of students' unique intersectional identities because students see themselves and experience the world as a complete entity, and not sectioned off based on individual aspects of identity. Using counterstories as a guide for centering the student experience, this project also asserts that the time has come for mentoring to be added to the list of HIPs, which could have the additional benefit of ensuring that adequate budgetary support is extended to student support services such as mentoring. The research demonstrates the positive impact mentoring has on persistence and degree-completion for undergraduate students, and the inclusion of mentoring on the list of HIPs will help to further focus and identify best practices with regard to mentoring which will positively impact both access and success of all undergraduate students and most especially students from historically underrepresented backgrounds.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

A significant number of undergraduate students in the United States come from an historically underserved community and as such, are uniquely at risk of not persisting through to degree completion (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021). The risk of undertaking a college education for a student who belongs to one or more of these underserved groups is significant and the reward of completion is also significant (McCallen et al., 2020). Completion of a college degree cannot clear all future barriers for a student, but it can help to create upward mobility for the student and it has the potential to transform the identity of a student's family (McCallen et al., 2020). Mentorship is one of the practices which has the potential to recognize and build on a student's strengths, and support an undergraduate student in their pursuit of a college degree (Bass, 2012; Hatch et al., 2016; McCallen & Johnson, 2020; McCoy et al., 2015; Stanton-Salazar, 2010).

We refer to the Integrative Coaching Program, a student success program at TU, as “an equity model” (A. Finley, personal communication, September 30, 2021; N. Elvove, personal communication, September 20, 2021). Anecdotal information suggests that Integrative Coaching lives up to that concept. However, collection of narrative data will deepen our understanding of how our reach or our practice as mentors delivers on that promise. Through this project, I would like to better understand best practices in mentoring, to better understand what the student experience is of that practice including equity of access across student identity, and ultimately, to make recommendations based on data and scholarship so we can be confident that our work really does positively impact student persistence and degree completion.

This research intends to understand ways in which undergraduate students from underserved populations, particularly Students of Color (SOC), Socioeconomically

Disadvantaged (SED), and first-generation college students, engage with mentoring at a specific institution of higher education. The research will examine how decisions made by architects and practitioners of undergraduate mentoring programs either facilitate or complicate students' access to mentoring, a practice which has the potential to be included in the Association of American Colleges and Universities' (AAC&U) list of High-Impact Practices (HIP). As college students arrive on college campuses from increasingly diverse backgrounds, mentoring programs must respond accordingly and adjust practices to truly meet students where they are (McCallen & Johnson, 2020).

The review of existing literature on mentoring for underserved undergraduate students will cover three main areas. First, this review will address the evolution of strengths-based approaches to supporting students from underserved populations that recognize student cultural capital. Freire's Critical Pedagogy contributed to the emergence of Critical Race Theory from which Yosso's theory of Community Cultural Wealth and Stanton-Salazar's Network Strength surfaced (Ladson-Billings, 2013; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2016; McCoy & Rodricks, 2015; Shih, 2018; Stanton-Salazar, 2010; Sung & Coleman, 2019; Yosso, 2005). Using student *testimonios* or *counterstories* as a key database is a central feature of this project. This review will then explore the value and attributes of HIPs and promising instructional programs for underserved undergraduate students (Bass, 2012; Hatch et al., 2016; Kuh et al., 2017). Although it is well documented that HIPs contribute positively to desirable outcomes for all students, access to HIPs is not equitable for historically underserved students (Kuh et al., 2017). Finally, this review will explore mentoring as an impactful practice for supporting underserved undergraduate students across individual aspects of identity, eventually shifting to apply Crenshaw's (1989; 1991; 2017)

concept of intersectionality, a tenet of CRT, as a mode of exploring a holistic approach to mentoring for undergraduate students (Crisp et al., 2017; McCoy & Rodricks, 2015).

Understanding Student Cultural Capital

In light of a nationwide racial reconciliation that is currently taking place in the United States during which many institutions of higher education have seen the emergence of antiracist study and thought, colleges and universities have struggled to adequately support students from historically underrepresented backgrounds in their persistence in their undergraduate educations through to degree completion (McCoy & Rodricks, 2015). There are assets-based frameworks and theories which can support our understanding of how best to approach the questions this project seeks to answer.

Paulo Freire's Critical Pedagogy

Emerging from his education work in developing literacy with sugar cane laborers in Brazil in the 1960's, Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy explained education as a practice of freedom, problem-posing, and conscientization (Saleh, 2013; Shih, 2018). Freire identified learners as co-creators of knowledge through which educators and students could reach deeper understanding and awareness of both the material being studied, and also about the learners' position in the context of where they learn and live, which Freire theorized was the goal of education (Shih, 2018). According to Freire, who articulated that freedom should be the outcome of education, critical pedagogy impacts "...how one teaches, what is being taught, and how one learns" (Shih, 2018, p. 65). Describing the transformative power of education, Shih (2018) stated, "Education is a liberating practice, because reform itself is an educational task and educators are the politicians" (p. 68). Freire's critical pedagogy worked to create educational equity by addressing inequities and inadequacies of his home country's social and educational

systems (Shih, 2018). In centering the learner as co-creator of knowledge, and identifying freedom as a key component and outcome of education, Freire strove to create equity. Although Freire's Critical Pedagogy acted as a pathway for the seating of CRT within education, a critical shortcoming of Critical Pedagogy was that it "...marginalized the fundamental significance of race" (Sung & Coleman, 2019, p. 50).

The Emergence of Critical Race Theory

Emerging from Critical Legal Studies (CLS), and drawing on pillars of social justice, liberation, and economic empowerment, CRT sought to correct the shortcomings of the Civil Rights Movement (McCoy & Rodricks, 2015). Over time, CRT expanded beyond its initial context as an evolution from Critical Legal Studies and into its "primary residence" in education (Sung & Coleman, 2019, p. 50). The tenets of CRT are: (1) the permanence of racism, (2) experiential knowledge (counterstories), (3) interest convergence theory, (4) intersectionality, (5) whiteness as property, (6) critique of liberalism, and (7) commitment to social justice (McCoy & Rodricks, 2015). CRT stated unequivocally that racist acts were not isolated and individual, but instead were "...symptomatic of a society that remain[ed] entrenched in racist ideologies" (McCoy & Rodricks, 2015, p. 3). Providing a means to comprehend and disrupt the system, "...CRT [was] both an intellectual and political project that aim[ed] to illuminate and challenge racism simultaneously" (Sung & Coleman, 2019, p. 46). Castañeda and Zuñiga (2013) defined *racism* as-

[T]he set of institutional, cultural and interpersonal patterns and practices that create advantages for people legally defined and socially constructed as "white," and the corollary disadvantages for people defined as belonging to racial groups that were not considered Whites by the dominant power structure in the United States. (p. 58)

This is the definition that will be used throughout this project.

The most compelling Critical Race method for the purposes of this research is “counterstorytelling or *testimonios* of students and communities racialized as non-White” (Sung & Coleman, 2019, p. 51) because counterstorytelling grants the researcher a unique and critical view into the participants’ lived experience. Explained by Crenshaw (2017) as “...a lens through which you can see where power comes and collides, where it interlocks and intersects. It’s not simply that there’s a race problem here, a gender problem here, and a class or LBGTQ problem there...” (para. 4), the definition of *intersection* or *intersectionality* that will be used for this research is “...the belief that individuals often have overlapping interests and traits based not only on their racial identity but also their class position, gender, and so forth” (Kumasi, 2011, pp. 216-217). The relevance of both of the above definitions will become more apparent throughout this chapter and project.

Community Cultural Wealth

In 2005, Yosso published her theory of Community Cultural Wealth in which she identified a strengths-based approach to the concept of cultural capital, arguing against the work of deficit scholars like Bourdieu and Hirsch. Framed through the lens of CRT, Yosso (2005) argued first for theorizing by academics of color to push against existing racist theories which pointed to what was perceived as a short-coming of the individual instead of pointing to the failure by the system to recognize the wealth and abundance brought to the experience by a Person of Color. Yosso (2005) identified six categories of cultural capital: aspirational, familial, social, navigational, resistant, and linguistic.

Mentoring Relationships with Low-Status Students. Stanton-Salazar (2010) identified critical concepts regarding the positive impact of mentoring relationships between low-status

students, defined as both Socioeconomically Disadvantaged (SED) and also Students of Color (SOC), and institutional agents who are well-placed, non-family agents who work within institutions. According to Stanton-Salazar (2010), an institutional agent is a person who holds “...one or more hierarchical positions of relatively high status, either within a society or an institution...” and who “...possesses a high degree of human, cultural and social capital” (p. 1075). Stanton-Salazar (2010) identified five characteristics of effective institutional or empowerment agents-

(1) the degree to which they are aware of the social structural forces within society and within their institution that function to problematize the success of low status students (e.g., low financial resources, lack of recruitment, and retention efforts); (2) on their level of critical awareness that the success of low-status students or youth within the institution is contingent on their receiving systematic and tailored provisions of ‘institutional support’; (3) on their willingness to not act on the established rules of social structure that serve the purpose of consolidating resources within the upper levels of the hierarchy (e. g., advocating only for students in advanced placement courses); (4) on the contents of their identity and their ideological commitments—particularly, on whether they identify themselves as one of those agents responsible for advocating on behalf of the low-status students and for providing them with varied forms of ‘institutional support’; and (5), their motivation and willingness to be identified by the larger personnel community that they are an advocate and an agent for low-status students. (p. 1089)

For the purposes of this project, the most important of the above characteristics is a willingness on the part of empowerment agents to leverage their own social capital and to be known throughout their network as a person who works as “...an advocate and agent for low-status

students” (p. 1089). In their discussion of the role of institutional agents, Hatch et al. (2016) explained that the impact of people on program practices is more significant than policies.

Network Analysis. Drawing on the concept of social capital and empowerment theory from a critical social work framework, Stanton-Salazar (2010) explored the importance of network analysis in predicting the likely impact of an empowerment agent. Stanton-Salazar (2010) applied “network-analytic” (p. 1074) to explain his finding that students from various socioeconomic strata reported that they were no better or less well connected to non-family adult mentors than their peers but that the critical difference among students was the social capital of the networks of those students’ non-family adult agents. Stanton-Salazar stated-

Working-class nonparental adults...may not have the “capital” to exert authority over a school administrator, or to introduce the adolescent into a peer group that itself is embedded in a community of adults poised to ensure that talents are cultivated and where ‘college-going’ becomes part of everyone’s identity. (p. 1071)

High-Impact Practices and Promising Instructional Programs

In 1995, Barr and Tagg explained that higher education had entered a potent phase in which the paradigm was shifting from instruction to learning. Barr and Tagg (1995) went on to assert that the shift would take decades. Bass (2012) identified a variety of components of that shift, the most compelling of which is his exploration of HIPs and the student behaviors those HIPs induce.

In 2007, the term High-Impact Practices (HIPs) first appeared. Defined by Kuh et al., (2017) as-

...an undergraduate experience marked by *academic achievement, engagement in educationally purposeful activities, satisfaction, persistence, attainment of educational*

objectives, and acquisition of desired learning outcomes that prepare one to live an economically self-sufficient, civically responsible, and rewarding life. (p. 9; emphasis from original)

HIPs are a set of interventions designed to facilitate student success in college for students across all backgrounds (Kuh et al. 2017). The impact of HIPs is that they welcome and encourage students to engage deeply and meaningfully in experiences which enhance learning. For all students, including Students of Color and first-generation students, engagement with more than one HIP has a cumulative effect. For example, participation in HIPs has been found to reduce students' experience of the size of a campus, which has the effect of personalizing the student experience, and making them known to at least one staff or faculty member (Kuh et al., 2017). At the time of writing, the list of HIPs included the following opportunities: first-year seminars and experiences, common intellectual experiences, learning communities, writing- and inquiry-intensive courses, collaborative assignments and projects, undergraduate research, diversity / study away / global learning, service-learning or community-based learning, internships and field experiences, capstone courses and projects, and e-portfolio (Kuh et al., 2017, p. 10).

Bass (2012) identified that HIPs would yield powerful learning outcomes which ultimately would lead to several positive outcomes including student success, persistence, and degree-completion. In his discussion of participatory culture, Bass (2012) listed a variety of features of engaging web-based communities, the most relevant of which was "informal mentorship," which he referred to as "integrative experiences" and went on to argue that if the ultimate goal of the formal curriculum is to prepare students for such experiences, then the design of instruction should more directly facilitate that. Bass (2012) concluded that the

connection between experiential learning and participatory culture had become the essential function of higher education which should inform all components of learning.

Mentoring as Promising Instructional Program

In addition to HIPs, there are “promising instructional programs” which are practices that have also been examined with regard to effectiveness in improving student outcomes. Hatch et al. (2016) defined a “...promising instructional program as ‘one that has demonstrably improved student learning and has closed the achievement gap, as measured by course pass rates, certificate or degree attainment rates, and so forth’” (p. 10). Making a positive impact on persistence and degree-completion is, by definition, educational equity. At the time this research was conducted, mentoring was missing from the list of HIPs and instead remained on the list of promising instructional programs. Mentoring can have the effect of connecting students with a variety of types of support from academic to emotional, and can also connect students with role models who may make a positive impact on students’ navigational capital. Although the impact of HIPs is significant for all students, Kuh et al. (2017) noted that participation is inequitable “...with first generation, transfer students, and African-American and Latino students least likely to have such experiences...” (p. 9).

In their exploration of promising and high-impact practices, Hatch et al. (2016) discussed the (1) semantic and (2) practical limitations of defining programs and practices and asserted instead that it would be wiser first to identify key dimensions of these practices. The dimensions suggested by the authors are: purposes or goals, activities and program components or structure, timing and/or duration, participants and the role of institutional agents, relevant contextual conditions and expected outcomes (Hatch et al., 2016).

As stated previously, mentoring has not yet been added to the list of HIPs by either AAC&U or the Center for Community College Student Engagement (CCCSE) although it is “...often studied for impact” (Hatch et al., 2016, p. 13). Kuh et al. (2017) list possible additional HIPs to add to the list and include “peer leadership and mentoring” (p. 15). Ashley Finley (personal communication, September 30, 2021), one of the authors cited by Kuh et al. (2017), asserted that she believes that mentoring has the potential to be added as a HIP by AAC&U. This research seeks to consider if the time has arrived for mentoring to be added to the list of HIPs.

Mentoring as an Impactful Practice for Supporting Underserved Students

Historically underrepresented students who participate in mentoring programs experience increased persistence, retention and engagement, and also “...social justice by reducing inequities in participation and outcomes for underserved groups” (Crisp et al., 2017, p. 20). Crisp (2009) described national trends regarding mentoring noting that there were varying contexts, standards, and priorities. Crisp (2009) and McCoy et al. (2015) pointed out that, as is still the case, at the time of their research, there was no standard definition of mentoring within the context of higher education. Crisp (2009), whose research focuses on students at community colleges, described four latent variables of mentoring: “...(a) Psychological and Emotional Support, (b) Degree and Career Support, (c) Academic Subject Knowledge Support, and (d) the Existence of a Role Model” (p. 178). Crisp (2009) warned against what she described as the contemporary practice in institutions of higher education to create and implement mentoring programs and practices that were not theoretically grounded. In response to this practice, Crisp (2009) argued that student affairs administrators should establish practices around how undergraduate students engage in mentoring, working to understand how the needs of diverse groups of students might vary. Crisp (2009) suggested that future qualitative research could help to illuminate the unique needs of

students across a variety of identities and recommended exploring student needs with more experienced student participants who would have spent adequate time in their institution both to engage in a variety of mentoring relationships and also to reflect on the impact of those relationships.

McCoy et al. (2015) explored the question of quality versus quantity of mentoring relationships in the development of purpose among undergraduate students. Lund et al. (2019) stated that relationships with mentors played a crucial role in development of purpose as a developmental asset. Citing Relational-Cultural Theory (RCT—not to be confused with CRT), Lund et al. (2019) named four components of formative relationships: (1) mutual engagement, (2) authenticity, (3) empowerment, and (4) resilience, and also touched on the value of positive relationships between an adolescent and a mentor. It has become evident that mentoring from across university departments positively contributes to student success for college students, including mentorship from peers, graduate students, staff members and faculty members (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Lund et al. (2019) made a case for the power of quality mentoring in the development of purpose for undergraduate students and also found that students from different family backgrounds engaged in mentoring relationships with on-campus employees differently.

Definition of Mentoring

Although the field of mentoring at institutions of higher education has experienced significant growth in recent years, “there is no one definition [of mentoring] that accurately represents the diversity of relationships that students and institutional agents may term *mentoring*” (Crisp et al., 2017, p. 18; emphasis from original). Without a standard definition of mentoring for undergraduate students within the context of their institutions of higher education,

I was left to draw upon earlier definitions to craft a working definition of mentoring for use in this research. Tillman (2001) defined mentoring as-

...a process within a contextual setting; a relationship between a more experienced individual; a means for professional networking, counseling, guiding, instructing, modeling, and sponsoring; the developmental mechanism (personal, professional and psychological); a socialization and reciprocal relationship; and an opportunity for identity transformation from both the mentor and the protégé. (p. 226)

Crisp (2009) defined mentoring as-

Support provided to college students that entails emotional and psychological guidance and support, help succeeding in academic coursework, assistance examining and selecting degree and career options, and the presence of a role model by which the student can learn from and copy their behaviors relative to college going. (p. 189)

The definitions above share concepts of (1) context, (2) guidance and support, and (3) modeling by a more experienced individual, although Crisp's definition omits the reciprocal nature of mentoring relationships as well as the opportunities for professional networking, which Stanton-Salazar's (2010) work asserts. Crisp et al. (2017) identified what they referred to as four *points of consensus* that emerged from over fifty definitions of mentoring:

- Mentoring relationships are focused on the growth and development of students and can be constructed in various forms.
- Mentoring experiences may include broad forms of support that include professional, career, and emotional support.
- Mentoring relationships are personal and reciprocal.

- Relative to their students, mentors have more experience, influence, or achievement within the educational environment. (p. 19)

Supporting Underserved Students Across Aspects of Identity

Means et al. (2019) stated “...education leaders should implement anti-racist and anti-classist curriculum and training to help disrupt deficit-oriented perspectives about Students of Color and low-income students” (p. 155). Lund et al. (2019) made a case for the power of quality mentoring in the development of purpose for undergraduate students, and noted that their research demonstrated that, unlike their White classmates, Students of Color and first-generation students reported relying more heavily on mentoring relationships with staff mentors than on mentoring relationships with faculty. In order to develop an understanding of how one might develop a holistic approach to mentoring undergraduate students, it is helpful to explore the impact of mentoring for undergraduate students from specific identity groups.

Students of Color (SOC)

Existing research on mentoring relationships between White faculty mentors and Students of Color (SOC) demonstrated instances in which White faculty mentors practiced colorblind mentoring (McCoy et al., 2015). McCoy et al. (2015) cited strong evidence that mentorship had a significant impact on student persistence and performance. The authors found that scholarship on the impact of faculty perspective on their mentoring relationships with SOC was lacking, finding that even well-intentioned White faculty mentors regularly relied on colorblind or race-neutral language as a foil for describing SOC as lesser students in terms of conventional measures of academic achievement. Although research underpins the idea that support is a strong predictor of persistence for undergraduate students (Crisp et al., 2017), research has also demonstrated that mentoring approaches could either reproduce or disrupt

inequities in an educational setting (McCoy et al., 2015). Although considered to be a critical component of a successful mentoring relationship, studies have shown that White faculty mentors did not consider their mentoring relationships with SOC to be mutually beneficial, which is a central component of mentoring (McCoy et al., 2015; Tillman, 2001).

First-Generation College Students

McCallen and Johnson (2020) analyzed the connection between outcomes for first-generation college students, defined as “...those students whose parents did not attend or graduate college...” (p. 320), and perceived social support from institutional agents and their personal networks. McCallen and Johnson (2020) identified well-documented challenges faced by traditionally underrepresented students in postsecondary education noting that first-generation students were less likely to enroll in, persist through, and complete a college education and that that failure also has long term negative effects on those students’ socioeconomic status beyond college indicating that there is a rationale for their work which is grounded in principles of social justice. McCallen and Johnson (2020) used frameworks from Sociology and Psychology, such as Bourdieu’s concept of social capital and intergenerational transmission, Yosso’s work around cultural capital, Stanton-Salazar’s exploration of social networks, including both institutional agents and protective agents (defined as a student’s peers and family or community), family capital, and also the concept of educational resilience. Strong relationships with full-time university faculty, particularly when the faculty member shares key aspects of identity with the student, are the most impactful. The authors also found that participants’ peers, as protective agents, made significant positive impacts on students’ aspirational and emotional capital. Finally, McCallen and Johnson (2020) identified the value of the development of institutional practices which improve teaching quality and the capacity of faculty to respond to the needs of first-

generation students with regard to their needs for instructional design and socioemotional support.

Implications of Mentoring for Socioeconomically Disadvantaged Students (SED)

Scherer (2020) compared informal faculty mentor relationships with working- and upper-middle-class students in two institutions of similar selectivity. One of the institutions was a flagship research institution and the other was a smaller regional teaching institution. The author distinguished the impact of the *organizational habitus*, which she defined as the universities themselves, as a primary factor in the efficacy of informal faculty mentoring relationships due to the unique contexts of each university. Scherer (2020) explored how “...a student’s class background shape[d] experiences of faculty mentorship” (p. 745) and how those experiences are shaped by the type of college the student attended. Scherer’s research revealed that, due to the complex issue of class, students from working-class families were more reluctant to engage in, and were less-skilled at developing cross-status relationships with faculty at the flagship institution. In the regional university Scherer studied, the overall size was smaller and the focus was on teaching. In this institution, both working- and upper-middle-class students forged, and benefited from establishing, informal mentoring relationships with faculty.

Using Yosso’s theory of Community Cultural Wealth, Means et al. (2019) explored the experiences of Students of Color and/or low-income and working class students who aspired to attend college, working to better understand the barriers students faced on that pathway (p. 139). Means et al. (2019) identified policies and programming that could “...honor and build upon the capital and agency of these students to support them in their pathways to higher education” (p.140).

Intersectionality as It Relates to Holistic Mentoring

McCallen and Johnson (2020) indicated that the outcomes for first-generation college students who also belong to other historically underrepresented groups (SOC, low socioeconomic status, etc.) are at higher risk of non-completion of their postsecondary education.

Intersectionality is a-

...key critical race tenet; the theoretical concept that race intersects with other subordinated identities (such as gender, class, religion, ability/disability, and sexual orientation) and forms of oppression (sexism, homophobia, ableism) to influence People of Color's lived experiences. (McCoy & Rodricks, 2015, p. 93)

This concept can and should shape the approach of student support services provided by institutions of higher education, including mentoring (McCoy & Rodricks, 2015). As demonstrated in the paragraphs above, existing research has focused on exploration of the experiences of students from specific identity groups, but has inadequately addressed the holistic experience of those same students across all aspects of identity. Despite the reality that culturally, "...U.S. society is organized primarily along binaries..." (McCoy & Rodricks, 2015, p. 63), as ever more students reject a binary approach to each and all aspects of their identity, the time has come to embrace our understanding of the student experience on a spectrum, which the concept of intersectionality can support.

Existing research provides a lens through which to consider a strengths-based approach to mentoring for undergraduate students from diverse backgrounds. What happens if, instead of considering a student's navigational skills lacking, we view the system itself lacking in its capacity to adequately reach each student? Although it overlooked the significant and real impact of racism, Freire's critical pedagogy centered the student experience, challenging what he termed

the *banking model* of education and creating instead an illuminating foundation for the concept of the student as a co-creator of knowledge (Shih, 2018; Tarlau, 2014). Inspired, in part, by critical pedagogy, and working to address the shortcomings of the Civil Rights Movement, Critical Race Theory specifically addressed important concepts such as the very real existence of racism in the United States, and its myriad impacts on People of Color (Kumasi, 2011; Ladson-Billings, 2013; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2016; McCoy & Rodricks, 2015; Sung & Coleman, 2019). Crenshaw's contribution of *intersectionality* to CRT provided this project with another important lens through which to explore the undergraduate student experience as a holistic experience instead of examining individual aspects of identity independently (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991, & 2017; Kumasi, 2011). CRT's tenet of centering the counterstories of POC, in which their lived experiences are told and understood similarly influences this project as it will be a primary mode of data collection (McCoy & Rodricks, 2015; Sung & Coleman 2019). Yosso's theory of Community Cultural Capital grounded the understanding that each person, inclusive of all aspects of identity, carries with them a variety of *capitals* or *wealth*, which individuals could leverage if only the systems they navigate would recognize that wealth (Carter-Francique et al., 2015; Stanton-Salazar, 2010; Yosso, 2005). While popular opinion in some regions of the United States has gone against CRT, only limited academic research suggests that the criticism should be taken seriously.

Pursuing a college degree can be a transformative experience for the identity of a college graduate and this benefit can extend to the family of a historically underserved student. However, that pursuit can also act as a liability. College is expensive and systems on many college campuses are complicated, unfamiliar and unfriendly. Persistence and degree completion for first-generation, SED and SOC undergraduate students is more challenging for these students

than it is for their continuing-generation, socioeconomically advantaged, and/or White classmates (McCallen & Johnson, 2020). In order to support students through to graduation, the AAC&U identified High-Impact Practices, which are carefully examined practices and experiences that are known to positively impact student performance and are provided by institutions of higher education. Additionally, research shows that access to and engagement with these HIPs is inequitable and that historically underrepresented undergraduate students experience HIPs at significantly lower levels than their classmates from more privileged backgrounds (Bass, 2012; Hatch et al., 2016; Kuh et al., 2017). Although the list of HIPs includes many helpful practices, mentoring, referred to as a *promising practice*, has not been included on this list even though the research demonstrates that its impact, when done well, can be positive (Crisp, 2009; Crisp et al., 2017; Hatch et al., 2016; Lund et al., 2019).

Existing research demonstrates the impact of mentoring across one to two aspects of student identity, which is helpful, but it does not go far enough (Doran & Hengesteg, 2020; McCallen & Johnson, 2020; McCoy et al., 2015; Means et al., 2019; Scherer, 2020; Tillman, 2001). Therefore, a significant gap in knowledge is, surprisingly, the impact of a holistic approach to mentoring. The concept of intersectionality as a component of CRT, can support the development of a deeper understanding of the holistic student experience (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991 & 2017; Kumasi, 2011). Existing research demonstrates that, to date, there are over fifty definitions of mentoring. While it is possible that, due to unique variables, consensus is unrealistic, I believe that if mentoring were to be added to the list of HIPs, a uniform definition of mentoring would be put forth.

In order to understand the experience of underserved undergraduate students with regard to mentoring, the purpose of this mixed methods case study is to explore how a variety of

undergraduate students at a specific university access mentoring at their university, to understand how student participants experience the mentoring that is available to them, and to understand possible barriers which may prevent undergraduate students from accessing mentoring through Integrative Coaching at TU. An additional purpose of this research is to craft a definition of mentoring which could be used by TU's Integrative Coaching program and to make recommendations for facilitating access to this equity model mentoring program by students across all identity groups.

Chapter 3: Methods

Numerous research studies have explored both the importance of mentoring for undergraduate students at their postsecondary institutions and the unique experience of mentoring for undergraduate students from various specific underserved backgrounds. Existing research has explored the experience of both mentor and mentee, taking into consideration one to two individual aspects of identity. However, what has been lacking is a focus on the experience of students in these mentoring relationships across the intersections of their identity as a mode to better understand and redesign, or to build from the ground up, a mentoring program that adequately achieves what it sets out to accomplish, supporting all students' persistence through college to degree completion.

I designed the methods that follow by considering how students' counterstories, or *testimonios*, could inform understanding of mentoring through Integrative Coaching, an intentionally designed student support program at TU (McCoy & Rodricks, 2015; Sung & Coleman, 2019). I have considered the student experience, described by the students themselves, of utmost importance in this exploration of how undergraduate students engage with mentoring at their institution of higher education.

Research Questions

This mixed methods case study focused on student responses to a question series presented in a survey, semi-structured individual interviews, and focus group format. In order to address concerns for triangulation, the study also included semi-structured interviews with university administrators and staff leaders. To this end, the survey, interview, and focus group questions were formed based on the following central questions: (1) How do underserved undergraduate students access mentoring at a specific institution (TU) using an equity model of

Integrative Coaching and other mentoring programs? (2) What factors contribute to undergraduate students' engagement in Integrative Coaching and other mentoring programs? (3) How does mentoring, through Integrative Coaching and other sources, meet the varied needs of diverse students?

These central questions were used to focus the study on the student experience of mentoring through Integrative Coaching at TU across all aspects of student identity and with particular focus on the experience of Students of Color, Socioeconomically Disadvantaged Students, and first-generation Students. The study was designed to understand and reveal opportunities to: (1) deeply understand the student experience of mentoring, and (2) improve the equity of access to mentoring through Integrative Coaching for all students.

Description and Rationale for Research Approach

Following initial consideration of a constructivist worldview, subsequent exploration made clear that this research adhered, instead, to a transformative worldview. Creswell and Creswell (2018) explained that in the transformative worldview, "...the research contains an action agenda for reform that may change lives of the participants, the institutions in which the individuals work and live, and the researcher's life" (p. 9), which was the impact I believed the research would have.

Both narrative and phenomenological research were selected for this project (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Use of narrative research allowed me to listen to stories about participants' lives in order to facilitate a retelling of the story as a "narrative chronology" (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 13). This design combines the perspectives of the viewer and participant which is why it was appropriate for this project, particularly because, as an insider-researcher, I brought with me a more fully formed concept of the subject (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009; Kanuha, 2000). Fitting with

my plan to explore my student participants' experience of mentoring, I selected phenomenological design as a method to facilitate interviews of participants who had experienced a phenomenon, in this case mentoring at their undergraduate institution, which they described to me (Seidman, 2019).

For this project, inspired by an interest in developing a deep understanding of the experience of mentoring beyond what qualitative or quantitative research alone would yield, I designed a mixed methods case study project which included a convergent mixed methods approach consisting of a survey, semi-structured interviews, focus group, and case study approach to examine Integrative Coaching at TU as a sample formal mentoring program (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Although the research relied heavily on qualitative study, the design of a mixed methods approach was intended to enhance understanding of the broad spectrum of factors regarding the student experience of mentoring.

With the intention of making a positive contribution to educational equity, this project is social justice in nature and as such, was influenced by Creswell and Creswell (2018) who stated, "for those researchers undertaking social justice or community involvement, a qualitative approach is typically best..." (p. 20). However, because I was committed to developing a deep understanding of the topic, I determined that a mixed methods design would enhance that understanding (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). A case study had not yet been applied to Integrative Coaching, so the opportunity to learn more about this program using this method was valuable. Because of my positions at the research site, and due to over two years of engagement in the program, the addition of a case study was appropriate (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Research Design

I selected the small, regional, resource-restricted university where I am employed as the research site for this project due to both access and interest. TU is a Minority Serving Institution with a significant number of students who identify as SOC, SED and first-generation college students. TU has developed a variety of programs which intend to support its diverse student population. The project I designed focused on the counterstories of five intentionally selected student participants from specific historically underrepresented identities who responded to a quantitative survey and semi-structured interview questions, and three university administrator and staff leader participants who participated in a single semi-structured interview.

Research Site

TU is a small private resource-restricted university where, in addition to being a graduate student, I am employed as an Accessibility Counselor in the university's office of Accessibility and Disability Services and as an Integrative Coach. It was through these roles that I gained access to the site. In fall of 2021, nearly 63% of TU's 1,243 undergraduate students reported being from the San Francisco Bay Area, which is where the university is located. The remainder of the undergraduate student body reported being from other areas in California, with just over 12% of undergraduate students reporting that they were from another state, and 1.4% of undergraduate students were international students. As I was conducting my research, TU received designation as a Minority Serving Institution (MSI), qualifying specifically as both a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) and an Asian American Native American Pacific Islander Serving Institution (AANAPISI). Approximately 70% of TU's undergraduate students were Students of Color, and nearly the same percentage of undergraduate students (68%) identified as female. In the same year, TU served a significant, though declining number of students who

identified as first-generation with 22% of students identifying as such. During the same year, 31% of TU's undergraduate students were Pell-eligible, which indicates that these students come from middle- to low-income families (*University Facts*). This university was purposefully selected due (1) to my roles on campus and (2) because the university's Integrative Coaching program provided an intriguing opportunity to explore mentoring for historically underserved undergraduate students. Integrative Coaching was purposefully selected for a case study because I am an Integrative Coach and I wanted to better understand barriers to access of this mentoring program and how aspects of mentee and mentor identity impact the mentoring relationship

Participants and Sampling Procedures

The student participants in this research were five purposefully selected undergraduate students at TU, who represented a variety of aspects of identity, many of which represent underserved student profiles, and who may or may not have engaged in mentoring relationships with an Integrative Coach. In particular, I sought student participants who were one or more of the following: first-generation, Socioeconomically Disadvantaged (SED), Students of Color (SOC), and also students who did not come from any of those backgrounds. I sought to select undergraduate students who were approaching graduation as they were more likely to have had an opportunity to reflect on their experiences as undergraduate students (Crisp, 2009). Seidman (2019) explains that in selecting participants from two seemingly opposite groups, "...the researcher will know that some issues will not be a matter of ethnicity or majority-minority status" (p. 59). The intention of selecting participants from these groups was to better understand their unique access to and experiences of mentoring.

I solicited participation through word-of-mouth and snowball sampling. When a prospective participant was identified through either method, I contacted that individual to

explain the project, assessing the individual's suitability for participation. If the individual was identified as a suitable participant, I then invited the prospective participant to join the study. When the participant agreed to join, I sent the participant the Introduction Letter, and explained the consent procedure. Participants who agreed to move forward with participation in the project were then sent a survey which focused on demographic information, initial information regarding the experience of mentoring, and which also invited participants to select a pseudonym. At the same time, participants were asked to schedule an in-person individual interview and were reminded that there would be a follow-up focus group discussion. University administrator and staff leader participants were identified through purposeful selection and were recruited as the student participants' engagement with the project was coming to a close. This dovetailing allowed me to invite this second group of participants to respond to aspects of the raw data from interviews and the focus group with student participants.

Methods

Prior to the beginning of the interviews, participants were asked first for their verbal consent and then for their written consent. I provided participants with a brief description and purpose of the study. Upon receipt of student participants' consent to participate in the project, I sent participants a survey via Google Forms to submit prior to their participation in individual interviews and focus group. See Appendix A for the survey questions, which collected demographic information about the student participants, initial data regarding student participants' experiences with mentoring, and which also invited student participants to select a pseudonym for use in this project. Some of the questions asked via the survey were: (1) How would you describe your or your family's socioeconomic status? and (2) If you have experienced mentorship as an undergraduate student at TU, please briefly describe the experience. University

administrator and staff leader participants were asked first for verbal and then written consent prior to participation in a single individual interview.

As student participants completed their surveys, I invited them to schedule semi-structured individual interviews during which I asked open-ended questions about the participants' experience of mentoring through Integrative Coaching at TU. Some of the questions asked were (1) Have you had a mentor? Do you have one now? What is that experience like?, and (2) What could the Integrative Coaching program have done to engage you more deeply? See Appendix B for a list of the questions used in the interviews and which were designed to deepen my understanding of undergraduate students' experience of mentoring at a specific institution of higher education. The last step of data collection with student participants was a single focus group discussion with all student participants. During this focus group, I asked questions such as (1) What experiences did you have before or while at TU which caused you either to engage with mentoring or not?, and (2) What aspects of who you are did you feel you needed to protect from an Integrative Coach? What could the IC or the program have done to create a safe space for you? See Appendix C for a listing of focus group questions. As I concluded the data collection phase with student participants, I invited university administrator and staff leader participants to participate in a single semi-structured interview which was designed to understand the broader context and forces impacting Integrative Coaching. See Appendix D for a list of questions used during these interviews. Examples of those questions are (1) In your opinion, what is the value of the mentoring offered through the Integrative Coaching program to all undergraduate students, and to specific identity groups of students?, and (2) What opportunities do you see for Integrative Coaching and what ideas do you have for the implementation of those opportunities? I audio recorded each interview and the focus group

discussion using my phone and I used Otter.ai, an artificial intelligence application, to generate transcriptions which I later reviewed for accuracy.

Data Analysis

Throughout the interviews and focus group, I wrote key phrases having to do with student experiences of mentoring through Integrative Coaching, and the perception of that experience in the case of the university administrator and staff leader interviews. Similarly, I reviewed the audio recordings and transcripts of each interview and focus group immediately after they took place and wrote analytic memos for each interview (Maxwell, 2013). I then categorized the participant's experience of accessing mentoring as equitable or inequitable. The idea was that there should be a pattern in both equitable and inequitable categories. I took note of student participants' identities in relation to their experience of accessing mentoring. It was important to understand if participants identified barriers to access of mentoring due to aspects of their identity. The transcript and recording of the focus group discussion were helpful in identifying if, over time, the way that participants reported their experience of accessing mentoring remained consistent or if it changed. The interviews with the university administrator and staff leader helped me to better understand the forces at play regarding the mentoring program. I used Maxwell's (2013) three strategies for qualitative data analysis: (1) writing analytic memos, (2) categorizing strategies like coding and thematic analysis, and (3) connecting strategies or narrative analysis.

By creating memos immediately following interviews and the focus group, I was able to consider similarities and differences in student participants' experiences of mentoring and what they reported about those experiences. Maxwell (2013) explained that writing analytic memos during data analysis helps to facilitate analytic thinking and insights. In deciding to write these

memos immediately following the interview or focus group, I was able to capture initial impressions. I was also able to capture a variety of factors from the experience: non-verbal cues from participants including facial expressions, posture, and mood, as well as audible information such as non-word interjections like laughter, pauses, sighs, inflection, change in volume, etc. The analytic memos helped me to recall important information regarding the interview which I would not have recalled otherwise.

For this project, I employed open coding, which Maxwell (2013) explained is based on the researcher's concept of what will be important and then using the data to develop new insights thereby allowing the qualitative researcher "...to fracture the data and rearrange them into categories that facilitate comparison to things in the same category and that aid in the development of theoretical concepts" (p. 107). Before I began interviewing, I created a list of words and phrases that I anticipated I would hear during the interviews and focus group and which I considered to be organizational categories. These expected codes included: (1) intersectional student identity, (2) access to mentoring, (3) perspective on mentoring, (4) unaddressed or unidentified student need(s), (5) student network strength or analysis, and (6) perceived ease of access to mentoring; these codes were based on my own experiences and my perception of what participants reported in response to the semi-structured interview questions. The following unexpected codes emerged: (1) strength of mentoring relationship, (2) impact of mentor and mentee identities, and (3) impact of single aspect of identity on mentoring relationships. In recognition of potential researcher bias, during the interviews and focus group, I set aside my list in order to listen closely to how participants described their own lived experiences. When participants mentioned key words or phrases, I made note of them and later categorized them in relation to my own list. Then, I read the transcript in its entirety carefully

considering what the individual meant by what they said (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Additionally, after listening to the interview and reviewing the transcript, I repeated the process. The process described here allowed me to develop substantive and theoretical categories (Maxwell, 2013).

Connecting analysis allows the qualitative researcher to describe relationships between the fragmenting that occurs in the coding, or categorizing process, in an effort to “...understand the data” (Maxwell, 2013, p. 112). I used two connecting strategies in this project: I analyzed the qualitative semi-structured interviews with university leaders and also conducted a case study with Integrative Coaching as the focus in order to understand the holistic experience of mentoring for undergraduate students at TU. This practice allowed me to “...look for relationships that *connect* statements and events within a context into a coherent whole” (Maxwell, 2013, p. 113). Finally, I used the convergent mixed methods design to analyze quantitative and qualitative data. I integrated the databases using a joint display of data which can be viewed in Table 1, which details demographic information about each participant and what they report about their experience of mentoring (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Validity

Dwyer and Buckle (2009) described the qualitative researcher as occupying a *both, and* role, explaining that the researcher's capacity for connection is of utmost importance. As I conducted this project, I carefully considered the issues that might arise from the multiple ways in which I am defined as an insider to my research. One of my roles as an employee of the university is that I am an Integrative Coach in the program which I used for a case study. And, as an undergraduate, I was a socioeconomically disadvantaged, first-generation student. It is important that researchers develop “...strategies for researching at the hyphen of insider-outsider”

(Kanuha, 2000, p. 443) because a researcher may possess unique individual qualities which can simultaneously center and de-center the qualitative researcher's experience (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). Both researcher bias and reactivity were important to consider because my role at the university influenced the environment in which the data was collected. I wanted student participants to articulate the full spectrum of their experiences with mentoring at the University to illuminate how student identity impacted equity of access to that same program in order to make recommendations for removing barriers to access. I implemented several strategies to address these validity threats because I was aware of my bias and wanted to stay focused on the objectives for the research to ensure a valid study.

Quantitative data was collected through a survey administered at the beginning of the data collection phase of the project to collect demographic information and initial information regarding participants' experiences of and attitudes towards mentoring. I also accessed university databases and survey responses regarding student perceptions of mentoring, which were collected by the university's office of Educational Effectiveness. Using open-ended questions to address undesirable consequences of reactivity, qualitative data was collected through semi-structured individual interviews, with two groups of participants, and a focus group with student participants (Maxwell, 2013). This triangulation of data sources increased the validity of the study because I was able to analyze data to look for themes that emerged from many sources. I wrote verbatim transcripts of each interview and of the focus group, which I verified by comparing to the audio recordings of those conversations. I also kept comprehensive notes of key phrases during the interviews and focus group, and I wrote analytic memos following each interview and focus group, and throughout the research process. In combination, the aforementioned practices provided rich data (Maxwell, 2013).

During the data analysis process, I conducted member checking in recognition that member checks are-

...the single most important way of ruling out the possibility of misinterpreting the meaning of what participants say and do and the perspective they have on what is going on, as well as being an important way of identifying your biases and misunderstandings of what you observed. (Maxwell, 2013, pp. 126-127)

It was important to ensure that my interpretation of the data accurately represented the lived experience of participants and not a construct of my own creation.

Chapter 4: Findings

This project sought to understand how underserved undergraduate students access and experience mentoring at a specific institution using an equity model of Integrative Coaching and other mentoring programs by exploring the following three research questions: (1) How do underserved undergraduate students access mentoring at a specific institution (TU) using an equity model of Integrative Coaching and other mentoring programs? (2) What factors contribute to undergraduate students' engagement in Integrative Coaching and other mentoring programs? (3) How does mentoring, through Integrative Coaching and other sources, meet the varied needs of diverse students?

Several themes emerged through close examination of the data. First, I discovered the theme of *holistic mentorship* which is about honoring the intersectional identity of students. In support of this theme, I explore both early messaging received by students regarding help-seeking behaviors, and the value of a holistic approach to mentorship which addresses the unique and individual needs of diverse students. The second theme that emerged was the sense that “*we’re all here to support each other,*” and as such, students identify a diversity of sources of on-campus mentorship, including students supporting each other and the support they find within themselves. For a variety of reasons, students make intentional choices about which source they seek mentorship from, and generate a matrix of reciprocity and support. The third theme to emerge was *fit* which revealed that a mentor’s demonstrated understanding of their role positively or negatively impacts a students’ participation in mentoring relationships. Findings show that fit is composed of three strands: 1) a mentor’s capacity for connection, 2) a mentor’s personality as it relates to mentorship, and 3) logistical factors. This theme also explores how these strands play into a student’s choice to engage in mentorship. The fourth and final theme to

emerge was *a critical convergence between even knowing about support and the act of choosing to access it*. This theme explores a phenomenon in which students who demonstrate a need for mentoring may or may not opt into mentorship provided by their university even if they know about and have access to mentoring that could meet their individual needs.

Holistic Mentorship

Diverse undergraduate students access mentorship at the institution of research in a way that reflects their unique and individual intersectional identities. I came to understand that holistic mentorship is about honoring the full spectrum of a student's identity which includes a mentor's demonstrated conviction in a mentee's belonging. Through my individual interviews and focus group discussion, two key factors emerged with regard to students' decisions about their access to mentorship: early messaging regarding help-seeking behaviors and access to holistic mentorship.

“Go to Someone with Authority”

During the focus group discussion, several student participants described having received positive messaging from a young age regarding seeking help. For instance, Jay, a first-year male Nursing student who identifies as Asian American and middle-class, and who I have known and worked with since the start of the current academic year, reported that his parents always told him to reach out for help and to seek a second opinion regardless of what he planned to do. Rose, a delightfully enthusiastic participant who I met for the first time at the start of this phase of my research, is a junior female Education Studies major and Spanish minor who identifies as first-generation, Latina, and low-middle class, added that her mom delivered regular positive messaging regarding help-seeking by encouraging Rose to see her high school counselor. Rose reported that the positive messaging from her mom was beneficial because, as an introvert, Rose

didn't think she would have sought help without the encouragement. Jessica, a junior Nursing student and Psychology minor who identifies as female, first-generation, and middle class and another participant who I met for the first time during my research, stated that her parents regularly encouraged her to seek support from non-family support providers but that, as a self-identified introvert, she preferred to "figure out things" on her own. Frank, a male senior Business Administration student who identifies as Black and who referred to his socioeconomic status as "living comfortably," concurred with the others, saying that his parents delivered similar positive messaging regarding help-seeking behaviors and added that they encouraged him to "go to someone with authority." Although I have known and worked with Frank for over a year, our conversations for the purposes of this research deepened and enhanced what had previously felt like a friendly though transactional working relationship.

Table 1

Table showing demographic information for student participants

Pseudonym	First-Gen	Socio-Economic Status	Status Upon Matriculation	Year	Major	Minor
Frank Williams ^b		"Living Comfortably"	Transfer	Senior	Bus Adm	
Hazel Green ^b		Upper-middle	New	Junior	Bus Adm	Psych
Jay Applebottom		Middle	New	Freshman	Nursing	
Jessica Lang	X	Middle	New	Junior	Nursing	Psych
Rose Gutierrez ^a	X	Low-middle	New	Junior	Edu. Studies	Spanish

^a took first-year seminar. ^b participated in major-specific student support seminar.

While student participants agreed with one another about the messaging they received from their personal networks regarding help-seeking, which was often reinforced by their lived experience, Rose added a nuanced element-

I believe that if you work hard and if you really, like, try to reach for your goals and achieve whatever you want to achieve, things will go your way, but if you're having the mentality where things are just going to be given to you, it does not work that way.

Rose contrasted her own approach with her older brother's, about which she said, "He's just like, Okay, I can't do it. I'm not gonna try." Rose explains having come to understand her own perspective by noticing her brother's and her different points of view.

Because of the combined impact of strong positive messaging regarding the benefit of help-seeking behaviors, and her own sense of agency, Rose cited repeated and regular benefits of mentoring relationships throughout her life. In my individual interview with Rose, she described the impact of a specific Integrative Coach at TU who Rose described as "...an amazing emotional speaker because she made me feel like I can do anything—like I was flying in the world." Rose explained that the Integrative Coach's enthusiasm was infectious as she encouraged students to pursue academic success in addition to social connection, and exploration of both self and the area surrounding the TU campus. Rose explained, "...we also need help with [non-academic experiences] because we are becoming adults...She was showing us the nice path..." Rose, Frank, Jay and Jessica each described having received favorable messaging regarding seeking support from non-family individuals. And they also describe distinct experiences of receiving support at TU.

Being Seen and Valued

As I spoke with student participants, what emerged is that students respond to holistic mentorship because it is responsive to their intersectional identity as a result of feeling seen and valued within a particular context. This idea contrasts with the concept that it is essential for mentors and mentees to share critical aspects of identity. Hazel, a junior female Business Administration major with a Psychology minor who identifies as Jamaican American or Black and who describes her socioeconomic status as upper-middle class, initially stated that shared aspects of identity hold some importance in a mentoring relationship; she explained that when she was younger, shared identities felt important. I first met Hazel, who I have come to know as a justice-minded, avid self-advocate as well as an advocate for peers, as she was navigating her transition to TU as a transfer student at the start of spring semester during remote learning. We have worked together regularly for over a year. Hazel reflected that now that she is older, she has noticed that people she currently considers mentors do not share critical aspects of identity with her but that they are aligned with Hazel's identity as a college student who works hard and who aspires to be successful. During our interview, Hazel described at least three different earlier mentoring relationships in which her mentors challenged her because, as she described it, the mentor understood what interested Hazel and also believed in her potential to rise to a particular situation.

Rose also described the power of being seen within the context of a mentoring relationship saying, "...I feel connected to anyone [who] comes up to me. As long as they're being nice, and they're actually doing it out of love and out of kindness and they want to actually mentor me." What both Hazel and Rose described was the transformational experience of feeling valued within the context of a mentoring relationship. It is evident that Hazel responds favorably

to being pushed and so when she experiences that in a mentoring relationship, Hazel responds with motivation and engagement. Rose's contextual identity means that she needs to experience a warm connection with a potential mentor and when she experiences as much, she engages and is responsive to the support she receives.

Frank described a contrasting experience in which he has not felt connected, seen, or pushed despite what he described as repeated efforts to do so at TU, which included exploring a variety of TU student clubs. Frank explained that none of the clubs or activities felt like a fit. "I just felt like a good push would help, you know, and I can't even say that I didn't try—I actually did try multiple, numerous times and it just didn't work." As a result, while Frank does report having reasonably satisfying relationships with the TU community, they are not relationships he relies on for support or guidance, which I believe is a direct result of Frank not feeling acknowledged within the context.

When I asked one of my other participants, who holds a leadership position at TU and who I will refer to as Leader Participant A, why they think students might describe a diminished value on shared aspects of identity, Leader Participant A responded that students "...might say that those shared aspects are not as important to them, but you know what? I didn't know that was important to me until I reflected that—on it 20 years later—at the time, I didn't have the tools to say why my heart was heavy after talking to somebody..." Leader Participant A described a difficult experience in their undergraduate education in which navigating the complex systems of their university was confusing, messy and unsupportive.

"We're Here to Help Each Other": Sources of On-Campus Mentorship

Students selectively engage with mentoring from a variety of sources on campus which includes seeking mentorship from faculty or staff, peers, and from themselves. Participants

described both a preference for mentorship from a particular source, and that the decision about which source to consult is situational. In general, student participants described a preference for seeking support from either peers or themselves, relying on staff or faculty mentorship when either or both former options do not yield the hoped-for results. Frank said, “Some situations I try my best to figure it out on my own, but [with other situations] I know I just don’t have the expertise.” Frank later explained that when he has a school-related question, he typically asks a peer for help “...because we’re here to help each other...” Frank added that if a classmate is unable to deliver meaningful guidance, he will then consult a professor.

“My Advice is Way Better”

I felt surprised to note the prevalence of a preferred source of mentorship which some of my student participants spoke about. Participants described relying on themselves regularly. During the focus group discussion, Jessica said, “I am also an introvert so if I needed help, I kind of would just try to figure things out on my own.” Jessica’s descriptions of her transitions to high school and college bear this out. In both instances, Jessica detailed difficult experiences of significant isolation and loneliness which were resolved by the passage of time and acclimation, but with little to no intervention from another source. While her attempts at self-mentorship cannot be described as highly impactful, because of the circumstances and who Jessica is, they were what was available to her during these times of transition. Although both Jessica and Rose described having received strong positive messaging about seeking support from sources outside of their personal networks, their introversion has led them to rely on themselves and trusted peers for support first, even when they describe needing more help than they take advantage of.

In response to a survey question about sources of support in college, Frank was the only student participant to list himself as a person who has contributed to his success in college. Frank

explained, "...I have a 'nobody could tell me anything' attitude, so it's just like...I know what to do...so there's not much anybody can actually tell me." Frank was clearly committed to this self-sufficient self-concept. It was interesting that as our interview concluded, Frank posed open, vulnerable questions to me about fundamental academic skills like note-taking practices in classes, which suggested that his self-reliance does have boundaries. I was surprised by Frank's questions since he had so strongly articulated his preference for his own counsel earlier in the same conversation. Even as a college senior with an eye on his post-baccalaureate plans, he seemed genuinely curious about and open to guidance I might offer him. Jay, who described relying on at least three different mentors prior to his matriculation at TU and who has actively sought regular mentorship from me since our interview, stated unequivocally, "I typically never take anyone else's advice because I think my advice is way better than anyone else's." What I believe is happening in these instances is that although Jay and Frank report fierce self-reliance, they remain open to the guidance and support of mentors while simultaneously recognizing that they are ultimately responsible for their own success.

"I Know They Won't Judge Me"

Student participants also articulated reasons they prefer to seek the support of peers. Students described situations in which they felt they could be subjected to unhelpful or negative responses from faculty or staff from whom they sought support. Jessica described regularly checking in with friends before contacting faculty to verify that her instinct to do so was correct. When reflecting on why, in general, she preferred to seek guidance from her peers, Rose explained, "I know they won't judge me." Following up on her earlier comment regarding the value of relying on faculty or staff for support, Rose added that mentorship from faculty or staff has a more professional, formal feel which Rose described as a "pressure situation."

“My Growth is Your Job”

Participants described instances in which they have sought mentorship and support from staff or faculty. Rose described the practice as a smart strategy saying, “...that means you get the ins and outs of school stuff.” Rose described a time when she sought the support of her on-campus staff supervisor about an issue that arose in her friend group. Rose explained, “I just feel like she’s wise and that she’s had a lot of experience and she’s just very trustworthy.” Rose shared that during her time working on campus, her boss consistently offered support across a variety of areas beyond their work together. Rose felt that her boss’ trustworthiness and openness were critical factors in Rose’s decision to seek her boss’ guidance in this particular situation. This was important because in this instance, due to conflict with her friends, Rose’s preferred source of support—her social network—was not available to her.

While other participants communicated feeling bad about taking up time from an employee of the university, Frank appeared to feel comforted by the fact that when someone is employed, he feels freed from obligation to that person. At an early age, Frank received messaging from his personal network which suggested that it is of great value to seek support from someone with authority as a way to ensure that the advice being given is reliable. Frank also talked about the value he sees in seeking support from someone who is paid, saying, “I always think my growth is your job technically, so I’m not gonna feel bad or anything...like, you’re working here.” On the surface, Frank’s statement could suggest a transactional approach to receiving support which I do not think is accurate. Based on my extensive experience working with Frank, what I believe Frank was alluding to is that when he knows that a support provider is a university employee, whether staff or faculty, he feels more comfortable accessing support because he is not at risk of overextending a personal relationship.

Fit

Across responses, participants described how a mentor's approach to the mentoring relationship impacts whether a mentee opts into mentorship and whether they continue to receive mentorship. Fit, as I came to understand it, is composed of three central categories which include a mentor's capacity for connection, how a mentor "shows up" in a mentoring relationship, and logistical considerations.

The concept of fit as a critical and foundational aspect of mentorship emerged in my conversations with participants. For example, Hazel described experiences in which it became clear that she thrives when pushed and when seen as a member of the community. As we explored her experience of mentorship, Hazel described powerful experiences in which her contextual identity was honored by a mentor. She said, "...my school identity feels like even though some of these people might not have gone through what I've gone through, they'll listen." Hazel talked about the significance of shared aspects of identity, such as feeling a powerful connection with her older sister who she looks to for advice because of their shared identities as Black women. It was evident there are also factors beyond shared aspects of identity that may, in fact, be more significant. Hazel repeatedly described powerful relationships in which her mentors pushed her and viewed her as belonging in a particular context. She shared many instances of experiencing fit with mentors. Reflecting on two significant mentoring relationships Hazel experiences at TU, she said-

Now that I'm older, I think maybe that identity doesn't play as big a part because the people I've had mentor me aren't exactly in line with my identity but my school identity they are. I have this need to fit in or meet people and excel and they definitely have been able to totally understand that aspect.

The mentors Hazel is referring to here are both White, one female and the other male, and they each have responded to Hazel with meaningful support and guidance which directly and indirectly communicates their belief in Hazel's value and belonging as a student at TU. Conversely, Hazel described her experience of her place in her family, with whom she shares many aspects of identity but where she does not experience fit, "I always tell my friends the version of me here is very different than the home version of me...At home, if I am struggling, I don't have someone."

In contrast, Jessica described far fewer instances of fit with potential mentors. During TU's freshman orientation, Jessica, who was not advised into the elective first-year student seminar, described her interaction with a Peer Mentor who was assigned to her orientation group. At TU, Peer Mentors are near-peer mentors who participate first in a semester-long elective Mentor Training course as a prerequisite to participation in a competitive selection process which consists of an application and interview. Peer Mentors receive a stipend in exchange for their year-long commitment to their role as mentors which includes leading New Student Orientation events and being assigned a cohort of mentees who the Peer Mentor connects with to offer direct guidance and support including individual and small group check-ins, organization of relationship-building events, as well as strategies relating to making a successful transition from high school to college. And for students who then enroll in the elective first-year student seminar, the Peer Mentor works with an Integrative Coach to co-facilitate instruction of the course. Jessica explained that although the Peer Mentor shared their contact information, they did not initiate contact or connection outside of organized orientation activities. As a result, Jessica never felt comfortable initiating contact with her Peer Mentor to request support even

when she needed it. This was problematic for Jessica because of the lack of fit between the Peer Mentor's communication style and Jessica's needs.

The contextual and individual nature of identity has a profound impact on students' decision to access support. Hazel described in detail repeated experiences of being pushed by her mentors, which was an experience that helped her to see her own potential and she enjoyed rising to the challenge. But that approach would not have the same effect on all students. Jessica was provided contact information for her Peer Mentor, but without her Peer Mentor's outreach, even soon after Jessica participated in activities organized by her Peer Mentor, even though Jessica was in significant need of connection and support, she did not receive needed mentorship, nor did she seek it out. What these two examples demonstrate is that in order for mentorship to be effective, it must adequately meet the needs of the individual student.

Capacity for Connection

Frank provided an introductory framework for understanding the significance of a mentor's capacity for connection when he said, "...for mentorship to really work out, you guys both have to be compatible with one another." Through my individual interviews and focus group discussions with student participants, a variety of aspects of mentor relationship skills emerged as being significant in mentoring. Participants listed the following relational roles and skills they find to be significant in a mentoring relationship: connector, value of mentor to mentee, mentor as motivator or cheerleader, responsiveness to evolving mentee needs, knowledgeable, sincere, and understanding of the reciprocal nature of mentoring relationships. Influenced by her experience of isolation, bewilderment and disconnect during her transition to college, Jessica decided to become a Peer Mentor. Describing how she approaches her own work with mentees, which is heavily influenced by the mentorship she did not receive but described

needing, Jessica explained that she strives to be open-minded, kind, and collaborative so that her mentees do not feel alone.

Frank identified the value of a mentor to a mentee, explaining that even if a mentor is not a good person, they may still have value to offer their mentee through a narrow and specific niche of mentorship-

Let's say they're a shit person. However, they are extremely good at their job.

Maybe...they could still be your mentor, but it'll be way stricter. You're only going to teach me what I need to know...you are not going to give me advice...on anything outside of this specific scope because I know that's what you're really good at.

Frank's focus on a mentor's value to him allows him to engage in mentorship with a person to whom he does not feel personally drawn. There is, for him, a narrowly defined fit.

More than any other participant, Hazel repeatedly illustrated the significance of a mentor's role as a motivator or cheerleader. Hazel described her English professor at a community college whose teaching style was demanding and to which Hazel responded favorably. Rose also added that, "...sometimes it's about being happy about [a mentee's] accomplishments and goals." Later, Rose articulated the powerful experience of receiving weekly writing tutoring in early elementary school from an ever-changing cast of tutors. Rose described the diversity of input as highly favorable saying, "...just like that feeling of, like, there are people out there that want to help you." Hazel highlighted the importance of sincerity in a mentoring relationship. As she reflected on why some students take advantage of mentoring opportunities and others opt out, Hazel mused that students might think that faculty or staff mentors offer mentorship insincerely—that mentors might not actually want students to contact them. Rose talked about the importance of mentors being able to respond to the evolving needs

of their mentees when she described asking a mentor from her high school for help filling out her Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) while in college. Frank succinctly highlighted the importance of a mentor's knowledge base, further identifying a style of fit, "someone actually needs to have knowledge to give some sort of knowledge." The capacity to build a relationship, or to connect with a mentee is a skill of utmost importance for a mentor. While there is no single way to achieve this, as demonstrated by the examples above, the starting point is for a mentor to stay open to who a mentee is and what they communicate, verbally or otherwise, about their experience.

How a Mentor "Shows Up": Impact of Mentor Personality on the Mentoring Relationship

Just as a mentor's relationship skills are significant components of mentoring, so too are aspects of a mentor's personality. Student participants listed the following affective stances as important: a neutral or non-reactive stance, openness, listening, warm or welcoming, reliable, and trustworthy.

While some participants explained the importance of mentor as cheerleader, Jay highlighted that he prefers that a mentor's stance, inclusive of emotional and physical considerations, remain neutral, saying, "...if I see your face, that you're thinking about it, then I'd be like okay, yeah, I should definitely think about what I'm going to do before I make the decision." While it is not possible for a mentee to know the reason for a mentor's reactivity, it is a factor that can impact a mentee's experience of mentoring.

As a first-generation student, Rose participated in TU's Torch Student Success Program which is designed to support first-generation students in their transition to college and persistence to degree-completion. Following her participation in Torch as a first-year student, Rose became a Peer Mentor through Torch. Detailing a powerful experience in which a Torch

mentee reached out to her to ask for support during a crisis, Rose talked about the importance of openness in mentoring relationships. Rose surmised that because, in earlier interactions, she and the mentee identified a shared experience with how they each experience their place in their families, the mentee felt safe enough to reach out to Rose during a crisis. This openness allowed Rose to build a meaningful relationship with a lasting impact.

During the focus group discussion, Jessica identified the importance of listening saying, “...just be present, in the conversation and...listen to them and let them explain their feelings or what they’re going through,” which also connects back to the value of a neutral stance.

Describing her experience as a new transfer student at the height of the pandemic while all TU courses were being delivered remotely, Hazel talked about the importance of a warm and welcoming stance. Hazel explained that she was able to connect with other Business students when a professor invited her to an event. Not only did the professor demonstrate a warm and welcoming stance, but she also acted as a connector for Hazel. Beginning in middle school, Jay played on a club volleyball team which he was on until the COVID-19 pandemic interrupted his participation during his junior year of high school. Jay explained that as a middle-school player, through his club volleyball team, he opted into an optional peer mentor program as a mentee. Jay also became close with one of his longtime coaches with whom Jay described having a very strong, positive mentoring relationship. Jay articulated that his coach demonstrated strong skills with the component of trustworthiness stating that his coach acted as both an athletic coach and as a mentor but that during practice, his coach never mentioned any of the personal topics that Jay consulted with his coach about. The confidence he had that his coach could be trusted meant that Jay felt emotionally safe relying on his coach for both mentorship and athletic coaching. Finally, Hazel described the importance of reliability in a mentoring relationship saying, “When

I came and then I met [two Integrative Coaches], that was very helpful for my integration into TU because I felt like okay, there's someone checking that I'm doing well with everything."

Without a strong component of trust, effective mentorship is exceedingly difficult if not impossible. Mentees need to be able to trust that their mentor will respect them, and their experiences, and that they can be relied on.

Logistics: "When Are You Actually Going to be Able to do the Mentoring?"

While perhaps a less compelling aspect of mentorship, student participants described the significance of logistics in a mentoring relationship. Frank said, "...if your schedules are always conflicting, when are you actually going to be able to do the mentoring?" Several times during our interview, Leader Participant B touched on the importance of staff and faculty setting aside other work when approached by students. They explained, "...The students are why we're here... Full stop, right? So yes, we've got a billion things we're juggling, but take ten minutes out of your day and just help that student in the moment."

While somewhat of an outlier among the student participants, another significant component of the logistical considerations of mentorship is whether a mentor is paid or unpaid. For example, Frank expressed increased comfort in seeking mentorship from mentors who are employed by the university saying, "This person is getting paid so they're on someone else's time, you know, so I feel like they are a lot more likely to help me out." Other participants communicated that a transactional approach, which the question of pay could be a component of, can be problematic in a mentoring relationship which I will address later.

Reasons Students Avoid Mentoring Relationships: “I Will Never Ever Reach Out to Her Ever Again”

Student participants described opting out of mentoring relationships when they experience disconnect, busyness or overwhelm, judgment, and transactional exchanges from mentors or potential mentors. Student participants identified the impact of conditioning regarding power dynamics in the teacher/student relationship in K-12 education which creates a bias against viewing a professor/student relationship from a collaborative point of view. During the focus group discussion, Rose, who described really liking her professors, commented, “It’s kind of intimidating because it’s like, oh okay, you’re the professor. We’ve always had this thing all throughout school. It’s like the teachers—we have to respect—and so, asking them for advice seems like an extra level of friendship.” This suggests that university faculty who aspire to mentor their students may have a hurdle to clear with their potential student mentees.

Student participants described experiences with mentors or potential mentors that cause students to opt out of seeking mentoring from those sources. Jay described a recent experience with a professor in which, after failing an exam about which Jay felt ashamed, he made what he considered a reasonable request of his professor. Jay described the response he received saying, “...I emailed the teacher the same day and she was very passive aggressive to me. I will never ever reach out to her ever again.” Regardless of what the professor intended, Jay’s experience of her response influences any future interactions he will have with her.

Another experience within the context of mentorship which causes students to either opt out or proceed with caution in a mentoring relationship is perceived judgment. Participants talked at length about taking measures to maintain their dignity in mentoring relationships with the hope of avoiding judgment from both mentors and from peers. Jessica described hiding her

feelings from professors and others at TU saying that, even though she believes it would be better to be more open, she strives to give the impression that she is always fine. Rose chooses to hide her identity as a procrastinator from others as well as the fact that she is in a long-term relationship. Jay and Frank described a personal habit which they both opt not to share with others to avoid judgment. Each of the aspects of these student participants' experiences could be addressed and supported in a mentoring relationship but for fear of judgment by the mentor, the participants make the decision not to disclose these experiences. Rose added that she is also cautious about mentoring relationships out of concern for judgment from peers, saying that she might limit her contact with faculty for fear of being labeled a "teacher's pet" by peers.

Another factor which causes students to opt out of mentoring relationships is insufficient time spent forging a relationship. Jessica explained that it is difficult to build a strong working relationship with a professor over the course of a single semester. She described an experience with a professor she had as a freshman who is a professor of hers again this year "I guess being with the professor longer, you just build a better relationship." Rose talked about perceiving overload on the part of the mentor and its impact on her decision to pursue mentorship "...After I see them, they're really busy because they have so many things to do, or they have so many more people. And so, I just tend to say I shouldn't bother them because I might pile on more stuff than they already have." A transactional or procedural approach on the part of a potential mentor has a negative impact on a student's decision to opt into mentorship. When a mentor invests in the relationship, demonstrating strong relational, affective, and logistical skills as a way of facilitating fit, student participants describe feeling more willing to opt into mentorship.

Critical Convergence: Knowing about Support versus Choosing to Access It

The convergence of a student's prior experience and the experience of their own network, in combination with demonstrated need for mentorship and knowledge of the availability of mentoring opportunities can either facilitate or complicate a student's access of mentoring at their university. As I learned from student participants, I began to imagine a correlation between two critical factors: knowing about support and choosing to access support.

When Jessica arrived at TU as a freshman, she experienced an exceedingly difficult transition to her new life as a residential college student, which echoed her difficult transition from middle school to high school. Jessica reported that as a new freshman, she found herself unable to sleep or eat during her first week of living in the residence hall and reported having lost seven pounds in a single week. Transitions can be challenging, but what is concerning about Jessica's difficult transition is that there was a demonstrated need for support beyond what Jessica reports having access to, and this was at a time when she was participating in TU's new student orientation which would have put her in contact with a variety of support providers from across the university, and which has the aim of arming new students with high quality information about the support that is available. Similarly, Frank, a senior who has been a student at TU since his freshman year, cites having made one friend during his time at TU. Despite repeated efforts to engage with university activities and affinity groups, Frank reports never finding an organization that spoke to what he sought. Additionally, Frank articulated questions about academic skills that could have been answered in a variety of forums available to students at TU, but which students must first know about and then actively opt into.

One possible explanation of the above phenomenon is that a student's personal network supports or complicates their access to mentoring relationships. During the focus group

discussion, student participants each described receiving early positive messaging regarding help-seeking behaviors, but messaging is only one component of the process. What a student chooses to do in light of that messaging is another important component. Jessica described having numerous positive experiences with mentorship throughout her life, which often came because of positive messaging and support from her personal network. However, she described having a difficult time connecting during her first year at TU and as a result, Jessica is striving to become the support provider she did not have- "...I didn't want any other freshmen going through the same thing that I did as a freshman. I don't want anyone to go through that week of hell that I went through." She also described the impact of advice from an older cousin and TU alumna. In her experience as a Peer Mentor, Jessica said, "...I'm kind of taking her knowledge and then also adding on my knowledge." In combination with factors such as personal point of view, mentor availability, and network analysis, students make conscious choices about whether to opt into mentoring relationships.

Conclusion

Findings from this mixed methods study indicate that diverse undergraduate students access mentorship at a specific institution when they know about and understand how to access mentoring opportunities. The data shows that factors such as early and, critically, positive messaging regarding help-seeking behaviors, which student participants report having received, in combination with a student's point of view regarding the value of those behaviors, improves the likelihood that students will access mentorship. Findings also show that students opt into mentoring when they believe that their specific needs will be met within a particular mentoring relationship in which they experience fit. Students identified preferred sources of mentorship: self, peer, and university faculty or staff, and that they make strategic decisions based on a

variety of factors about which source of mentorship to access first. While findings do not show any single description of fit, the data identified three central categories of fit: mentor capacity for connection, mentor personality, and logistical concerns. The extent to which a mentee experiences fit, which is deeply personal and individual to each mentee, can either encourage a student to opt into mentorship or cause a student to opt out of mentorship.

The first research question asked, how do underserved undergraduate students access mentoring at a specific institution (TU) using an equity model of Integrative Coaching and other mentoring programs? The results from this study suggest that underserved undergraduate students at TU make intentional decisions about accessing mentorship through Integrative Coaching and other sources of mentorship. Student participants described experiences in which they selected a mentor based on their understanding of needs in a specific situation, sometimes relying on their own counsel or that of a friend, reaching out to a trusted boss or even to someone who they considered an otherwise untrustworthy person. Although student participants underutilize valuable sources of support provided at TU, they report equitable access to mentorship from a variety of on-campus sources when they know about its existence and feel comfortable reaching out for help.

The second research question asked, what factors contribute to undergraduate students' engagement in Integrative Coaching and other mentoring programs? The data suggest mentor/mentee fit as significant in how undergraduate students at TU experience mentorship. Mentees who experience fit report favorable experiences with mentorship. Conversely, mentees who do not report experiencing fit, or who report diminished fit, report a less effective experience of mentorship.

The final research question asked, how does mentoring, through Integrative Coaching and other sources, meet the varied needs of diverse students? TU has intentionally designed a variety of student support programs which students report knowing and using to varied degrees. One source of support is a variety of peer mentor programs. Data demonstrated that while some students report preferring the mentorship of faculty and staff to varying degrees, many students prefer their own or peer counsel. Based on the findings of this project, TU may better meet the needs of diverse students by ensuring that all students have access to high quality information about university systems and sources of support.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Drawing on a theory that mentorship is a powerful practice which can support diverse undergraduate students' degree completion, this transformative mixed methods case study intended to understand the student experience of mentorship at a specific university. By revealing barriers to access to mentorship, I was able to identify specific strategies and shifts in policy and practice that, if adopted, would increase equity of access to mentorship at colleges and universities for students from historically underrepresented identity groups.

This study showed several areas of overlap between themes in my data and in the review of literature. The first area is in the definition of mentoring for undergraduate students. In their study of over fifty existing definitions of mentorship for undergraduate mentorship, Crisp et al. (2017) identified components of mentoring relationships: reciprocal and personal, focused on a student's growth, covers a range of topics, and requires knowledge and or experience on the part of the mentor. These factors are consistent with the findings of this project. This study deepens understanding from previous research by identifying fit as a way to understand alignment or misalignment in the mentoring relationship. When a mentee experiences the components above in a way that meets their unique and individual expectations and needs, they experience fit in the mentoring relationship.

Another similarity between the literature review and the findings of this project is that mentorship is an impactful practice for undergraduate students from historically underrepresented identity groups. McCoy and Rodricks (2015) articulated the importance of drawing on an approach to student support which is informed by an understanding of the intersectional identities of students and by students' growing rejection of being defined on a binary. The findings of this study demonstrate that undergraduate students view themselves as

whole individuals, and do not section off their experiences based on individual aspects of identity. Instead, the strands of students' identities are profoundly and inextricably interwoven. This project adds that mentorship provided by institutions of higher education should be holistic in design in order to meet the intersectional needs of students.

A critical feature of the design of this project was to rely on students' *counterstories*, a concept that comes out of Critical Race Theory, to better understand their experience of mentorship. This study highlighted that when students are asked about their lived experiences, and listened to, they respond with openness and vulnerability. When explaining my project to potential student participants, I pledged to take action with what I learned from them, which is a feature of transformative qualitative research design. Participants responded favorably to this pledge directly and indirectly.

Implications for the Literature

Findings from my research demonstrate that students make intentional decisions about when and how they will access mentorship at their university, and they consider seeking their own counsel, that of their peers, and to a lesser extent, staff or faculty. Undergraduate students are in a phase known as "emerging adulthood" and they are coming to understand that ultimately, they have agency in their own lives. One particularly compelling component of the findings from this research which would benefit from deeper study and understanding, is the idea of student self-mentorship. There are varying reasons students elect to rely on their own counsel ranging from an experience of connection or community, self-knowledge, trust in systems and people, self-reliance, etc. Understanding how to support students' self-mentorship will contribute positively to student outcomes.

At TU, although students have access to a variety of high-quality sources of mentorship with little to no systematic barriers to access, ineffective messaging creates a barrier to students' knowledge about valuable tools of support that are available to them and their access to those tools. Just as there are conditions that will encourage students to accept mentorship, there are also conditions which will cause a student to opt out of a particular mentoring relationship. As I conducted research for my literature review, I found no existing research regarding how colleges and universities communicate about mentorship. I did not expect messaging to be a key finding in my own research, which may explain why it did not emerge in my review of literature, but I suspect that this idea, which could feel like it belongs in a realm more closely related to marketing, may not be a natural area of interest for education researchers.

Because students do not section themselves off based on individual aspects of identity, mentorship should be holistic in design, addressing the myriad aspects of students' unique intersectional identities. The trend in the research on mentorship has been to examine how students experience mentorship based on one to two aspects of student identity. This has been important since it allowed for deep understanding of the experience of students from specific identity groups. And now, it is time for a pivot. In his description of qualitative research, Maxwell (2013) explained that the purpose of coding in the data analysis phase is to *fracture* the data as a method which leads to making meaning of it and which eventually leads to new theories. I believe it is fair to view the focus of previous research on the experience of students from a specific identity group as a fracturing of the data, although on a much larger scale. Now that this fracturing, so to speak, has been explored deeply, the time has come to compose a new understanding with student intersectionality and community cultural wealth as the guiding principles.

Implications for Practice and Policy

The data from this study, in combination with research from the literature review, reveal opportunities for practice and policy. Strategic planning; effective messaging; the removal of silos, or *de-siloing*; areas of support in programmatic offerings; and creating a central physical space for students support will work to improve students' access to and experience of mentorship.

My Integrative Coaching colleagues and I can draw on the information illuminated in this project to improve the efficacy of the mentorship we offer. The findings of this project indicate the importance of fit in mentoring relationships and of creating a strategic plan to guide when and how we message to students and the whole TU community about mentorship through Integrative Coaching. By demonstrating mentor capacity for connection and strong relationship skills, and addressing logistical challenges, which are the essential components of fit, on-campus staff and faculty mentors can improve the quality of mentorship they offer and improve outcomes for our diverse students. The research indicates that university practices and policies regarding mentorship should be grounded in theory which supports the creation of strategic plans (Crisp, 2009). This practice can be applied to other sources of support at TU as well, which is crucial to the success of our program, and which directly impacts outcomes for students.

Like many, if not most, institutions of higher education, silos between departments at TU (e.g. Student Success Center and Student Life), create unhelpful barriers for student access to important on-campus sources of support. TU should work to identify and remove those silos, or plan to address the impact of them, which will improve outcomes for diverse students by facilitating coordination of efforts among departments and across the university. These efforts could, potentially, even help to alleviate budget concerns by consolidating sources of support. In

support of this, the Center for the TU Experience, the groundbreaking for which was announced shortly before the writing of this chapter, upon completion, may provide a powerful opportunity to test another practice which is to create a central space on campus where students know they will have access to a variety of support.

Although college enrollment in the United States is currently on a downward trend, the general trend is that college students come from increasingly diverse backgrounds (McCallen & Johnson, 2020). These findings will increase educational equity for any student because even in an equity-focused program like Integrative Coaching, it is often the students with significant navigational capital who access student support first, which renders an equity model inequitable. Because the delivery of effective messaging is so complicated, it is nearly impossible to reach the highest-need students to connect them with meaningful support. With more awareness about mentorship opportunities, more students will be able to access that support.

Finally, the time has come for AAC&U and CCCSE to add mentorship to the list of HIPs while simultaneously continuing to address issues of equity of access to HIPs on college campuses. I believe that doing so will have the impact of drawing attention to this much-studied, impactful source of student support, the effect of which I predict will be to simultaneously broaden and focus the reach of mentorship. The broadening will come from a more extensive commitment to providing effective mentorship across institutions, and the focusing will be exemplified by bringing clarity to specific mentoring programs and inviting institutions to consider how they can best meet their students' needs.

Limitations of the Study

Several limitations impacted this study. First, due to the timeline for the project, the data collection phase was swift, which limited opportunities for selecting participants and also

compressed the analysis phase. Additionally, this research focused on the experiences of five students, four of whom participated in the focus group discussion, with intentional focus on three underserved populations: Students of Color, Socioeconomically Disadvantaged, and first-generation. Undergraduate students from other underserved groups may describe contrasting experiences of mentorship, and a larger pool of students would both broaden and deepen the diversity of insights.

Drawing on Dwyer and Buckle's (2009) exploration of researcher as insider and outsider, it was important for me to position myself as both researcher and participant as one of my professional roles is as an Integrative Coach in the same program that I was researching. My positionality did not complicate or overshadow understanding, but it is important to acknowledge. Additionally, the impact of researcher positionality may have impacted the results of this research. Responses may have been influenced because I have prior working relationships with three of the five student participants.

Directions for Future Research

Current research appropriately focused on mentorship for students from a single identity group, and sometimes two, which represents the fracturing of data described by Maxwell (2013). The intention of this project was to initiate the development of a conceptual framework for understanding how mentorship might address the intersectional identities of undergraduate students. Future research should focus on understanding and supporting students' intersectional identities across a broader cross-section of student aspects of identity than was undertaken in this project (e.g. sexual identity, religious identity, cultural background(s), language, gender identity, etc.), and should also expand to include greater diversity of institution type and location. Additionally, it would be beneficial for future research to expand into a longitudinal format,

including data collection from both prospective students and alumni. Future research should also seek to understand how messaging impacts a student's decision to opt into mentorship provided by their undergraduate institutions and should focus on efficacy. It would also be meaningful for future research to explore how the physical space and organizational habitus of mentorship impacts student engagement in student support. Understanding if students prefer a single central student support center—a one-stop shop, so to speak—or a variety of spaces can guide practice on university campuses.

Conclusion

As an undergraduate student, I was a low-income, first-generation college student at a time when the concept of student support was in its nascence. During that time, I pursued areas of aptitude and to a lesser extent, interest, but I lacked a clear plan for success. I regularly felt bewildered that friends and classmates clearly understood how to navigate the systems that made little sense to me at our small private liberal arts university. In my professional roles as an Integrative Coach and Accessibility Counselor at TU, I strive to support undergraduate students who feel similarly mystified by university systems and processes. In this way, my work allows me to meet the unmet needs of my young undergraduate self.

Through this project, my hope was to develop a deep understanding of the student experience of mentorship, which we know to be a highly impactful practice. I hoped to understand how students experience this powerful practice at the institution where I work so that I could make meaningful and informed adjustments to my own practice, and so that I could communicate those opportunities to the IC Team and to departments throughout the university. I also wanted to add empirical understanding to my intuition about what encourages or discourages students to participate and persist in mentoring relationships. The understanding that

emerged from my data collection, woven together with the existing research, offers up a deeper understanding of where mentorship at TU meets the mark and where our opportunities lie, which is critical understanding that we can use to transform students' experiences of this powerful practice.

Undergraduate students regularly demonstrate their readiness for independence and can be relied on to communicate their needs. It is incumbent on university staff and faculty to ask students about their lived experiences—their *testimonios*—and to listen deeply as they tell us what they need and to trust the reliability of what we hear. Students are, after all, reliable self-experts. The most important understanding from this project is that because students view themselves as whole and complete individuals, university systems of support should reflect a holistic approach that honors and responds to students' unique and individual intersectional identities and accompanying needs. It is time for institutions of higher education to enter a post-silo era and student support is an ideal place to begin this work.

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Appendix A: Student Participant Survey

1. Last Name
2. First Name
3. Please choose a pseudonym (first and last name) for me to use for the purposes of this project. Your identity will be kept confidential, but I would like to know what name to use for you in my thesis. (Note: please do not list a name or nickname that people currently use to identify you)
4. What is (are) your major(s)?
5. What is (are) your minor(s)?
6. Are you in the Honors program?
7. What year are you in college now?
8. In your first year as a student at Dominican, were you a first-year college student or a transfer student?
9. If you think it would be helpful, please provide additional information.
10. How do you describe your gender identity?
11. What are your pronouns?
12. If you think it would be helpful, please provide additional information.
13. Do you identify as a Student of Color (SOC)?
14. How do you describe your race?
15. If you think it would be helpful, please provide additional information.
16. Are you eligible to receive a full or partial Pell Grant or CalGrant?
17. How would you describe your or your family's socioeconomic status? (If you are unsure how to respond, consider whether you or a family member is financially responsible for you, and how financially well-off you feel you and / or your family are.)

18. If you think it would be helpful, please provide additional information.
19. Are you a first-generation college student? (First-generation is defined as a college student whose parents (or parent, in the case of single-parent families) did not complete a baccalaureate or Bachelor's degree.)
20. If you answered yes to the question above, please list the relationship of any family member(s) who did complete a 4-year college degree, if applicable. (e.g. grandparent, sibling, cousin, etc.)
21. Please list the name(s) and title(s) or role(s) of the people who have supported your college access.
22. Please list the name(s) and title(s) or role(s) of the people who have supported your college success.
23. If you have experienced mentorship as an undergraduate student at Dominican University, please briefly describe the experience. If you have not experienced mentoring at DU, simply respond with "n/a."
24. What else do you consider important for me to know about you?

Appendix B: Student Participant Interview Questions

1. Pell Grant or CalGrant?
2. In your eyes, what are important or essential components of mentoring?
3. Have you ever had a mentor? (Do you have one now? What is that experience like?)
4. Does the identity of a mentor and mentee matter?
5. Could you tell me as much as possible about the details of your experience as a student here at DU and how you have, or have not, connected with a mentor?
6. What can you tell me about Integrative Coaching?
7. That you know of, how many Integrative Coaches have you met with? Please elaborate (if you have, describe the experience and its value; if not, what is the reason for that)
8. What could the Integrative Coaches have done to engage you deeply? OR What could the IC team do to engage students? OR What can a mentor do to better reach a mentee?

Appendix C: Focus Group Questions

1. When you have a question or concern that comes up—about school or relationships or adulting or systems at DU, etc.—who or what is the first way that you seek an answer? Are there other ways that you seek an answer? Does that work for you? (If not, how do you wish it worked?)
2. As you were growing up, what kind of messaging did you receive from family, friends, teachers, etc. about asking for help?
3. What experiences did you have before or while at DU which caused you either to engage with mentoring or not?
4. If you could, what advice would you give to your pre-DU self about getting help at DU or in your post-high school life?
5. What did you or do you know about Integrative Coaching, or what do you wish you had known before?
6. Is there any aspect of who you are that you feel you need to protect from anyone who works at DU, including Integrative Coaches? What could DU or the IC or the program have done to create a safe space for you?
7. What more would you like to tell me about your experiences of mentoring, or your lack of experience with mentoring—here or elsewhere?

Appendix D: University Leader Interview Questions

1. Based on my conversations with student participants, I am developing a concept for a 2x2 table with “knowing about support” on one axis and “accessing support” on another axis. I have learned that there is a significant range of student experiences in both of those arenas. What do you think could be done about students “knowing about support”? And “accessing support”?
2. Some students have expressed a strong preference for relying on peers for information and support, often saying something like, “then I don’t have to be so formal...” In some cases, this seems to be an effective mode of seeking support, but not in all cases. In cases where this is not effective, how could this fit with the existing work of ICs and PMs/Torch, etc., and beyond?
3. Two participants stated explicitly that they prefer to rely on themselves for advice and support, which is inherently charming, and at the same time both named experiences in which they either would have benefitted from guidance of a mentor, or they did. What kind of messaging do you think could work with a student who fits this profile? (both participants identify as cis-male, bisexual, students of color)
4. When I asked student participants to tell me what they know about Integrative Coaches, for the most part, they responded with a blank look tinged with a glimmer of panic. My takeaway, following deeper exploration, is that many DU students know very little about the work of Integrative Coaching, sometimes even students who have taken MC/NC or are a PM. Do you view this as an issue? If so, what thoughts do you have for addressing that knowledge gap? (one participant suggested that IC work is future focused (on post-college life))

5. As I prepared my lit review, I encountered research that revealed that their participants, who identified as student-athletes who are black, relied heavily on their personal networks for advice or counsel about navigating systems at their institutions of higher ed. Last year's NC assessment uncovered a surprising code that emerged which was the benefit to the family of a first-gen student of color who explained that because of her experience taking Navigating College, she was able to share information with her family which positively impacted the family's understanding of how to navigate complex systems at DU. What do you envision could be done with this information?
6. Funding—everything has a cost. Where do student support systems fit in the DU budget? What untapped pathways to funding are you aware of?