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Person First, Student Second: Staff and Administrators of Color Supporting Students of Color Authentically in Higher Education

Courtney L Luedke

In this qualitative study I explored the mentoring roles of staff and administrators for first-generation Black, Latinx, and Biracial students. Social reproduction theory (which assesses how inequality is perpetuated or disrupted generationally) was used to analyze social capital cultivated by mentors. Staff of Color nurtured the capital that students brought with them to college, and because of this students often turned to the staff for other forms of support, which opened the door for acquisition of cultural capital. White staff focused almost exclusively on students' academic experiences, neglecting their backgrounds. Supporting students holistically and valuing their backgrounds establish authentic relationships that support students' success.

While access to higher education for Black and Latinx* students has increased during recent decades, persistence and graduation rates have not kept pace (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). Several persistence models have addressed the benefits of relationship building with institutional stakeholders for student persistence (Astin, 1984; Milem & Berger, 1997; Tinto, 1993). A substantial body of research attests to the benefits of student–faculty relationships for student persistence (Astin, 1984; Campbell & Campbell, 1997; Tinto, 1993) and student development (Chickering & Gamson, 1987); however, comparatively little is known about

student relationships with campus staff and administrators, and students may spend more time with these campus stakeholders than they do with faculty. More recently, scholars have begun to investigate the role of staff and administrators in students' college experiences, and findings suggest the benefits of these relationships for students (Bensimon, 2007; Kuh, 2008; Schreiner, Noel, Anderson, & Cantwell, 2011; Strayhorn, 2008; Torres & Hernandez, 2009).

The purpose of this study was to explore how first-generation African American, Latinx, and Biracial college students described social capital gained through their relationships with Mentors of Color, college staff (advisors, program personnel, etc.), and administrators (deans, program directors, etc.). More specifically, I investigated how Black and Latinx students described their mentors as nurturing the cultural capital (knowledge, skills, and assets) and social capital (relationships built on trust) that students brought with them to college. By acknowledging the capital that students brought to college, these mentors built a bridge between them and their students that appeared rare in comparison to the students' relationships with other staff members on campus, who, perhaps unintentionally, devalued the students' prior capital. The holistic and authentic social capital acquired through relationships with Staff and

* I use the terms *Black* and *African American* interchangeably to include those who identify as Black and/or African American. I use the term *Latinx* when describing a group of Latinx students as opposed to Latino, Latina/o, or Latin@, in order to be inclusive to gender fluidity in identity.

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Administrators of Color also opened the door to the accumulation of cultural capital valued in higher education, such as campus norms, deciphering of academically coded jargon, and resources. Students gained rich social capital in their relationships with Staff and Administrators of Color who valued students' backgrounds and supported them holistically and authentically.

LITERATURE REVIEW

While students' interactions with faculty are demonstrated to be crucial (Astin, 1984; Tinto, 1993), students may only interact with faculty for a limited number of hours per week. The remainder of students' time on campus is more likely spent with peers, staff, and administrators. Student–staff relationships may be significantly different than student–faculty relationships because staff do not assign grades to students. This important distinction may enhance the level of vulnerability that students have with staff and administrators in comparison with faculty. Lee (1999) asserts that institutions have begun to rely less on faculty and more on graduate students and staff to mentor students. Research that addresses the role of staff or administrators suggests the potential benefits of these relationships for students, such as having someone to listen, providing support during difficult junctures in college, enhanced cultural affinity, encouragement, and increased commitment to the institution (Kuh, 2008; Schreiner et al., 2011; Strayhorn, 2008; Torres & Hernandez, 2009); however, much of this research addresses the roles of staff alongside other institutional agents, such as faculty or peers (Bordes & Arredondo, 2005;

Schreiner et al., 2011; Strayhorn, 2008; Torres & Hernandez, 2009), and detracts from the focus on staff exclusively. Further, this research often does not address the racial and ethnic backgrounds of staff members (Schreiner et al., 2011; Strayhorn, 2008; Torres & Hernandez, 2009). Scholars have also addressed the need to better understand how mentoring is experienced by Students of Color[†] (Bordes & Arredondo, 2005; Crisp & Cruz, 2009; Nora & Crisp, 2007).

Mentoring

Mentoring has been defined a number of ways, such as specific actions conducted by a mentor (Crisp & Cruz, 2009), discipline-related activities, support, and guidance (Tillman, 2001), a process (Davidson & Foster-Johnson, 2001; Tillman, 2001), and a mutually beneficial relationship built on trust (Merriweather & Morgan, 2013). Crisp and Cruz (2009) emphasized the lack of an agreed-upon definition of *mentoring* as one of the limitations of research in this area. They offered a framework to assess mentoring, and their four constructs could be considered a thorough definition of what mentoring might entail: “(a) psychological and emotional support, (b) support for setting goals and choosing a career path, (c) academic subject knowledge support aimed at advancing student’s knowledge relevant to their chosen field, and (d) specification of a role model” (p. 538). The first construct suggests that the mentor listens, provides moral support, and encourages the protégé. Second, the mentor gauges a student’s strengths and limitations and guides them in creating academic and career goals. Third, mentors support the protégé academically, both inside and outside

[†] Because ethnic and racial terms such as *Latinx*, *Native American*, *Black*, and *White* are stylistically capitalized, I chose to capitalize *Students of Color* and *People of Color* to reaffirm the experiences of individuals represented by these phrases who have historically been excluded or silenced in the literature.

of the classroom, serving as their advocate. Finally, a protégé learns from their mentor's present and prior experiences by the mentor opening up and sharing to develop their relationship (2009).

Students of Color who experience mentoring tend to have an easier transition into higher education than those without mentoring (Freeman, 1999). Informal mentoring, or mentoring relationships that develop more organically, may be more successful and result in greater outcomes for Students of Color (Davidson & Foster-Johnson, 2001; Gandara, 1999). A review of the literature (Tsui, 2007) found that Students of Color with positive mentoring experiences have lower attrition rates, higher grade point averages, increased self-efficacy, and better-defined academic goals.

Racial and Ethnic Matching in Mentoring. Research suggests there may be benefits to racial and ethnic matching of mentors and protégés, including self-efficacy (Santos & Reigadas, 2002), cultural affinity (Torres & Hernandez, 2009), increased support for personal and career development (Frierson, Hargrove, & Lewis, 1994), and greater satisfaction with mentoring experiences (Frierson et al., 1994; Griffin & Reddick, 2011; Santos & Reigadas, 2002). Strayhorn (2008) suggested that Black males who experience isolation at predominantly White institutions (PWIs) may benefit from access to Black role models on campus. Still, more scholarship is needed in this area. Because the literature on mentoring often focuses on faculty roles in mentoring students, a gap remains as it relates to the mentoring roles of staff and administrators. This is particularly important to address because the relationships between staff/administrators and students are likely different from the relationships between faculty and students, because of the inherent power imbalance of faculty assigning grades to students.

Positive Mentoring Characteristics. Scholarship has begun to include the mentoring roles of staff members alongside those of faculty. Schreiner and colleagues (2011) interviewed 62 high-risk students and 54 of their influential faculty and staff across nine institutions. Findings revealed that students benefit from relationships with staff who show that they care about them, take the time to talk with them, and know them on a first-name basis. A willingness to invest time in students is crucial, along with being genuine and authentic in such relationships (Schreiner et al., 2011). A longitudinal quantitative study of Latinx students at three institutions revealed that students who indicated having an advisor or a mentor had higher levels of institutional commitment and reported greater levels of encouragement than their peers without a mentor (Torres & Hernandez, 2009). Research describing the benefits of such relationships have not addressed the roles of cultural and social capital in these relationships, particularly as they pertain to mentors valuing students' prior capital in the college setting. This study begins to fill this void.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Bourdieu's (1984) social reproduction theory, which examined how inequality is perpetuated or disrupted generationally through family and schooling, was used in this study. Bourdieu was concerned with exploring why some groups of people held advantages in social institutions, particularly schooling, and the ways in which these advantages manifested in success in particular settings. Bourdieu's full social reproduction theory includes social capital, cultural capital, habitus, and the *field* (italicized to distinguish the theoretical concept from other uses of the word). *Social capital* is defined as the networks of social connections that one can access in particular settings as a

form of social currency or reward. *Cultural capital* is the skills, knowledge, and tastes that can be used as currency within a particular *field*. *Habitus* is the accumulation of one's capital, norms, and tastes into various dispositions that make different options or opportunities seem available or unavailable. The *field* is the place in which particular forms of capital are given value. The larger study, in which data for this study were drawn, used the full social reproduction theory; however, for this analysis, I focused primarily on social capital developed in mentoring relationships with Staff and Administrators of Color and secondarily on cultural capital acquired as a result of this social capital. I focused on the concepts of social capital and cultural capital because of the ways in which they so strongly emerged in the data and examined the ways in which particular staff and administrators built relationships with Students of Color that allowed for the transition of capital valued in higher education.

The focus of this study—on examining the roles of staff and administrators in the lives of Students of Color—lends itself well to an application of social reproduction theory because it facilitated a deep analysis of larger social inequities that may impact a student's commitment to, and persistence in, higher education. While Bourdieu (1984) suggests that inequality is perpetuated generationally because of one's access to particular forms of capital, there is space within his theory for upward mobility (see also Emirbayer & Johnson, 2008). My interpretation of social reproduction theory pushes against deficit perspectives of the application of this theory that validate only middle-class values and relationships (also see, McCoy & Winkle-Wagner, 2015; Yosso, 2005). Students bring capital with them to college, and these various forms of capital may be given different values depending on the *field* in which they are engaged, consistent with interpretations of Bourdieu's work that

finds that the value of capital is dependent on a *field*, which gives it value or not (Emirbayer & Johnson, 2008; Emirbayer & Williams, 2005). My assertions coincide with Yosso's (2005) theory of community cultural wealth, which asserts that Students of Color bring various forms of capital, including aspirational, familial, social, linguistic, navigational, and resistance, to formal schooling that they can draw on for success in education. The social reproduction theory framework is particularly useful when considering the experiences of individuals who have been historically marginalized in education. Although social and cultural capital have been applied to educational research, scholars suggest more work is needed on how these concepts are developed using an asset-based approach among Students of Color (Winkle-Wagner, 2010).

METHOD

Data for this project stemmed from a larger critical qualitative study on relationships important to the success of Students of Color in higher education. For this study, I specifically examined the role of staff and administrators in mentoring Black, Latinx, and Biracial students. The importance of these individuals arose quickly throughout data collection as students described influential individuals during their college experience. This was particularly intriguing because scant literature addresses the roles of staff and administrators and how they play key roles in students' lives. The research questions that guided analysis were:

- How do Black, Latinx, and Biracial students at PWIs describe relationships with staff and administrators during college?
- How did holistic and authentic social capital develop among relationships between Students of Color and Staff and Administrators of Color?

Participants

Participants attended one of two PWIs in the Midwest: one large research-intensive university (Midwestern University) and one midsize comprehensive university (Midstate University). Midwestern University’s student body was composed of 87% White students, and Midstate

University’s student body was composed of 90% White students at the time data were collected. Criteria for participation in the study included identifying as a first-generation college student; identifying as Latinx, African American, or Biracial including Latinx or African American; and being at least a second-semester first-year student. All participants were traditional-aged

TABLE 1.
Student Demographic Information

Pseudonym	Institution	Race/ Ethnicity ^a	Gender	Class Standing	Major
Kelly	Midwestern	Black	Female	Senior	Anthropology
Tenishia	Midstate	Biracial (Black/White)	Female	Junior	Finance
Elizabeth	Midstate	Latina/White	Female	Junior	Social Work
Sergio	Midstate	Latino	Male	Senior	Spanish
Javier	Midstate	Latino	Male	Junior	Sociology
Alex	Midstate	Latino	Male	Junior	Finance
Mario	Midstate	Latino	Male	First-Year	Entrepreneurship
Antonio	Midstate	Latino	Male	Sophomore	Social Work
Max	Midstate	Black	Male	Senior	Business
Joseph	Midstate	Black	Male	Sophomore	Social Work
Jesus	Midstate	Latino	Male	First-Year	Information Technology
Eduardo	Midstate	Latino	Male	Junior	Public Relations (Business)
Esteban	Midwestern	Latino	Male	Junior	Community and Nonprofit Leadership
Jack	Midwestern	Black/White	Male	First-Year	Undeclared
Marisol	Midstate	Latina	Female	Senior	Public Policy and Administration
Damien	Midwestern	Biracial	Male	First-Year	Engineering
Maricela	Midwestern	Latina	Female	First-Year	Engineering
Albert	Midstate	Latino	Male	Junior	Theater
Alfonso	Midwestern	Latino	Male	Junior	Engineering
Josh	Midwestern	Latino	Male	Senior	Computer science
José	Midwestern	Latino	Male	Sophomore	Communications/Spanish
Claudia	Midwestern	Latina	Female	Junior	Social Work
Maribel	Midwestern	Latina/White	Female	Junior	Biology/Chinese
Lauren	Midstate	Black	Female	Sophomore	Communications

^a In some cases, students provided more specific ethnicity categories (i.e., Mexican, Puerto Rican, or tribal affiliation), but this is not provided here in order to maintain confidentiality. Most students who identified as Latinx were of Mexican descent.

college students. Table 1 provides additional sample demographics, including participant pseudonym, institution, race/ethnicity, gender, class standing, and major.

Data Collection

I recruited the participants purposefully, by employing purposeful chain sampling (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This sampling technique allowed me to utilize my own contacts with undergraduates and staff members at two institutions who assisted in recruiting students for participation in the study. Through my contacts, I was invited to announce the study at three different multicultural student organizations. Through contacts and announcements at student organizations, 14 participants were recruited. In addition, participants recommended other students to participate in the study, and this method resulted in 4 additional participants. Finally, 6 participants were reached directly through personal contacts.

Data collection included in-person, semistructured, in-depth interviews (Fontana & Frey, 2005) and demographic questionnaires with 24 Students of Color (15 Latinx, 4 Black, 3 Biracial [Black and White], and 2 Biracial [Latina and White]). Interviews usually lasted 1 to 2 hours with questions focused on influential relationships before college, during the transition to college, and throughout college, with a particular focus on the types of support provided and the types of interactions students had with these individuals. See Appendix A for the full interview protocol.

DATA ANALYSIS

Data for this study emerged from a larger grounded theory study of relationships important to the success of Students of Color in higher education. For this study I adapted the constant comparative method, a grounded

theory data analysis technique, to jointly collect and analyze data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This analysis technique has a flexible, yet systematic, approach. The constant comparative method was engaged through multiple overlapping steps. First, new data were continuously compared with data already collected. This occurred while I conducted interviews, transcribed audio files, and performed the initial review of transcripts. Next, with multiple rounds of reviewing transcripts I combined and integrated themes within the codes. During this process I created an initial codebook for the larger study, refined the codebook, and transferred transcripts into NVivo, an electronic qualitative coding software that aided in pulling data for further inquiry. Finally, I narrowed the codes from the original list of categories and focused only on codes relevant to this analysis. I analyzed the coded data using Bourdieu's social reproduction theory concepts. Social and cultural capital in particular were used to guide exploration of students' responses as they described their relationships with staff. The use of this lens during analysis uncovered subtle, and unsubtle, ways in which social stratification was perpetuated or disrupted by different staff members. Throughout the coding and analysis, I wrote memos or records of the analysis process (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) regarding the data to capture ideas and thoughts as well as potential new categories. As the data analysis progressed, the coding and memos contributed to the depth and breadth of the analysis.

Researcher Positionality

I identify as a mixed-race first-generation college student. My future changed when I was admitted to a program exposing high-achieving Students of Color to research during their first year of college. Undergraduate research exposed me to several mentors, both People of Color and White people, who supported me inside and outside the classroom. I share

several identity characteristics with many study participants, which assisted me in accessing the study sample and building rapport. My life experiences have shaped the ways in which I view the world and interpret data.

Trustworthiness

Multiple techniques were used throughout this study to increase trustworthiness. Two stages of member checks were conducted (Carspecken, 1996; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Initially, participants received their transcript via e-mail and were provided an opportunity for review; participants were also sent via e-mail the study findings and were provided the opportunity to discuss themes via e-mail or in person. While few instances arose when participants suggested revisions, all changes and suggestions were incorporated. Peer debriefing was used, in which I reviewed my analysis with colleagues until consensus was reached (Carspecken, 1996; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). To do this, I coded the data independently and presented my analysis to colleagues for interpretation. We reviewed our analyses, focusing on data that had not been interpreted the same and engaging in discussion until consensus was reached. Finally, negative case analysis (Carspecken, 1996) was conducted in which data that did not fit with the primary themes were examined and then reexamined to uncover areas of contrast within the emergent themes.

Limitations

Even though multiple measures were used to enhance trustworthiness, limitations were still present. The first limitation was selection bias. Because convenience sampling was used, the study did not contain the breadth of participants available at each institution. In particular, because some participants were recruited at student organizations, participants may have been more likely to be connected to staff and

administrators than were other students on campus. Additionally, 18 of the 24 participants were affiliated with a program that provided services to Students of Color, first-generation college students, or low-income students. Participation in such programs may have increased the likelihood that a student would encounter a Staff member or Administrator of Color on their respective campus. Finally, because of the personal contacts used, the sample resulted in a larger number of Latinx students and a smaller number of Black and Biracial students; thus, findings may be more applicable to Latinx students.

FINDINGS

The data indicated that White staff and administrators did not support Students of Color holistically. When meeting with students, White staff and administrators focused on students' academic experiences and neglected other factors that affected their role as students, such as personal or familial concerns. Because of these interactions, students overwhelmingly felt that these individuals did not attempt to build genuine relationships with them. This forced students to seek relationships with People of Color, who established social capital that was both holistic and authentic. Three themes emerged chronologically. Initially, Staff of Color nurtured the various forms of capital that students brought with them to college. As meaningful relationships grew between Staff of Color and students, mentors maintained complete honesty in all circumstances. Finally, due to the previously established relationships, mentors made themselves available at all times. Throughout these themes, it became evident that students also acquired cultural capital through the social capital established in their mentoring relationships.

Nurturing Students' Prior Capital

Staff and Administrators of Color nurtured students' prior capital by prioritizing students as whole individuals whose status as students was only a piece of their identity. In these relationships, students could let their guard down and be themselves in a place where they would be appreciated for who they were and the experiences they brought with them to college. Mentors often knew the students' situations outside of academics, which in turn affected their academic performance. For example, José, a Latino at Midwestern University who was double majoring in communications and Spanish, recognized the importance of his advisor taking an interest in other aspects of his life beyond his role as a student:

She's always taking out the time to listen. At times, it's more like, it's not that much of a school thing when we talk. It's more of like, "What's going on in life? How are your relationships going? How are your girlfriend and you? What did you do this weekend?" Things like that, where you gain that trust, that good relationship, and that's what you need for that. And she wants that . . . That's why I think there's [such] a great relationship between me and her. And that's why she understands me so well. Because she gets to understand me first as a person and then as a student. So I think that's key.

José's advisor spent time getting to know what was important to José. When they met, she nurtured their relationship by showing that she cared about him as a person and by valuing other aspects of his life outside of academics. In turn, José turned to her for various forms of guidance, including academic support and encouragement.

Marisol, a Latina public policy and administration major at Midstate University, corroborated José's notion of the importance of her advisors' interest in relationships

important to her. During her final semester of high school, Marisol's mother passed away. Her advisor listened to her, giving her space to describe how this affected her college experience. Marisol talked about the difference between her relationship with her advisor, a Latina, and other administrators:

I think . . . being Latina helped. I felt we had more in common; it was easier to make conversation with her. She was also one of the first people that I had a conversation with, like a deep conversation. We ended up talking about my mom and that's when she offered the leadership conference. We were having a conversation and I even remember her giving me a tissue. I was crying and she was like, "Don't worry, things happen." I felt more connected because of that whole conversation. I don't know, I felt it was real. It wasn't, "Oh sorry, like I don't know." I could feel it, the actual concern.

Marisol's advisor acknowledged the experiences and relationships (social capital) that Marisol had before college. She encouraged Marisol to attend a Latinx leadership conference and paid for her to attend, providing an opportunity to build relationships and accrue cultural capital. She also shared information about scholarships and assisted with developing essays and applications.

Tenishia, a Biracial (Black and White) finance major at Midstate University, also substantiated the importance of her advisor, an African American woman, understanding her well as a person:

She kind of knows me a little bit more, because we've done other things besides just advising. I was in a scholarship my freshman year and she was the advisor for that. So she's known me on other levels besides just education. She went on the study abroad trip with me this past winter break, so we know each other pretty well. She knows my capabilities, whether or not I can take 18 credits, or take 12 credits, or

take this class with this class. I mean that really helps, too, knowing that person and [her] knowing you as well . . . regarding your capabilities. I don't know maybe it's just me, but I really love the personal connections that you can make.

Tenishia knew her advisor well, because their relationship extended beyond academic advising and they regularly talked about other experiences. This facilitated her advisor's ability to counsel her on academic matters, because she knew her strengths and areas for growth and what academic course load she could handle based on what was occurring in her life. Her advisor shared cultural capital valued on campus by sharing information about course selection (course sequencing, course load, and course combinations). The cultural capital that her advisor shared was grounded in the capital (prior academic experiences and knowledge) that Tenishia brought to campus.

Eduardo, a Latino majoring in public relations at Midstate University, noted that despite his mentor's prominent role on campus, Dr. Valadez, a Latino administrator, always humbled himself, which allowed Eduardo to feel more comfortable:

One man actually has been very supportive, and I can sit down with him and carry on a conversation: I don't have to censor myself too much. It's Dr. Valadez, the director for student affairs on campus. I can go to him and I can go have lunch with him. . . . He doesn't like to come and act like he's a high important person 'cause he humbles himself very much. I think in doing so, it allows me to go and ask him questions. . . . He's probably the one that I reach out more to. . . . I mean our conversations, sometimes they do revolve around school, but sometimes we actually do have personal conversations where we talk about my family or he talks about his family.

Dr. Valadez's creation of an informal environment made Eduardo comfortable approaching

him with questions or concerns, and this allowed Eduardo to be himself. Eduardo noted that he does not have to self-censor too much around Dr. Valadez, which suggests that he does this with other staff on campus and implies that he may have to suppress parts of his identity to communicate with other administrators. Dr. Valadez created a space where Eduardo could have personal conversations about his family and demonstrated that he valued these conversations and understood how the relationships that Eduardo brought to college continued to affect his college experience. Eduardo felt comfortable approaching him with questions or concerns, which allowed Eduardo to accrue cultural capital that he could use across campus.

Maintaining Complete Honesty

Being completely honest was particularly important to students, because it contributed to crafting trusting relationships. In these relationships, students received information that would allow them to identify areas needing improvement and to strategize ways to overcome obstacles in a supportive and nurturing environment. These relationships allowed the transition of valuable capital that would assist the students in navigating obstacles. Alfonso, a Latino engineering major at Midwestern University, described the difference between his relationship with Diana, a Latina administrator who provided support to Students of Color and women in engineering, and other staff and administrators he encountered on campus:

I would have to say it's just her personality and her background specifically, just because she's always been completely honest, completely straightforward. She does have a very professional position within the office, but when it's just one-on-one with her, she throws all the BS out the window and she goes straight to

it. She tells you exactly what you need to do and exactly what you did wrong, and she never shied away from it like other advisors [who] beat around the bush and kind of tell you one thing but [then] tell you the other. [*laughs*] And it's just the fact that she's from a diverse background and diverse culture, and she understands a lot of the stuff that I come from and how family means a lot.

Alfonso counted on Diana to tell him the truth about situations or concerns that arose. He had other experiences where individuals were not direct in their language because they were afraid to offend him and, thus, buried their concerns; coded language often disguised the valuable information in the actual message. In reality, Alfonso wanted the truth from someone who would explain things to him without “beating around the bush,” as he described it. Diana broke down barriers for Alfonso and provided valuable cultural capital, when other administrators blocked access to this capital. Diana understood the emphasis that he placed on family, while other staff members did not; this served as a source of solidarity between them.

José discussed another relationship with a Staff of Color that he could relate to and went to with academic and personal concerns:

Now it's more like a friendship level instead of he's higher than me. . . . It's really good to be able to have someone I can talk to professionally and on the social aspect, . . . just being like a person, a cultured person, as someone who understands a lot of the struggle that I went through. That helps me out a lot. . . . It helps out being that he is Native American, . . . because [we] can relate, . . . and it creates a trust between [us]. . . . He'll tell [me] the truth. like, “You're messing up blank-blank.” But instead of giving up, he'll be like, “We can do this, come on. Let's push forward.”

José felt that because he and his advisor,

Daniel, both came from Communities of Color they could relate to one another in a way that he could not relate to others. Previous relationships with White staff members (both before and in college) further validated this feeling. In emphasizing that Daniel treated him as an equal, he suggests that other staff did not always do the same. Daniel ensured that José addressed areas of improvement without giving up on him; again, suggesting that others did not take the additional steps to help José problem-solve.

Similar to Alfonso and José, Max, a Black business major at Midstate University, described how important it was that he could count on Kevin, his Black advisor, to be honest with him:

He gives me honest feedback, and I think that the main thing that really influenced me is that he just—he keeps it 100—or I guess I could say he keeps it real with me, and anything I need to hear or needs to be said he'll say it, good or bad, and I think that's definitely what I need to hear. . . . With him telling me what I'm doing—where my flaws are at, [it] helps me to get my self-motivation back and to know that I need to push more and to figure out more ways to go about things differently.

Meaningful and honest dialogue, like the dialogue between Max and Kevin, facilitated a space where Max felt comfortable discussing flaws, because Kevin would help him turn them into strengths for greater success in college. By strategizing ways to overcome barriers, Kevin shared various forms of cultural capital that would assist Max throughout college. With Kevin, Max felt comfortable being vulnerable, because he knew it was a supportive environment.

Making Themselves Available

While students emphasized the importance of their mentors' dependability in being honest

with them, they also noted the significance of their reliability in actions and their steadfast commitment to students. They were reliable to the point that students could and would contact them outside of office hours for assistance that was not always academic. Kelly, a Black anthropology major at Midwestern University, compared the level of commitment and availability of her Advisor of Color through her Student Support Program III (SSPIII) with her major advisor who was White:

I have an advisor for my major, but he's usually really busy and he doesn't seem like he has given me attention when I come in there. He's always really late, and I'm waiting in the hallways for him for like an hour. He doesn't show up when he says he does, or says he will, and everything is really short with him, so I just hate going to go visit him. . . . I think that the difference is, with my advisor for my major that's not his sole job: his job is he's a professor. He's doing research, and he's got a lot going on. But my advisor with SSPIII, his job is to be an advisor, so he does set up those times and he takes them seriously and he's going to be in his office all day. . . . [He] set me up with tutors, told me there are different ways they could get me help with my classes, and [told me] to meet people in the class so I don't feel like I don't have anyone to turn to in there: a lot of good advice.

Kelly attributed her major advisor's absenteeism to other responsibilities, but he clearly did not prioritize her education and her needs and demonstrated this in the value he placed on his meetings with Kelly. She elaborated on how her SSPIII advisor found her a tutor and other academic support, and later in the interview she described how he assisted her with finding courses to enroll in and made her aware of university deadlines, providing cultural capital important to her persistence.

Joseph, a Black social work major at

Midstate University, described a similar experience with his first-year White advisor, compared with the African American advisor assigned through a student support program:

My advisor [from last year], I only talked to her when we had scheduled meetings, but my current advisor, he constantly sends me e-mails for opportunities that I could be a part of. He asked me, "How is class going?" He motivates me. . . . The last time I met with him it was because I wanted to take a class over, 'cause I didn't think I was doing well in it. When we talked about it, he asked me what [did] I think I'm not doing right in class, and then he asked me how could I change it. . . . and [asked about] the things I am doing right. And then, even though our meeting was to talk about one specific class, he asked me about my other classes and then he offered to help. He offered to help me study and he gave me his personal phone number, and he was just like, "Call me if you need help or text me."

Joseph's African American advisor encouraged him to develop ideas for ways he could improve his performance in the class instead of dropping the course. In doing so, he engaged Joseph in the process of considering alternative forms of cultural capital that he may not have considered using on his own. He took the time to suggest several career and personal opportunities for Joseph to consider—opportunities that could provide additional venues for accruing social and cultural capital on and off campus. Joseph's advisor was genuinely interested in his success in a way that Joseph did not feel with his previous advisor who was not a Person of Color.

Jack, a Biracial (Black and White) undecided major at Midwestern University, noted the way an administrator informed him of concerns and extended herself as a source of support:

I was going through a lot last semester and I talked to Angela, and honestly she's

the only person I've met in my entire life who doesn't judge. . . . Even talking to her, it's just very easy. She's a great person. . . . stunning Black woman. She's really someone who's helped me. . . . If [I] ever need anything like food, somewhere to stay. . . . [I] always can talk to her and that's been the most help she's been to me: . . . extending herself, letting me know and others know that she can be accessed at any time, and anything she can do for you she will do for you.

Jack received more than academic support from Angela, an assistant director of a high impact program he was a member of. She provided honest answers and support in a way that he had not experienced before. When Jack brought concerns to others on campus, he felt judged and unsafe, which initially led him to work at solving his problems on his own. After building a relationship with Angela, he learned that he could count on her for support in overcoming obstacles, including those that occurred outside of academics. With Angela, Jack felt safe and supported in all aspects.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Twenty-one of the 24 students had Staff or Administrators of Color who significantly supported them through higher education; the 3 students who did not relied more heavily on other networks. Students described the Staff of Color as providing them holistic and authentic social capital, meaning they valued the students' background capital, which facilitated students' willingness to use them as valuable forms of social capital in college. Findings revealed that Black and Biracial Black and White students were more likely to rely on a Black mentor than on another Mentor of Color, whereas Latinx and Biracial Latina and White students relied on a Mentor of Color more generally. Because of the small sample sizes of Black and Biracial students, it

is difficult to ascertain additional nuances in the ways these students interacted with their mentors. This warrants additional attention to uncover the nuances of these racial and ethnic differences in future work.

Across the sample, students rarely recognized White staff or administrators as building meaningful relationships with them. Within the larger study, few students described meaningful relationships with faculty outside of class. This could be the result of a dearth of available Faculty of Color, who have been found to build more meaningful relationships with Students of Color (Reddick, 2011). Black faculty, and Black women in particular, are especially attuned to discussing student's lives outside of the classroom (Griffin & Reddick, 2011), similar to the ways in which students in this study described their personal relationships with Staff and Administrators of Color. By addressing students' lives outside of the classroom, advisors made students feel that they mattered (see also Bova, 2000).

The finding that the students maintained relationships with Staff of Color connects with prior scholarship. Literature that examines the importance of racial and ethnic matching in mentoring relationships (often with faculty) is inconclusive. Students of Color who report mentoring relationships with faculty of the same racial background indicate more positive perceptions of the mentoring relationship and report receiving greater support than do students matched with a mentor of a different racial background (Blake-Beard, Bayne, Crosby, & Muller, 2011; Frierson et al., 1994); however, other scholars have found that the racial background of the mentor is less important (Thiry & Laursen, 2011), with some scholars finding that students reported preferring a discipline-matched mentor to a mentor with a similar racial background (Lee, 1999).

While some research suggests that faculty may attempt to be colorblind in their mentor-

ing of Students of Color, emphasizing their commitment to treating all students the same, regardless of background (McCoy, Winkle-Wagner, & Luedke, 2015), these findings suggest that being open about students' racial backgrounds may be more beneficial. Students in this study emphasized the importance of their mentors acknowledging, not avoiding, their background characteristics and how this contributed to their college experiences.

Staff and Administrators of Color maintained their openness and supportiveness in a way that allowed students to feel that they could be authentic with them. Findings imply that students may not be able to be their full selves in other places on campus because of the ways they strongly highlighted the importance placed on being themselves with these particular staff and administrators. This is consistent with Rendón's (1994) validation theory: validation occurred when mentors actively expressed their interest in students. Despite decades of research that highlights the importance of validating marginalized student populations, findings suggest this may still not be occurring across college campuses. Data from this study suggest that Students of Color were supported primarily by People of Color because of the lack of attention they received from White staff and administrators (and faculty) beyond academics.

Relative to social capital, what initially distinguished Staff and Administrators of Color was that they valued students' prior capital. They allowed students to feel that they could keep (and share) their background capital instead of disregarding or suppressing it (see also McCoy & Winkle-Wagner, 2015; Yosso, 2005). Staff and Administrators of Color inquired about many aspects of students' personal and undergraduate lives; in doing so, they created environments where students felt that the mentors cared about all facets of their development. For example, when mentors

asked students about familial ties, students appeared more open to pursuing relationships with particular staff or administrators. Within these holistic and authentic relationships, students accrued social capital. Students were able to access this social capital when they needed support or guidance. In other spaces on campus, the absence of discussions centered on students' lives outside of the classroom may suggest to students that because they were only asked about academics, those matters appeared to be of greater importance, devaluing their experiences and the social and cultural capital that they brought with them to college.

Another vital characteristic of these relationships was honesty. Staff of Color maintained honesty by avoiding politics and political correctness and set aside academic jargon. They shared valuable cultural capital (e.g., unspoken norms and the deciphering of coded language) by helping students learn to decode the language used by others. Mentors took time to strategize ways to overcome obstacles throughout college by also sharing cultural capital about campus resources such as tutoring or scholarships. Students in this study emphasized that mentors gave them feedback, both positive and constructive, that would help them be more successful as undergraduates. This social capital made students open and willing to access mentors when they had questions, which opened the door for accruing cultural capital relevant to the *field* of higher education and contributed to their ability to persist in college as well as their opportunity for upward social mobility.

In emphasizing how Staff and Administrators of Color nurtured prior capital, students suggested that others on campus did not. Students of Color described how they were able to share information with Staff of Color that they did not share with others on campus. These findings suggest the need to further investigate the *field* (the place in

which particular forms of capital are given value; Bourdieu, 1979/1984), a ripe area for research in higher education. These findings suggest that students may be creating *subfields* within the larger *field* of their campus in their relationships with supportive Mentors of Color. In these *counterspaces*—academic or social spaces where deficit perspectives can be negated and where students’ experiences are validated and acknowledged—positive relationships can be established and maintained (Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). Certain forms of social capital valuable to the study’s participants—like an emphasis on maintaining strong familial ties—did not appear to be highly valued in the larger *field* of higher education, but within a *counterspace* (in this case, the relationship with a Mentor of Color), the emphasis on familial consideration may be foundational. Within these *counterspaces*, students were likely more able to exchange information and build relationships that allowed students to return to the full *field* of higher education with the skills, knowledge (cultural capital), and relationships (social capital) that may give them an advantage. Future research should focus on bridging social capital and cultural capital, as these concepts are often investigated separately, underutilizing the power of the larger social reproduction theory. Some scholars argue that the *field* is a shifting space (Emirbayer, 1997; Emirbayer & Johnson, 2008; McCoy & Winkle-Wagner,

2015). These data suggest the need for further investigation into the *field* of higher education as a shifting space. Findings call into question whether the *field* as a shifting space allows for the accrual of additional capital, or whether the creation of *counterspaces* within the full *field* provides the opportunity for the accumulation of additional capital. Students in my study retreated to *counterspaces* to exchange capital that they sometimes had a difficult time acquiring in other areas. These meaningful relationships appeared to create the *counterspaces*, not merely the physical spaces.

Future research could further explore how holistically and authentically supporting students and valuing their background capital can enhance students’ opportunities for success throughout college and their upward social mobility beyond college. The opportunity also exists to further investigate how we prepare White staff, administrators, and faculty to support marginalized student populations in ways that value their backgrounds. Treating students as persons first, and students second, acknowledges their rich cultural backgrounds and creates an environment where students can share their capital as well as acquire additional forms of capital.

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APPENDIX A. Interview Protocol

Before College

When you started thinking about wanting to go to college, was there anyone who influenced your decision?

How did they influence/help you?

How did you end up here?

Who helped you prepare for college (describe this)?

How does this person still help you today?

Entering College

Think back to the last time you had a question about something college-related . . . tell me about this experience and how you handled it.

When you have questions about college, how do you generally go about finding the answers? Is there a person, a thought process, routine, etc.?

Tell me about your worst day of college so far.

Who did you talk to about it?

Tell me about one of your favorite memories in college.

Relationships in College

Tell me about the three people that you interact with the most on campus.

For each person: (what is the relationship, i.e., friend, professor, etc.?)

Describe your most memorable moment with them.

What kinds of things do you talk about with them?

In what ways do they help you?

In what ways do you help them?

Tell me about your relationship with your favorite professor so far in college.

Describe a typical interaction with him/her.

What is so great about him/her?

How is this relationship similar or different from your relationships with other professors?

Tell me about your relationship with your advisor.

Tell me about your last interaction with him/her.

In what ways does your advisor help you?

How does your family feel about you being in college?

In what ways do they support you (financially, emotionally, advice, etc.)?

While in college, do you support your family in any way?

Tell me about a typical time when you hang out with your friends.

What kinds of things do you do?

When/where did you meet these friends?

Do you talk about school? (Give me an example of this.)

Tell me about any programs that you are in that assist you in college.

In what ways does this program help you in college?

After College

What do you want to be when you “grow-up”/ after college?

When did you realize this?

Tell me about someone you know who does this.

What do you have to do to get there?

What did you want to be as a child growing up?

Reflection

Reflecting back on the past couple of years, if you could go back and talk to yourself as a freshman and give yourself advice on things to do differently in college, what would you say?

What would you do differently?

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