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## Protégé Growth Themes Emergent in a Holistic, Undergraduate Peer-Mentoring Experience

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Two faculty members developed and implemented a successful, holistic, goal-oriented peer-mentoring project for two years at a midsize, urban university to enhance student success and retention. In year one, 12 juniors and seniors mentored 34 freshmen and sophomores; in year two, 14 upperclassmen mentored 40 underclassmen. A grounded theory approach was used to analyze goal-progress tracking data, postintervention survey data self-reported by protégés, and mentor journals. The following six themes emerged from this data analysis: *academic skills and knowledge, career decision-making, connectedness to others, maturity, physical well-being, and aspiration*. Findings advance our summary understanding of the context in which students may grow and develop because of holistic mentoring, understanding that may have value in informing the intelligent design of future mentoring experiences. Results also support program efficacy, from an overall standpoint as well as regarding improvements from the year one to year two versions of the program.

*Keywords:* cultural capital, growth and development, holistic model, peer mentoring, protégé, undergraduate

Each year, postsecondary educational institutions devote significant resources to new student recruitment. However, they continue to face the challenge of serving and retaining many talented students who struggle to make the critical transition from high school to college (Lotkowski, Rob-

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bins, & Noeth, 2004; Swail, Redd, & Perna, 2003). Wirt et al. (2004) reported that only 53% of students in four-year postsecondary education institutions graduated after five years. Some students who struggle in making the transition to college life belong to demographic populations that have a higher likelihood of feeling or being marginalized because of race/ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and/or socioeconomic background (Budge, 2006; Crisp & Cruz, 2009; Dennis, Phinney, & Chuatco, 2005). For example, Wirt et al. (2004) noted that only 17% of Blacks and 18% of Hispanic undergraduates enrolled in four-year colleges graduate within five years. Student retention is strongly influenced by academic factors such as high school GPA and ACT scores and by non-academic factors including socioeconomic status and the development of academic self-confidence, academic goals, social support, and social involvement (Lotkowski et al., 2004; Ward, Thomas, & Disch, 2010). Lareau's and Horvat's (1999) work has underscored the important role that cultural capital plays in the academic success of students from socially privileged backgrounds. Unfortunately, many undergraduates fail to obtain the academic and social support that could be critical to their overall success as students while in college (Nora & Crisp, 2007).

### **Mentoring**

Increasingly, since the mid-1970s, mentoring has been used as a tool to enhance undergraduate goal attainment and retention (Budge, 2006; Crisp & Cruz, 2009; Jacobi, 1991). Mentoring provides an ongoing relationship with a supportive person who can assist novice students with maneuvering challenges and opportunities with which many students, due to inexperience, may be unaccustomed. Researchers have documented the positive impact of mentoring on measures of academic goal attainment (such as unit completion rates per semester and GPAs) and student retention (e.g. Campbell & Campbell, 1997; Freeman, 1999; Kahveci, Sutherland, & Gilmer, 2006; Mangold, Bean, Adams, Schwab, & Lynch, 2003; Pagan & Edwards-Wilson, 2003; Sorrentino, 2007; Wallace, Abel, & Ropers-Huilman, 2000; Ward et al., 2010). These researchers documented mentoring's enhancement of undergraduate academic performance and retention through a variety of models (e.g. faculty mentors, student peer mentors, science-oriented programs) and along a spectrum of populations (e.g. remedial students, high-achieving students, women, Hispanics). Furthermore, researchers have explored the role of several environmental social support variables that represent intermediate factors, influenced by mentoring, that ultimately affect goal attainment and student retention. Such factors include sense of peer support, encouragement of friends/family, and social growth and integration (e.g. Dennis et al., 2005; Strauss & Volkwein, 2004; Thomas, 2000).

### **Holistic Mentoring of Undergraduates**

Recent researchers, such as Cramer and Prentice-Dunn (2007) and Nora and Crisp (2007) have drawn attention to the intrinsically holistic foundations of effective undergraduate mentoring programs. Whereas mentoring research has been plagued for decades with definitional, theoretical and methodological inconsistencies, and shortcomings (Budge, 2006; Jacobi, 1991), Nora's and Crisp's (2007) work has emerged as a useful framework to bring order to this complex area of inquiry. Based upon their extensive review of the literature on undergraduate mentoring programs, they developed and proposed a comprehensive conceptual framework of four domains that they believed formed the multidimensional foundation of any effective mentoring experience for undergraduates.

Nora and Crisp (2007) validated their mentoring framework with two college populations (Crisp, 2008, 2009). The conceptual framework includes the following domains: (a) psychological/emotional support, (b) goal setting and career pathing, (c) academic subject knowledge support, and (d) specification of a role model. They concluded that mentoring programs intending to help students make the transition to college life and to fully participate in the classroom experience as well as extracurricular pursuits need to intentionally provide the holistic support encompassed by these four fundamental dimensions (Nora & Crisp, 2007).

The conceptualization of mentoring as a mechanism of human development has often been an implicit element of theorizing about mentoring (Allen & Eby, 2010; Levinson, Carrow, Klein, Levinson, & McKee, 1978). Even if it is not always explicitly stated as such, many mentoring programs and studies of such programs have suggested that the growth and development of protégés, whether academic, professional, or personal, is either an intended goal or a beneficial outcome (Jacobi, 1991; Tillman, 2001).

The purpose of this study was to understand the ways in which undergraduates grew and developed through participation in a holistic peer-mentoring experience. We present findings from two years of data from the project. Specifically, we present a descriptive account of six overarching themes that emerged from the qualitative data we collected. We discuss the results in the light of current research on mentoring, and suggest that these findings about patterns of protégé growth might better inform the design and implementation of future peer-mentoring programs for early undergraduates, including the training of the mentors who would serve them.

### **Method**

Our study is part of a larger investigation, the purpose of which is to evaluate the effectiveness of and to understand the social-psychological processes at work within an innovative, holistic peer-mentoring project. In related

analyses, we have explored: the quantitative outcomes from year one of the larger study that are related to goal attainment and student retention (Ward, Thomas, & Disch, 2009, 2010), lessons we learned with respect to program design and implementation over two years (Thomas & Ward, 2010), reflections on the origin of the holistic model we developed (Ward, 2012), and themes of mentor service to their protégés that have emerged from the qualitative data we collected over two years (Ward, Thomas, & Disch, unpublished manuscript). Within the context of the larger study and intimately linked in meaning to the latter of the five related analyses, the purpose of the present sub-study is to understand the ways in which undergraduates developed, as students and as persons, by virtue of having participated in a holistic peer-mentoring experience – that is, as a consequence of being in relationship with the mentors who served them.

### **Project Description**

The primary goal of the mentoring project was to foster a community of intense, nurturing relationships between junior/senior peer mentors and freshman/sophomore protégés (Ward et al., 2009, 2010). Such relationships, we envisioned, could flexibly address and support early undergraduate goal attainment with respect to academic needs, as well as career, social and personal well-being needs, which can strongly influence academic development, thereby promoting student retention.

#### *Mentor recruitment*

Recruitment of mentors involved posting and a mass emailing to all juniors/seniors with a GPA of at least 2.5. Mentor selection criteria included the following: class standing of junior/senior, GPA of at least 2.5, having good interpersonal skills, and sincere interest in fostering the development of early undergraduates. Of the 91 students who applied over two years, 61 were interviewed and 26 were selected.

#### *Protégé recruitment*

Recruitment of the convenience sample of protégés entailed an emailing to the following: underclassmen on academic probation; freshmen with at least one mid-term grade of less than C during the fall semester; and faculty, inviting them to encourage students they felt could benefit from mentoring to apply. Recruitment posters also invited all interested freshmen and sophomores to apply (Ward et al., 2009, 2010). Of 2,705 underclassmen enrolled in the university over two years, 108 applied, and 74 completed the enrollment process. Mentoring assignments were made after a novel social networking orientation exercise that allowed all mentors and protégés to briefly meet, discuss interests, and then secretly rank those five with whom they

most preferred to be paired. Quality mentoring was ensured through a 1–3 mentor/protégé ratio.

Goal-setting and goal-monitoring activity served as the primary task of the mentoring relationship. Mentors and protégés collaboratively developed unique goal plans for each protégé to enact during the project period. They met weekly for approximately 90 min to discuss and revise strategies, monitor goal attainment progress, and address the protégé's strengths, weaknesses, and unique developmental needs. Mentors encouraged and supported protégés in their pursuit of goals for growth. As examples, academic goals might include earning a grade of *B* in a biochemistry class, studying at least 15 hours per week, or studying in the library vs. more distracting locations, whereas personal well-being goals might include creating a balance between schoolwork, employment, and socialization, or practicing healthy eating habits. Finally, mentors assisted protégés with identifying and accessing on-campus resources valuable to supporting protégé goal attainment. This relationship, typically personal and mutual in nature, constituted the core of the peer-mentoring intervention.

### **Study Site and Population Demographics**

This 14-week project was implemented in Spring 2009 and 2010 (Ward et al., 2009, 2010). The study sample was drawn from undergraduates at a midsize, private university with underclassmen enrollments of 1,381 (Fall 2008) and 1,324 (Fall 2009). The sample consisted of 74 protégés (62 freshmen, 84%; 11 sophomores, 15%; one junior, 1%), who were mentored by 26 juniors and seniors in good academic standing. The demographic makeup of the mentored sample consisted of 56 (76%) women and 18 (24%) men. The racial/ethnic composition of protégés was 36 (49%) Black, 18 (24%) White, 18 (24%) Hispanic, and 2 (3%) Asian. The mentor racial/ethnic composition was 12 (46%) White, 7 (27%) Black, 4 (15%) Hispanic, and 3 (12%) Arab/Middle Eastern, and their gender breakdown was 17 (65%) female and 9 (35%) male. Mentors included 14 (54%) seniors and 12 (46%) juniors.

Fifty-one (69%) protégés had been encouraged by faculty to apply, 11 (15%) had received a low mid-term grade, and eight (11%) were on academic probation. The mean ACT score for the 69 underclassmen participants for whom we had data (21.3) was below the mean ACT for all nonparticipating underclassmen at the university during those two years (21.9). In addition, the mean (starting) fall GPA for 27 Black female underclassmen participating in the project (2.46) was above the mean corresponding fall GPA for the 377 nonparticipating Black female underclassmen at the university (2.30).

### **Instrumentation and Data Collection**

Mentors used the Progress Tracking Form several times throughout the project period to record the progress of each protégé toward goal attainment. Overall progress toward each goal was summarized by the following scale:

1=no progress, 2=slight progress, 3=moderate progress, 4=significant progress, and 5=goal met. Some participants established multiple goals. Protégés completed a postintervention survey that evaluated the mentoring experience. The items on this instrument as well as on the progress tracking form were developed in conjunction with conversations with experts and a review of the literature (Ward et al., 2010). They included open-ended questions about ways in which they might have grown through the mentoring relationship, what they valued most about it, what they would change, etc. In addition, each week mentors recorded reflective notes in a journal that captured their experiences and impressions regarding the relationships they were creating with protégés, and documented the growth, struggles, and goal attainment of their protégés over the project period. Pseudonyms are used in the following data for participants.

### Research Design and Data Analyses

The three sources of data were analyzed using a grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Tracking form data are reflective of mentors' assessment of progress that protégés made on goals that protégés had intentionally selected and established for the semester. On the other hand, postintervention survey data and data from mentor journals, respectively, are reflective of protégés' self-reports and mentors' ongoing observations and reflections during the project period. Through data analyses we identified 22 emergent patterns in which protégés grew during the project period. The 22 patterns were then grouped into six themes that are more inclusive. Two colleagues not associated with the study then performed separate inter-coder checks of reliability. The 19 and 26%, respectively, of mentoring relationships for which a discrepancy existed vis-à-vis the first categorization were then reassessed and the thematic categories were consequently refined on this basis.

Credibility and trustworthiness of qualitative studies have recently become a matter of significant debate; however, strategies for guaranteeing rigor have been available for some time (Shenton, 2004). Demonstrating credibility involves reassurances that a researcher has the capacity for rendering a true picture of the reality in question. Lincoln and Guba (1985) noted that credibility is the primary factor ensuring trustworthiness in qualitative research. Based upon the constructs of Guba (1981), which have been widely accepted, Shenton (2004) has proposed strategies that qualitative researchers can use to ensure credibility.

Among the 17 strategies that Shenton (2004) suggested qualitative researchers might utilize, we employed at least seven in the present study. First, we *adopted well-established research methods*, such as self-reflexive mentor journals, a self-reflexive postintervention protégé survey that included text-based responses, and a tracking form designed to assess protégé progress at multiple time points during the project period. Second,

we developed an early familiarity with the culture of the participating organization, as we in fact developed and implemented the fundamental culture of the project and had extensive face-to-face experience with the participating mentors and protégés. Third, we utilized *triangulation* with respect to methods and data, collecting tracking form data, mentors' journal accounts and protégés' text-based survey responses in an effort to gain a multiperspectival portrait of protégé growth that included the assessments of both mentors and protégés.

Fourth, we employed *tactics to help insure honesty in informants*, including deliberately designing the project as a voluntary experience for protégés and making protégés fully aware during an informed consent process that they had the right to withdraw or to refuse to share information at any point in the project. Fifth, we ensured *peer scrutiny of the research project* by inviting two colleagues not associated with the study to perform inter-coder checks of reliability in the process of coding data on protégé growth; we have also received feedback from peers through national conference presentations and publications. Sixth, we engaged in *member checks* with protégés and mentors on a spontaneous and informal basis, which reinforced some and altered other research propositions. Seventh and finally, once we had developed the mentoring project and completed our study, we *examined previous research findings* to determine the extent to which our own findings were consistent with those of prior studies. Although we did not engage all of the strategies Shenton (2004) proposed that might enhance credibility and trustworthiness in qualitative studies, we have genuinely sought to incorporate a high level of rigor into the study through the aforementioned strategies.

## Results

Twenty-two unique types, or patterns, of protégé growth emerged from the analysis of tracking form data, mentor journals, and text-based, postintervention survey data. These were organized conceptually into six overarching, emergent themes of protégé development: *academic skills and knowledge*, *career decision-making*, *connectedness to others*, *maturity*, *physical well-being*, and *aspiration*. The first of these themes, concerning the development of *academic skills and knowledge*, included growth in such areas as being organized, time management, study habits (e.g. note-taking), paper-writing, and knowledge and specific skills pertinent to specific academic areas (e.g. mathematics, chemistry, history). Nearly all protégé participants in the study (93%) were categorized as having experienced some level of academic growth, as shown in Table 1.

In addition, as shown in Table 2, 81% of protégés experienced moderate to high growth, specifically with respect to the attainment of an explicitly self-established academic goal, as the project mission stressed primarily academic growth.

Table 1  
*Percent of Protégés Experiencing Growth by Cohort and Growth Theme*

Cohort	Academic (%)	Career (%)	Connect (%)	Maturity (%)	Physical (%)	Aspiration (%)
2009 ( <i>n</i> = 34)	88	21	97	71	18	38
2010 ( <i>n</i> = 40)	95	34	80	78	29	32
Combined ( <i>n</i> = 74)	93	28	88	73	24	35

*Notes.* Growth means moderate or significant growth with respect to a theme. Data sources include goal-progress tracking forms, mentor journals, and protégé postintervention surveys.

Table 2  
*Percent of Protégés Experiencing Progress by Cohort and Growth Theme*

Cohort	Academic (%)	Career (%)	Connect (%)	Maturity (%)	Physical (%)	Aspiration (%)
2009 ( <i>n</i> = 34)	71	6	3	12	18	0
2010 ( <i>n</i> = 40)	90	13	18	15	23	0
Combined ( <i>n</i> = 74)	81	9	11	14	20	0

*Notes.* Progress means a mentor rating of moderate or better, but not slight or no progress. Goals were established by protégés at project start, and monitored by tracking forms.

One Black sophomore's mentor, a White female senior, recorded the following notes about her academic growth with respect to better time management:

*Note. Pseudonyms are used for all participants.*

2/3/09. After meeting with Michelle today, I have found out that she wants Encore to help her stay focused and improve on her time management skills. Michelle knows that her biggest problem last semester was not attending class regularly and she has made it her priority to go to class this semester.

4/14/09. Michelle told me that she has achieved her academic goal, which made me very happy! She attributes all of her success to Encore ... and I reminded her that although Encore may have been a guide, she is the one who earned those grades .... She was very appreciative of everything that Encore has done for her.

Growth with respect to *career decision-making* is a second theme that emerged in the data on the mentoring relationships – specifically for 21 protégés (28%). This was often due to mentors engaging in a consideration with the protégés about their choice of academic major or career, or preparations for graduate school, and sometimes involved the sharing of detailed information and experience with the protégé. In some cases, the mentor and protégé shared the same major and career decision-making. The following excerpt from the journal of a male Puerto Rican senior reflects one of the numerous considerations he had with his protégé, a Puerto Rican freshman, around his goal to learn more about graduate schools and the requirements to enter such schools:

We also set up his Vision Map, which has been circled about his career plans and future intentions following graduation. He remains set on going to graduate school for psychology. Once he told me that he had really looked into it, I told him a great idea would be to begin searching possible schools in the region along with contacting schools to see requirements and things of that nature. This way he can have an idea of the direction he needs to go, along with reducing the chance of taking unnecessary courses that can hinder the time it takes him to graduate.

A third theme of protégé growth, *connectedness to others*, or social support, emerged in the data on 66 protégés (88%). This broad theme included a variety of types of growth experiences, such as the following: overcoming extreme shyness/insularity through regular interaction with caring others and becoming more comfortable and confident with meeting people and making new friends; overcoming being antisocial; developing a desire to participate more in campus activities; feeling like one is supported and belongs (being part of a family at school); or trusting someone else in an intimate relationship – that is, through overcoming the fear of intimacy or working out

issues. In the next excerpt, we see the postintervention survey response of Vanessa, a Black freshman experiencing extraordinary life challenges, to a question about the quality of her relationship with her mentor, another Black female. Here we witness an example of perhaps one of the last two of the five types of growth in *connectedness to others*:

My mentor's and my relationship has a lot of depth. It felt as if I wasn't in a program but dealing with a helpful friend. I feel that what I learned through Encore, I couldn't have learned any other place. It helped me with a lot of struggles and difficulties in my life that were beyond academic problems. I am grateful to be in this program at this time of my life.

A fourth emergent theme of protégé development relates to growth in *maturity*, or growth with respect to life skills, coping with difficulties, maintaining balance between different spheres of life activity, or development of character. Examples would include the following: proactively communicating with professors; dealing in a professional and proactive way with difficult situations with a professor/class; taking care of personal business that the student has tended to ignore; being more responsible in life; learning through *trial and error* the necessity of self-discipline; surviving extremely difficult life-situations while remaining (or doing well) in school; balancing of two or more areas of one's life (e.g. work and school); making sober assessments of one's strengths and areas in need of improvement; or developing self-esteem. Other researchers, as well, have drawn attention to the dimension of moral or character development in the protégé (Levinson et al., 1978; Moberg, 2008). Our data indicate that 55 protégés (73%) experienced at least a moderate level of growth in this dimension because of their participation in the mentoring experience. Matthew, a White freshman who had the goal of attaining a higher GPA as well as establishing healthier eating patterns, was mentored by a Palestinian junior. In his postintervention survey responses, Matthew shared the following:

My goals have provided me the opportunity to become a healthier person, emotionally, physically, and socially .... Connecting with an older student and receiving their guidance was a tremendous opportunity .... Amani was an excellent mentor. Even when we weren't meeting at the time, she made herself available as a friend, and that meant a lot. In addition, she created a relaxed environment for us to meet and more of a friendship than a professional meeting.

The previous excerpt also illustrates the fifth theme of protégé growth: *physical well-being*. One in four protégés demonstrated growth in this dimension, which generally included healthy eating habits, establishing a regular workout regimen, losing weight, or getting more sleep at night. Many students responded to the program directors' invitation to establish

such personal well-being goals, in great part because they strongly affect overall well-being and academic development in particular.

The final emergent theme for protégé growth was identified as *aspiration*. This theme embraces those ways in which protégés grew through the inspirational example of a mentor that might be characterized as reflecting the emergence of a higher impulse, yearning, or aspiration. Some examples are being more highly motivated to succeed, becoming a better person, or having the desire to become a role model to others. As an example, when Guadelupe, a Mexican-American sophomore mentored by a Black junior, was asked on the postintervention survey about ways in which she had grown from being in Encore, she replied:

I am more determined ... feel like my GPA will go up ... and I am a better person, but this is all because of my mentor .... At first I was not sure what to think of my mentor, but as soon as I meet her I knew I would like her. She is a great person. I feel like I can talk to her about anything and she is there to listen. Not only that, but she is there to help me reach my goals. Trina is an overall great person! Love her!

Protégés made significant progress toward achieving self-established goals, with the two-year sample revealing a group mean across all goal types of 3.65 on a scale of 1–5 (i.e. moderate-to-substantial progress); the fall-to-fall retention rate of freshmen who participated in the project in year one was 93%, as compared with an 81% retention rate for all other freshmen at the university (Ward et al., 2010). The mentoring project was clearly successful each year in stimulating academic goal attainment among protégés, but also in fostering goal attainment in related, nonacademic areas that often support academic development. Moreover, the overall efficacy of the project increased for year two, in great part due to gains in academic goal attainment, which represented the vast majority of goals established each year. This success can be seen in Table 3, which reports mean progress among protégés for each of the four categories of intentional goals that protégés established for the semester, as evaluated by their mentors throughout the semester. From year one to year two, there was a nearly 10% increase in

Table 3  
*Mean Progress Toward Goal Attainment by Cohort and Goal Type*

Cohort means	Overall	Academic	Social	Personal	Career
2009 means	3.42	3.44	2.50	4.09	4.50
2010 means	3.85	3.85	3.30	3.85	4.20
2009–2010 means	3.65	3.67	3.17	3.95	4.29

Notes. Mean progress was assessed by mentors using the following scale: 1 = no progress, 2 = slight progress, 3 = moderate progress, 4 = significant progress, and 5 = goal met.

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the proportion of protégés who achieved at least moderate progress toward self-established goals.

### Discussion

Our theme of *academic skills and knowledge* corresponds closely to Nora's and Crisp's (2007) latent construct of *academic subject knowledge support*, while also reflecting the first part of their construct of *goal setting or career pathing*, since academic goal setting was an integral and pervasive element of our program, even beyond the theme of academics (Ward et al., 2010). Our theme of *career decision-making* corresponds precisely to the latter part of Nora's and Crisp's (2007) aforementioned construct. Our theme of *connectedness to others* relates closely to their construct of *psychological/emotional support*, but also includes patterns of growth that may evolve from such support, such as developing a desire to become involved in campus activities.

The theme of *physical well-being* does not have a clear correlation with Nora's and Crisp's (2007) constructs, but obviously supports academic, career, and even emotional/psychological well-being and success for early undergraduates. *Aspiration* correlates strongly with Nora's and Crisp's (2007) *existence of a role model*, but includes more than this, as it also embraces the protégé's inspired response to the example of the mentor, as it might manifest in her or his life. Finally, the theme of *maturity* is related to the constructs of *psychological/emotional support* and *goal setting and career pathing* in that it includes those ways in which students may grow personally due to the mentor's support or critical reflection and feedback on the protégé's behaviors or incipient goals.

However, this theme also subsumes those ways in which protégés may grow in self-knowledge or in critical thinking about their lives because of their own self-reflection gained through interaction with a mentor. Overall, our study supports the four constructs of Nora's and Crisp's (2007) theoretical model, while also including two additional themes that we see as nevertheless germane to the personal and even academic growth of early undergraduates.

Such a framework of protégé growth themes may have value in helping us to understand how the mentoring experience can affect the academic confidence, social integration, and personal growth of an early undergraduate student. Only 11% of students intentionally set social connectedness goals during the program, in comparison with the 81% of students who intentionally set academic goals. Nevertheless, we found that 88% of protégés grew in *social* terms through the mentoring experience – a rate almost as high as the 93% who grew *academically* through the experience. Furthermore, 73% of students grew in terms of *maturity* because of the mentoring experience,

even though only 14% had explicitly set goals that were retrospectively classified by the researchers to fall within the *maturity* theme.

Development with respect to *career decision-making*, *physical well-being* and *aspiration* can serve as critical, though often supportive, factors in academic and social success – such as through the influence of diet, physical exercise, or receiving sufficient sleep upon the capacity to study or upon self-esteem. Whereas growth in each of these themes occurred among 1/4 to 1/3 of protégés in the program, growth in terms of *maturity* took place among 73% of protégés. The very high rates of protégé growth within the themes of *academics*, *social connectedness*, and *maturity* (73–93%) raise the possibility that growth in these thematic dimensions may be synergistic and mutually reinforcing. Of course, this makes good sense intuitively as, for example, a student's level of confidence within the academic environment is enhanced when she or he has a tacit sense of social belonging. That confidence is also strengthened when a student has developed the maturity to be self-disciplined academically and knows when to reach out to others, including to instructors, for help.

### Limitations

The nature of the analyses was qualitative and the sample size was small. However, findings from the previous year as well as other findings (Nora & Crisp, 2007) in the literature were supported. Limitations from the first year of the mentoring program were addressed in year two through expanding the sample size, and further support was found in year two for program efficacy (Ward et al., 2010). In addition, the study was limited to one semester of an academic school year. Finally, limitations have been addressed in each iteration of the study.

### Conclusion

These findings expand our conceptual understanding of mentoring, in this case, by providing a broad schema of the universe of ways in which early undergraduates might grow when offered a holistic mentoring experience designed to be broadly and organically responsive to their individualized needs (Ward, 2012; Ward et al., 2010). In this qualitative study, we focused upon the growth and development that protégés experienced during a peer-mentoring program. We made use of mentors' journals and protégés' self-reported statements as well as longitudinal assessments made throughout the semester by mentors about their protégés' progress toward self-established goals.

As such, the study's six emergent themes of protégé growth provide qualified support for and validation of the four major domains or latent foundational variables comprising the mentoring concept set forth by Nora and Crisp (2007). We believe the findings of this study may be of value in informing the development of mentoring programs, and in particular, peer-

mentoring programs, in that they indicate a range of themes through which protégés may grow within a holistic mentoring experience. Such information can be of value, for example, in training mentors to recognize and understand the growth patterns they might conceivably encounter in their protégés within the mentoring experience.

Some students arrive to college as freshmen, lacking in development in one or more of the critical thematic areas we have explored here, sometimes due primarily to personal factors, or social structural factors, and often due to a combination of both. A successful peer-mentoring experience has powerful implications for addressing and mitigating the patterns of structural inequality that continue to pervade our educational system at all levels, especially at the postsecondary level where many nontraditional students are invited into the system only to fall through the cracks, typically, during the first two years of college (Ward et al., 2010). Largely, this happens because the institution is aware of deficiencies in academic preparation and cultural capital, yet has failed to support these students in gaining the academic reinforcement and cultural capital necessary for successfully negotiating the academic world.

A holistic peer-mentoring experience potentially has great value in extending not only individualized academic encouragement, but perhaps even more importantly, critical support for social integration, cultural capital, and personal growth to students from social and economic backgrounds that traditionally have not had access to the higher education experience in the USA (Nora & Crisp, 2007; Ward et al., 2010). These are, therefore, often students in great need of added encouragement and support in order to realize that they do in fact belong within the higher educational setting. Holistic peer-mentoring experiences can provide nontraditional, early undergraduates with critical and personalized informational and cultural support in making the transition to being successful within a still rather traditional, postsecondary educational environment which is nevertheless their doorway to effectively operating within and contributing to our ever-more-diverse and challenging, emergent twenty-first century global civilization.

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### **Notes on contributors**

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