EXPLORING THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF MENTEES INVOLVED IN A UNIVERSITY TRANSFER PROGRAM IN A TWO-YEAR TECHNICAL COLLEGE: A QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY

by

Jason Ray Whiteside

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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APPROVED BY:

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Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore the lived experiences of mentees involved in a University Transfer program in a two-year technical college. The theory guiding this study is Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory. Bandura postulated that learning occurs in the social context through observing and emulating a mentor (model), thus creating the opportunity for the mentee (observer) to acquire new practices and skills. The study consisted of 10 mentees who participated in individual interviews and focus groups and maintained a reflective journal to share their personal experiences with their assigned peer mentor during the mentorship. The mentees were all current students at Triad Technical College which serves an annual enrollment of 25,603 students in a variety of course modalities. All data were analyzed and coded to highlight any emerging themes. The emerging themes presented by the data included the need by mentees for their mentors to be relatable to them including similar backgrounds, academic goals, and career goals. The data also indicated a unique preference for interactions between mentees and mentors to occur face-to-face rather than through digital means. Finally, the data suggested the mentees were able to learn more from their peer mentors than advisors on course selection, course success, the transfer process, and networking within their desired career pathway.

Keywords: mentee, higher education, technical college, mentorship, peer mentoring

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Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to God, my creator, who has been my source of strength, grace, and wisdom throughout this entire process.

To my grandparents who have imparted great wisdom and have always been my greatest fans throughout life's journeys and endeavors.

To my parents for raising me in a Christian home, instilling into me the importance and value of an education, and always being my greatest support system.

To my brother, sister-in-law, sister, and brother-in-law for always keeping me entertained, and grounded, and always being there for support when needed.

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First-Generation College Student (FGCS)

Grade Point Average (GPA)

Higher Education (HE)

Information Communication Technologies (ICT)

Institutional Research Board (IRB)

Science Technology Engineering Mathematics (STEM)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

The purpose of this qualitative case study is to explore the relationship between peer mentoring and persistence among University Transfer program students in a two-year technical community college. Declining persistence rates continue to be a problem for two-year technical and community college administrators. However, prior research that has been conducted related to this topic is minimal and focuses primarily on the four-year and graduate levels. Peer mentoring is grounded in Albert Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory that learning is achieved through emulating the behaviors of a model. For this study, I will investigate the relationship between peer mentoring and student persistence, analyze the experiences of mentee participants, and highlight the favorable attributes of participating mentors.

Background

Historical Context

Historically, persistence rates among first-generation students have been marginal as compared to students with college-educated parents. It was reported that the retention rate for first-generation full-time students enrolling in a public 2-year degree-granting institution fell to 61% between 2019 and 2020 (De Brey et al., 2021). The definition of a first-generation student continues to evolve; however, more modern definitions of first-generation students include parents earning less than a bachelor's degree, low-income or lower-middle income, or identifying as a marginalized ethnic or racial group (Latino et al., 2018). A parallel remains between previous and recent first-generation students regarding access, transition, student retention, and graduation rates (Ives & Castillo-Montoya, 2020). Furthermore, first-generation students tend to have lower grade point averages (GPAs) in their first year, have difficulties

choosing a major, and feel a sense of not belonging at their respective institutions (Schwartz et al., 2017).

Social Context

Present day, the persistence and success of first-generation students entering two-year technical/community colleges and four-year universities continue to be a concern. This concern is shared among the students primarily, the parents, secondary-level guidance counselors, and post-secondary admissions counselors (Ricks & Warren, 2021). As ongoing research continues to be conducted regarding the persistence of first-generation students, the data continue to indicate that a "one size fits all" approach is not suitable to combat increasing attrition rates. However, studies have indicated successes in implementing such programs as hybrid-based mentoring conducted in the traditional face-to-face setting or the virtual setting and increasing social capital initiatives (Glass, 2022).

Evans, Stansberry, et al. (2020) conducted a qualitative study to compare the experiences of first-generation students at a small, rural community college and a large, metropolitan undergraduate university, both located in the southeastern United States. Participants in the study indicated similar issues and concerns regarding self-efficacy, financial constraints, and the demand for more programs to satisfy the needs related to social capital. From a social perspective, increasing opportunities for engagement among first-year college students and their families continue to be seen as a means for first-line support. Moreover, incorporating the parents in the social capital equation can help to further bolster positive first-generation student outcomes (Romanelli, 2020).

Theoretical Context

The study of the effects of peer mentoring on first-generation, two-year, technical college

students maintains to be an area of minimal study. Conversely, previously conducted research has been primarily focused on the four-year and graduate levels (Dollinger & Lodge, 2019; Holloway-Friesen, 2019; McConnell et al., 2019). The concept of mentoring is closely tied to the tenets of the social cognitive theory, indicating the importance of social and environmental contextual influences (Bandura, 1986, 1997). Furthermore, Bandura (1997) indicated that increasing the sense of self-efficacy can be achieved through the observation of a model that currently is demonstrating success in the observed area of interest (Bandura, 1997).

To enhance and further develop a first-generation student's sense of self-efficacy and the desire to pursue academic-related goals, social interactions with academic advisors, professors, and mentors are necessary (Bolkan et al., 2021; Tinto, 2017). Notably, a strong sense of self-efficacy is an impactful variable that lends itself to positive academic success and outcomes (Burns et al., 2018; Schneider & Preckel, 2017). Student persistence in higher education (HE) courses saw an increase when students were partnered with knowledgeable peer mentors as compared to students who did not (Damkaci et al., 2017; Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2021).

Prior studies conducted to identify potential solutions to increase student persistence rates among first-generation students have been numerous (Bolliger & Halupa, 2018; Picton et al., 2018; Pratt et al., 2017). However, these studies have been primarily focused on the four-year level of HE. A commonality in the research is the employment of mentoring among students with either a faculty member, staff member, or peer (Baker et al., 2020; Li & Wong, 2019; Newman et al., 2021). The idea of mentoring in HE is not a new concept and has been seen as a positive way to increase student engagement and a sense of belonging. Historically, mentoring has been a facilitated arrangement between faculty, staff, and students (Budge, 2006). The role of the peer mentor is multifaceted and includes such functions for the mentor as serving as an

advisor, friend, study partner, primary source of support, and role model (Egege & Kutieleh, 2015). Although peer mentoring is recognized as a successful way to augment declining persistence rates, researchers have indicated two suggestions to ensure the success of peer mentoring programs. These two areas of concern are mentor training and identifying key characteristics of the mentor that lead to mentor efficacy (Alcocer & Martinez, 2018).

Problem Statement

The problem is that despite all the available resources for full-time, first-generation, two-year college students, there continues to be a decline in persistence and completion rates. Specifically, enrollment and persistence declined by 3.2% between the fall of 2018 and the fall of 2019 in two-year associate degrees in biological sciences (Juszkiewicz, 2020). To combat declining enrollment and persistence rates, some states have passed legislation to offer additional financial assistance. In 2015, Oregon state passed State Bill 81 known as the Oregon Promise which would function to cover the remaining balance of tuition for eligible two-year technical and community college students (Gurantz, 2020). Students eligible for financial assistance programs such as the Oregon Promise are required to complete a Free Application for Federal Student Aid for federal funding and any remaining costs would be covered by the state.

Consequently, students who are classified as low-income have the lowest persistence rates among first-generation, two-year college students (Evans, Kearney, et al., 2020). Alleviating financial pressures from low-income students continues to be a focus among legislatures on the state level. Notably, after the implementation of the Oregon Promise, Minnesota and Tennessee passed legislation forming their state-level version of the Oregon Promise (Gurantz, 2020).

Similarly, to augment declining persistence rates and reduce the devastating effects of

student debt, a variety of intervention initiatives have been examined. For example, hierarchical mentoring practices that involve student-faculty or student-advisor have both been implemented to enhance student success rates and have been met with great success (Collier, 2017). In a study conducted by Holt and Fifer (2018), it was determined that mentors who exhibited low self-efficacy, high avoidant attachment, and anxious-ambivalent attachment styles were classified as less supportive by mentees. From the numerous studies that have been conducted, a plethora of data has been yielded identifying the measures that have led to student success. However, the data from these studies have produced limited data on student persistence rates. Moreover, the data are very shallow concerning persistence rates among first-year, first-generation two-year college students regarding those who are identified as being enrolled as a University Transfer program student.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative case study is to explore the lived experiences of mentees involved in a University Transfer program in a two-year technical community college. At this stage in the research, the effect of peer mentoring on student persistence rates will be defined as continued enrollment from the first semester of initial enrollment to the second semester.

Significance of the Study

The purpose of this case study is grounded in Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory. The social cognitive theory approach is centered around the tenant that active learning is achieved based upon the involvement of the learner and their interaction for the creation and adoption of new knowledge (Scarff Seatter et al., 2017). Providing mentee study participants with a mentor will provide the learning construct needed to gain a better understanding of what is required of a college student. Empirically, this study will contribute to an existing body of

knowledge that has been focused on peer mentoring and student success rather than student persistence. Previous studies examining the effects of mentoring such as Collier's (2017) study explored hierarchical and peer mentoring and suggested that peer mentoring is a more effective form of mentoring due to the shared perspectives of the student and their peer mentor. Similarly, Torrens et al. (2017) examined the value of mentoring by men of color staff members of a community college. The findings indicated that mentoring did complement student success, however, persistence was not examined in the study.

Research Questions

Central Research Question

What are the lived experiences of mentees in the university transfer program at a two-year technical college?

Sub-Question One

As a mentee, what leadership attributes of your mentor did you find most beneficial to you?

Sub-Question Two

As a mentee, what were some of your memorable experiences while being mentored?

Sub-Question Three

As a mentee, what are some of your experiences that would potentially inhibit you from persisting in your current program of study?

Definitions

First-generation students - A classification of students whose parents do not have any post-secondary education (Redford & Hoyer, 2017).

Summary

Theoretically, peer mentoring is deeply entrenched in Bandura's (1986, 1997) social cognitive theory. Previous research findings have implications for the use of peer mentoring to diminish declining persistence rates in HE. However, the literature is sparse with research related to two-year technical and community college settings. The problem of student persistence and what effects peer mentoring has on student persistence will be studied at a two-year technical college located in the southeastern, United States. For this study, a first-generation student will be defined as a student with parents or guardians who do not have previous experience in HE.

Embracing the tenets of the social cognitive theory, selected study participants will be assigned to a mentor who demonstrates strong academic skills. The mentor will serve as the candidate for the mentee to observe, question, and have frequent and ongoing communication during the tenure of the study. The findings of the study will explore an avenue for increasing persistence rates among first-year, first-generation students. The data harvested from the study can be shared with recruiters, student affairs, and department leaders as a tool to augment declining persistence rates among students in the University Transfer program.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

Declining persistence rates and increasing attrition rates among first year, FGCS have become an increasing problem for HE administrators (Anderson & Goldrick-Rab, 2018; Cohen & Kelly, 2019; Horn et al., 2019). Deeply rooted in the theoretical framework of the social cognitive theory postulated by Bandura (1986), peer mentoring provides students with a mentor/model to observe and emulate. Historically, mentorship has been dyadic in nature, observing a hierarchical relationship where a faculty or staff member serves as the mentor for a participating student (Nowell et al., 2017). As evidenced in the research, mentoring has slowly evolved to include alumni-mentoring initiatives to advance the professional skills and career goals of mentees (Nabi et al., 2021). Furthermore, research has indicated that mentees prefer a mentor who subscribes to the tenets of servant leadership among other notable and desired mentor attributes (Sims et al., 2020; Tanno & Banner, 2018). Finally, in this literature review peer mentoring is evaluated based on previous research findings to demonstrate efficacy and need within HE.

Theoretical Framework

The social cognitive theory conceived by Bandura (1986) is situated on the tenant that much of the learning achieved by humans is done in the social context. The social cognitive theory postulates that learning can be achieved through the imitation of a model by an observer (Schunk, 2020). The cognitive component of Bandura's theory is that the observer initiates thought regarding the behavior considered to be a stimulus and then decides to imitate the observed behavior, the stimulus (Connolly, 2017). Furthermore, the application of the social cognitive theory can be employed across a wide age range of social and environmental contexts

yielding the desired outcome (Yildirim et al., 2020).

Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory is unique in that can be applied in a variety of diverse contexts. These diverse constructs or settings can include the education sector, various healthcare fields including rehabilitation, and different aspects of the legal system (Beauchamp et al., 2019). Peer mentors who demonstrate the ability to provide support, including social and emotional support, are factors that lead to greater mentee success (Seery et al., 2021). Employing the fundamentals of the social cognitive theory, mentee or observer behavior, attitude, and performance have been enhanced through modeled emulation (Ozyilmaz et al., 2017). Furthermore, empirical evidence from previous studies collectively has indicated that mentees or protégés can achieve desirable work-related and career outcomes when appropriately coupled with a mentor displaying high self-efficacy (Ragins & Verbos, 2017).

Presently, numerous studies have been conducted to evaluate the effectiveness and impact that mentoring has on student success (Nimmons et al., 2019; Raposa et al., 2020; Sneyers & De Witte, 2018). However, these studies primarily have been focused on the undergraduate, graduate, and post-graduate levels. Consistently, these studies have reflected the tenets of the social cognitive theory, indicating that mentee behavior and self-efficacy were enhanced due to the guidance of an assigned peer mentor (Andersen & West, 2020). For example, Dennehy and Dasgupta (2017) examined the relationship between female peer mentors and female positive academic experiences and retention in engineering. The authors' findings indicated that the relationship between a mentor and mentee facilitated academic success and had a positive impact on mentee self-efficacy.

The focus of the proposed qualitative case study is to evaluate and explore the lived experiences of mentees who have taken part in peer mentoring and mentee persistence in the

University Transfer program at a two-year technical community college. The study will be reflective of Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory as study participants will serve as mentees who have been assigned to a second-year mentor enrolled in the University Transfer program and in good academic standing. The mentor will serve as a guidepost to help mentees learn behaviors and practices that will serve to increase persistence rates. The mentees, during their time with their assigned mentors, will have the opportunity to observe and discuss the academic behaviors and tendencies of their mentors that have afforded them academic success. As Bandura postulated, learning occurs in the social context through the observation and emulation of a model, creating the opportunity for the mentee (observer) to acquire new practices and skills.

Related Literature

First-Generation College Student Retention and Persistence Concerns

The term first-generation college student (FGCS) continues to evolve and includes descriptors such as first in the family to pursue a degree in HE (Kim et al., 2021). The FGCSs, compared to their non-first-generation colleagues, will not experience the same social and cultural capital in theory due to their parents not attending college (LeBouef & Dworkin, 2021). Additionally, previous research findings indicated that FGCSs face difficulties in assimilating to the culture of their HE institution, creating stress and a lack of a sense of belonging (Gist-Mackey et al., 2018; Museus & Chang, 2021). The lack of support networks that FGCSs often face can translate to an increase in health and financial barriers (Vasil & McCall, 2018).

Student retention and persistence continue to be a growing concern for HE institutions; however, these two areas have not seen improvement in more than two decades (Caruth, 2018). To address the question of student retention, including FGCSs, Farruggia et al. (2018) examined noncognitive factors and how those factors contributed to student success. Interestingly, of the

noncognitive factors that were evaluated—academic mindsets, perseverance, social skills, and academic behaviors—academic mindsets were indicated as having a positive and direct relationship with academic performance and retention. Supporting the assertions of Farruggia et al., Hassel and Ridout (2018) suggested that the mindset and expectations of entering students did not align with the demands of HE, including the belief that HE was a continuance of their secondary studies.

In the growing shift of instructional modality towards online learning, student retention, especially regarding students classified as first-generation, has also become an area of concern for HE institutions (Stone & O'Shea, 2019). In any case, whether the FGCS is learning in a traditional modality or online, creating a sense of belonging, connectedness, and engagement has been identified to enhance student retention and persistence (Gillen-O'Neel, 2019). To provide students with a sense of belonging and connectedness to enhance both retention and persistence rates, mentoring has been indicated as a first-line approach (Banks & Dohy, 2019). Social connectedness correlates with the postulates of the social identity theory and can be satisfied in a variety of approaches, including mentoring (Farrell et al., 2018).

To promote student retention, especially for those being described as FGCS, colleges and universities have employed a variety of strategies, including the development of a bridge program for entering freshmen, conducting seminar series for ways to be successful and time management, academic support initiatives, and peer tutoring (Gibson et al., 2020). Although these programs have value, they require resources that some colleges and universities might not be able to provide; however, the creation and implementation of mentoring programs can be established with little cost (Stephenson et al., 2020). Moreover, higher rates of retention have been realized through academic and social integrations including mentorship, which also serves

as a bridge between social integration and academic integration (Clayton et al., 2019).

Hierarchical Mentoring Programs

The existing research examining the role and functionality of academic faculty and staff mentoring is plentiful. In similar studies, O'Connor et al. (2019) and Cree-Green et al. (2020) focused on the hierarchical relationship between the mentor and the mentee, and the mentee's success concerning academic performance and program completion. Moreover, hierarchical mentoring relationships were identified as being beneficial for potential career success due to professional networking (O'Connor et al., 2019). In each study, the focus was placed on the students enrolled in graduate and post-graduate level academic programs. A great deal of focus has been placed on the undergraduate, graduate, and post-graduate academic levels and settings rather than the two-year technical or community college HE sectors.

Traditionally, mentoring practices in HE involved a more senior faculty member or staff member and the mentee (Goerisch et al., 2019). The mentor in this role provides the mentee with guidance regarding academics and enhances noncurricular skills such as professionalism, emotional support, and encouragement (Henry-Noel et al., 2018). Interestingly, traditional hierarchical mentoring practices that were once normative practice are being replaced with newer forms of mentorship practices such as reverse mentoring and the creation of mentorship teams (Waljee et al., 2020). Nevertheless, mentoring does play an integral role in the socialization of students when entering HE (Sarrett, 2018).

In similar studies conducted by Lunsford et al. (2017), and Livingstone and Naismith (2018), the authors examined the relationship between hierarchical mentoring and university nongraduate level mentees. Findings from Livingstone and Naismith (2018) indicated a positive relationship between undergraduate student mentees participating in hierarchical mentoring.

Mirroring the findings of Livingstone and Naismith, Lunsford et al. (2017) contributed to the literature that hierarchical mentoring helped mentees with their transition into the university setting, served to increase academic performance among mentee participants, and facilitated an increase in program persistence rates.

Alumni Mentoring Programs

Alumni are invaluable assets in that they create networking opportunities for career and professional advancement, serve as a pool of support for university development and improvement, and serve as an added means of financial support (Straujuma & Gaile–Sarkane, 2018). Moreover, universities are now looking for alumni to serve as alumni mentors as alumni mentoring programs continue to grow in adoption and success (Vieregger & Bryant, 2019). Alumni mentoring presents a variety of benefits for the mentor, mentee, and participating institutions. Skrzypek et al. (2020) identified such benefits as enhanced career development for the mentee, the development of stronger relationships among alumni and their graduating institution, and the deepening of the connections between institutions and the surrounding communities.

To streamline the process of pairing freshmen with alumni, Babu et al. (2021) evaluated the efficacy of a new portal dedicated to providing information to alumni about university happenings and to freshmen with information about alumni. When fully operational, the alumni portal provided students with a variety of information including providing guidance and mentoring opportunities. Further supporting alumni initiatives, HE institutions can develop programs to enhance mentoring opportunities through purposeful interactions. Mourad et al. (2020) evaluated the effectiveness of a professional program known as SEEDS (Strategies for Ecology Education, Diversity and Sustainability). Professional societies create a platform for

alumni and current students to interact for the purpose of professional development, to learn the latest trends in their field of study, and to engage in mentoring with alumni in a career that is related to the mentee's current program of study (Vickers et al., 2017)

In similar studies conducted by Scerri et al. (2020) and Dollinger et al. (2019), university alumni programs were evaluated to determine efficacy and mentee participant impacts. Both studies indicated that mentees gained industry knowledge and skills, were able to take part in networking opportunities, and strengthened mentee confidence while simultaneously enhancing student engagement among mentee participants. Additionally, Obeng-Ofori and Kwarteng (2021) suggested that alumni mentors helped to strengthen self-esteem, instill self-confidence, and motivate student-mentee participants. Alumni mentors also have the liberty of functioning as facilitators for career and professional development seminars, career development advisors, and developers of workshops for students in their senior year of university.

Alumni Contributions to Mentee Career Development and Academic Success

As indicated by previous findings, alumni have the opportunity to develop the professional and soft skills of mentees either through mentoring initiatives or advisors (Cownie & Gallo, 2020). Alumni mentors assigned to mentees serve as valuable assets to the participating mentees in a variety of ways including the development of essential skills, refinement of abilities, and development of a mindset for modern-day practices (Zografou & McDermott, 2022). Likewise, alumni mentors can function by imparting knowledge to encourage entrepreneurial career development, enhance specialized business knowledge and skills, and serve as an external source of emotional support (Byun et al., 2018; Nabi et al., 2021). In some instances, the relationship between the alumni mentor and the student mentee can be viewed as experiential or service-learning, yielding academic credit for the time spent together (Rey-Garcia

& Mato-Santiso, 2020).

Alumni can play an integral role in increasing student persistence rates and academic performance at the two-year HE level (Smith et al., 2019). However, the literature is very minimal concerning alumni mentoring and two-year technical or community college settings, particularly regarding students enrolled in STEM (science technology engineering mathematics)-related areas of study and underrepresented students (Stofer et al., 2021). In an empirical evaluation of the dimensionality of alumni giving behavior, Khatri & Raheja (2018) explored impacts seasoned alumni could have on new alumni. Similar to the findings of Nabi et al. (2021) and Byun et al. (2018), Khatri & Raheja (2018) argued the importance of alumni mentorship. Alumni can provide up-and-coming alumni with beneficial industry skills and networking opportunities while also serving to help existing alumni who have moved to different regions to secure a position in line with their career goals.

Similarly, alumni can play a beneficial role in program development and appeal to legislatures for academic reform and continued academic policy development (Nabi et al., 2019; Weerts & Cabrera, 2017). Alumni have the inherent influence to drive change, such as the creation of more online or virtual programs to satisfy the needs of a growing technology-based student segment (Khanna et al., 2019). Alumni mentoring initiatives can also be implemented to reinforce anti-racism efforts by college administrations to support the academic and career goals of Black, Indigenous, and other people of color (Samari et al., 2022). Increasingly, alumni of American universities are considered as primary stakeholders due to their contributions, specifically nonmonetary contributions (Snijders et al., 2019).

Remote Alumni Mentoring Programs

The research indicates that remote alumni mentoring can be accomplished in a variety of

ways. Remote mentoring can be achieved through virtual meetings, remote field placement, and virtual internships (Kernan & Basch, 2022). Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, traditional face-to-face mentoring was the normative practice and alumni mentoring frequently remained an underutilized resource in some cases (Dean & Jendzurski, 2021). However, the pandemic forced student mentoring to be conducted remotely, particularly for mentees in STEM-associated areas of study (Alm et al., 2022; Cheng et al., 2023).

In a qualitative study conducted by Campbell (2018), students who had been awarded scholarships to study in Western universities were studied to determine the impact and influence that alumni mentoring had on current university students in their home countries. Campbell's research indicated that alumni, either remaining abroad or returning home, provided a variety of contributions. Furthermore, alumni were indicated as having the opportunity to help current students enact change within their programs, help to change education laws and regulations, and seek to improve the socio-economic status of university students in their home regions (Campbell, 2018; Jonbekova et al., 2022).

To provide alumni the opportunity to express their loyalty to their alma mater, remote alumni mentoring through mobile applications is now available as an alternative pathway for engagement (Khalifa et al., 2019). Traditionally, mentoring has occurred in person; however, this practice is evolving as can be seen in more and more HE institutions (Davishahl et al., 2021). Mentoring has become more agile as the continued development and implementation of digital mentoring increases in popularity among distance learners (Leppisaari, 2019). Remote mentoring can be achieved through communication platforms including Slack, Zoom, Google Hangouts, Email, and text (Price et al., 2020).

Peer-to-Peer Mentoring Programs

As a first-line measure to increase retention rates among entering first-year students, HE institutions have embraced peer mentoring (Lane, 2018). Peer mentoring programs can also be implemented by campus libraries to help first year, FGCSs become familiar with the supporting academic resources that are available (Arch & Gilman, 2019). Colleges and universities see the need to stabilize and increase retention rates among first year FGCSs. In doing so, programs such as peer mentoring are being employed to further utilize the social capital present on campus (McCallen & Johnson, 2020). The culture of an institution can be cultivated through the cultural capital practices and behaviors of students who play a direct role in the development of social capital (Hamilton et al., 2023; Mahfud et al., 2020).

Diving deeper into the moderating role that social capital has on first year FGCSs, Martin et al. (2020) examined student persistence in an engineering program using the tenets of the social capital theory. Social capital is entrenched in the belief and understanding that members of organizations or institutions desire to maintain a commonality that includes goal orientation and trust (Swanson et al., 2020). Using social capital, such as peer mentoring, relationships were formed that created a sense of community and comradery and helped the students feel a sense of belonging and empowerment in their program of study (Martin et al., 2020).

Comparatively, Ma and Shea (2019) surveyed the perceived barriers of FGCSs and how these barriers could be mitigated using the social cognitive career theory as a framework. The social cognitive career theory suggests that behaviors can be shaped and modified based on supportive variables in addition to variables seen as barriers (Rasdi & Ahrari, 2020). Supportive variables including coherence and human support systems such as peer mentoring were suggested as mitigating factors needed to provide FGCSs with a sense of belonging and

acceptance (Ma & Shea, 2019; Schelbe et al., 2019). Additionally, the use of peer mentoring for first-year students not only serves to help with program studies but also the socialization aspect and adapting to a new culture associated with the institution (Tsang, 2020).

Near Peer Mentoring Programs

Near-peer mentoring is a mentoring scheme that involves a mentor who is one or more years in college enrollment above the mentee (Akinla et al., 2018; George et al., 2020). Mentees engaging in a near-peer mentoring program in their first year of study experience are mentored and later have the option of serving as mentors in subsequent years of study (Anderson et al., 2019). Espiritu and Todorovic (2020) reported on a new near-peer model program being implemented at a two-year community college that takes a hybrid approach to peer mentoring. Based at Wright College, college alumni from the engineering program serve as peer mentors to engineering students and share their experiences with college experiences, academic success strategies, and the transfer process into a senior institution (Espiritu & Todorovic, 2020).

In an experimental study conducted by Bettinger and Evans (2019), near-peer mentoring was introduced to enhance enrollment for a two-year college through the mentoring efforts of a recent graduate from the college. The appointed near-peer mentors were assigned the tasks to assist students with application completion and enrollment with positive results being indicated for two-year enrollment for high-risk students. The unique nature of near-peer mentoring allows mentors from different areas of study to experience a relationship with the mentee who may or may not follow the same pathway as their mentor; however, the relationship provides valuable insight for the mentee (Haggins et al., 2018). Near-peer mentoring benefits the mentee not as a way to receive help for specific course needs but rather as a way to provide a student with a model to demonstrate approaches that the mentee could implement for overall academic

achievement and success (Wilson & Grigorian, 2018).

Virtual Environment Peer Mentoring Programs.

Surpassing the traditional face-to-face modalities of education, online education and learning are projected to become the new mainstream of education by 2025 (Palvia et al., 2018). However, the COVID-19 occurrence and the quick modality change from face-to-face traditional instruction to online instruction has accelerated and solidified the movement toward online education (Aguilera-Hermida, 2020). Emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic, the movement to online instruction, interaction, and mentoring practices have been reimagined, and pedagogical approaches that were traditionally implemented in the lecture room have been replaced with more innovative approaches (Kariapper et al., 2020). Conversely, the move to online modalities could serve as an inhibiting or limiting factor for FGCSs who seek traditional and naturally occurring mentors seen on campuses (Fruiht & Chan, 2018).

As a response to more first-year university students completing courses online, alternative forms of peer mentoring have begun to emerge (Allen et al., 2017; Anderson, 2020). Comparable to peer mentoring in the traditional setting, peer mentors in the virtual environment meet with mentees to accomplish similar goals as those in the traditional face-to-face setting. In a study conducted by Mullen (2017), the environments in which mentoring was being conducted were evaluated. It was indicated that the advantages of peer mentoring in the virtual setting included the ability to communicate more frequently, less time spent conducting in-person meetings, and mentees being able to discuss sensitive issues in a less threatening environment.

In a qualitative study conducted by Fayram et al. (2018), the researchers investigated the benefits of online peer mentoring for student confidence and motivation. The study yielded that the utilization of mentor-facilitated discussion forums and threads gave participating mentees

more of an opportunity to engage and interact with online mentors and learn from other participants, which increased feelings of belonging and relatedness. Conversely, some research studies have indicated that virtual mentoring is still considered to be an emerging form of mentoring and, thus, requires more study. Supporting the findings of needing more study and development Tinoco-Giraldo et al. (2020) indicated in their study that educators need to augment pedagogical practices to create more opportunities for online collaboration that allows more opportunities for virtual mentoring (Goodrich, 2021).

Suggested Best Practices for E-Peer Mentoring

To investigate best practices when virtual mentoring has been implemented, Ramli et al. (2022) evaluated an e-peer mentoring program implemented to assist university students with their studies in mathematics during the COVID-19 pandemic. Data from the 80 mentee student participants indicated a positive relationship between mentor leadership skills, the formed relationship during the mentorship, the quality of communication, and the overall perceived efficacy of the e-peer mentoring program. Prior to Ramli et al. study, Culpeper and Kan (2020) examined what kind of relationship exists between communicative styles, rapport, and student engagement in an online peer mentoring program. The findings from the study indicated rapport development occurred between the peer mentor and mentee when frequent participation occurs and when the peer mentor communicates in a self-effacement manner (Culpeper & Kan, 2020).

Apart from peer mentor communication style, best practices for online peer mentoring need to include a mentor training component before engaging in peer mentoring and ongoing guidance from a faculty or staff member who can provide support to the mentor as needed (Glazzard et al., 2021). Betts (2019) highlighted the effects of peer mentoring for both the mentor and the mentee on a graduate level; however, the findings can be applied universally to

traditional and online peer mentoring programs. To provide support for the mentor, program facilitators should identify program expectations and time expectations as some mentors indicated difficulties with personal, social, and workload balancing to satisfy commitments (Betts, 2019; Bakar & Brody, 2021). Additionally, Naidoo et al. (2022) asserted that a multiple-mentor approach to virtual mentoring can serve to decrease the feelings of isolation by the mentee and help enhance the sense of belonging.

Suggested Platforms for the Use of E-Mentoring

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, traditional instruction was moved online to provide students with assistance, and supportive e-peer mentoring strategies were employed (Hardt et al., 2022). In a recent case study conducted by Speer et al. (2021), an investigation was conducted to evaluate the adaptations of online peer mentoring during the COVID-19 pandemic. The researchers identified a variety of communication modalities that were used and cited that video conferencing and emails were the most preferred among e-mentoring participants. In a prior study completed by Ongoz (2018), the use of information and communication technologies was explored to determine which one was the most effective in their use during the e-mentoring process. Of the various information and communication technologies (ICT) used during the study, email, social media platforms, conversations via phone, SMS, text messaging, blogging, learning management systems, teleconferencing social media, and instant messaging were among the most effective ICTs.

Further contributing to the literature on best practices and effective use of ICT, Mahayosnand and Bermejo (2022) examined the reflections of a mentor and mentee who took part in an e-mentorship. The findings from the study suggested the use of Google Workspace to maintain an accurate record of meeting times, dates, and topics discussed between the mentor

and the mentee. Recently, Bostanchi (2022) organized a study to determine the efficacy of a new mobile app called Mentree that could be used to consolidate the processes associated with mentoring including matching the mentee with a mentor, scheduling, and maintaining records of meetings. Though Mentree is still in the research phase, the mobile app shares many of the same benefits that current competitors such as Superpeer, BetterUp, ementor, LinkedIn, and Mentorcam offer.

If mentorship has been occurring virtually using any number of ICT, research has indicated that mentor proficiency is important for reducing the stress and anxiety of the mentee (Pollard & Kumar, 2021). Bühler et al. (2020) asserted that the use of ICT has proven results for their use; however, lack of access and the lack of skills and knowledge to use ICT present an additional disadvantage and barrier for either the mentor or mentee. Notably, there are a variety of communication platforms that can be utilized for e-mentoring; however, platforms having a messaging component, such as Facebook, provide both the mentor and mentee with more options for communicating, including a function for free video calling (Godó, 2021). Before engaging in any e-mentoring activities, program leaders should facilitate an ICT skills and utilization workshop to verify and develop essential skills as needed for both the mentee and mentor (Monroe-Wise et al., 2019).

Effective Mentor Attributes and Leadership Styles

Post-secondary student mentoring initiatives have been met with great acceptance and universally implemented across varying degree programs and degree attainment levels (Fallatah et al., 2018). While conducting a study to explore best practices and effective strategies for mentorship, Byrnes et al. (2019) examined the efficacy of e-mentoring. Mentorship in any capacity must be built upon effective and innovative strategies employed by the participating

mentor for success. Effective mentors facilitate opportunities for technical support, development of time management skills and goal-establishing, and provide a source of emotional support as needed by the mentee (Roberts et al., 2019). Like providing support to mentees within the mentorship relationship, mentors also require support and a well-developed idea of best mentorship practices (Harvey & Uren, 2019).

To address the question of what qualities, practices, and traits a successful mentor must possess, Barret et al. (2017), in their qualitative study, examined effective mentoring relationships. They concluded that effective mentor attributes included engagement with the mentee, frequent and ongoing communication, and shared similar interests between the mentor and the mentee. Holmes (2018) found similar findings to Barrett et al.'s (2017) findings. Holmes (2018) contributed to the research by asserting that a mentor with high efficacy would possess strong listening and observation skills with the ability and proven background to work one-on-one with mentees.

Effective Attributes of a Mentor

Mentoring programs are often a first-line resource employed by universities and colleges to assist students during their first-year transition period (Akinla et al., 2018; Holt & Fifer, 2018). Mentoring opportunities provide first-year students a pathway for becoming more integrated with their university or college, giving them a sense of belonging (Yomtov et al., 2017). Mentors who shared similar educational and socio-economic backgrounds and academic pursuits with those of their assigned mentees were indicated as having a stronger mentor/mentee connection and relationship (Geesa et al., 2018). Moreover, mentor attributes related to tolerance and being able to foster positive teamwork outcomes were also suggested by mentees as being desirable traits (Schatz-Oppenheimer, 2017).

In a 2018 study, Holmes et al. highlighted the positive or desirable attributes of a mentor. The authors' research examined mentorship for students in medical school; however, they noted that the identified competencies of a mentor could be shared among mentors who serve as peer-to-peer mentoring or engaged in hierarchical mentoring. Mentors' knowledge, credibility, clear and concise communication, devotion, and commitment to the mentee are the traits most desired. In a similar study to Holmes et al., Sibiya et al. (2018) explored the influences that a peer mentor had upon their assigned mentee. The qualitative data indicated that peer mentoring was beneficial when the mentor exhibited knowledge and skills pertaining to the mentee's area of interest.

A growing area of research, particularly in the areas of education, psychology, and managerial inquiries, is a focus on emotional intelligence (Chandra, 2020). Specifically, emotional intelligence is having the capacity to understand personal emotions and the ability to identify and understand those emotions in another person (Nguyen et al., 2019). A good mentor style or approach is one in which the mentor displays emotions and expressions (Semenets-Orlova et al., 2021). Developing and enhancing the emotional intelligence levels of mentees provides them with the ability to combat the stress typically experienced by college students (Bryant & Aytes, 2021).

In a recent study, Buckley et al. (2020) examined the enhancement of emotional intelligence among student leaders. Through mentorship, the emotional intelligence related to the areas of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management saw improvements in mentees' emotional intelligence appraisal scores that were completed prior to the study and at the conclusion. Before the assertions of Buckley et al., Crumpton (2019) stressed the importance of creating mentoring programs that included training to develop emotional

intelligence skills. The lack of emotional intelligence skills could have a negative impact on participants and serve as a limiting factor for the growth of programs.

Aside from the mentor having the attributes of self-efficacy, trustworthiness, and emotional intelligence, having proper training is another desired key attribute of a mentor (Morales et al., 2020). The development of a cohesive and well-structured training program provides mentors a clear understanding of their role and purpose they are to serve (Stelter et al., 2020). Furthermore, trained mentor training initiatives should include communication and how to evaluate the needs of their assigned mentee, develop meaningful relationships with mentees, and provide appropriate and timely support (Tan et al., 2018). Supporting the findings of Tan et al. (2018), Hund et al. (2018) asserted that proper mentoring training before engaging in mentorship enjoys positive associated benefits such as recruitment, retention, and addressing mental health issues of participating mentees (Hund et al., 2018).

Effective Mentor Leadership Styles

Peer mentoring programs provide a wide array of benefits for both the mentee and the mentor (Martin Ginis et al., 2018). Respectively, peer mentoring allows the mentor to continue to advance communication skills and to further grow in the skills needed to be an effective leader (Gafni Lachter & Ruland, 2018; Murrell et al., 2021). In developing a deeper understanding of student leadership style, Tan & Adams (2018) investigated student leaders' perceptions and understanding of their leadership style through the lens of Bolman and Deals (2008) proposed four-frame leadership theory. The study concluded by suggesting that the student participants embraced the tenets of more than one leadership approach, hybridizing their leadership skills which increased effectiveness (Peterson et al., 2020; Tan & Adams 2018).

The leadership style of a mentor is an important determinant, as it can influence strategies

for success for the mentee, enhance skills, change the mindset of the mentee, and create a culture associated with success (Al Amiri et al., 2020). A mentor who exhibits the transactional leadership style serves in a role to satisfy a particular need or want, but a mentor who is more invested in the mentee maintains a more supportive role (Mehrad et al., 2020). In a recent study, Heyns et al. (2019) contributed to the literature that among the baby boomer and Generation X population segments that were evaluated, the data implied that there were no major differences in how the two generations expressed leadership traits associated with transactional and transformational leadership styles. Furthermore, the researchers also indicated that millennials are more likely to place a higher value on leadership skills that create a culture of openness, forward-lookingness, and respect as compared to the baby boomer and Generation X populations.

The leadership style of a mentor can also play a pivotal role in the success of a first-year college student (Watkins, 2020). Research conducted by Norris et al. (2017) asserted that the servant leadership style is an effective leadership approach when engaging and connecting with first-year millennial generation students. In a study conducted by Amah (2017), leadership styles and relational energy in high-quality mentoring relationships were closely examined. Interestingly, the research indicated that servant leadership was the most desirable leadership style for a mentor, as transactional and autocratic leadership styles should be avoided due to having a negative or only slightly positive relationship with relational energy.

Supporting the findings of Norris et al. (2017), Miao et al. (2021) conducted a meta-analysis to determine if there was a direct correlation between emotional intelligence and servant leadership. The researchers concluded that the findings indicated a strong positive correlation between emotional intelligence and servant leadership. Furthermore, the evaluation of the

emotional intelligence of an individual can be used as a measurable predictor of leadership outcomes, either positive or negative (Digo 2021; Poonamallee et al., 2018). A mentor exhibiting the traits and characteristics of servant leadership can instill trust and engagement and collectively creates the pathway for positive outcomes for the mentee, the follower (Rahal & Farmanesh, 2022).

Mentor Training Programs in HE

The relationship between the mentor and the mentee is a personal relationship (Arnesson & Albinsson, 2017). Mentors provide the mentee with a myriad of benefits including shared knowledge of course-related work, career insight and advancement, and networking opportunities (Bredella et al., 2019). However, in most cases, the mentor serves voluntarily and does not receive any formal training prior to service (Sheri et al., 2018). Further compounding the matter is the shortage of adequately trained mentors (Chong et al., 2019).

In a review of best practices for mentors, Sorkness et al. (2017) describe the functionality and need for mentor development and training programs. Research findings indicated that mentor training provided an avenue of professional development in addition to providing mentors with the tools and resources needed to deal with challenges related to diversity and inclusivity (Choi et al., 2019; Sorkness et al., 2017). Similarly, Okolie et al. (2020) studied how career training with mentoring could be implemented in Nigerian HE institutions and how mentoring could enhance desirable career-related behaviors of college students. Career training with mentoring was suggested to elevate student motivation and provide necessary resources to refine potential career pathways.

To explore and identify the limitations of a mentor training program, Lescano et al. (2019) examined the adoption and implementation of a mentor training program in low- and

middle-income countries located in Africa, South America, and Asia. Countries designated as high-income can acquire needed resources for program implementation. However, low- and middle-income countries are faced with challenges, including the development of programs addressing the needs and concerns of that region, initiation of pilot programs, and the ability to move the program beyond the infancy stages.

Ideally, mentor training programs should be comprehensive and ongoing and serve as an opportunity for evaluation and self-development (Lee & Kim, 2018; Vikaraman et al., 2017). Consequently, ineffective mentorships and training programs can present detrimental effects for both the mentor and the mentee. Hund et al. (2018) examined the importance of mentor training in STEM-related fields of study and indicated that the lack of adequate mentor training can have negative impacts on mentees, cause a decline in productivity, and increase stress for both the mentor and the mentee. Moreover, the lack of mentor training specifically related to cultural practices of mentees of differing race and ethnicity from the assigned mentor could also serve as a limiting factor within the mentoring relationship (Byars-Winston et al., 2020).

Advantages of Peer Mentoring

As the literature has indicated, a positive relationship between mentoring—whether hierarchical in nature or peer-to-peer—and college student success exists (Collier, 2017; Lorenzetti et al., 2020). Mentoring can also be beneficial in easing the challenges that face FGCSs, such as stress and anxiety, as they transition into post-secondary education life (Plaskett et al., 2018). Peer mentoring initiatives can also serve as a direct avenue for the continued development of leadership skills for peer mentor participants (Skalicky et al., 2018). Peer mentoring also affords participants who share similar cultural practices the opportunity to build community and encourage the socialization of mentees engaged in mentorship (Brazill et al.,

2023).

In a recent study, Hall et al. (2020) examined the benefits of peer mentoring as an early intervention approach for at-risk student populations. Using peer mentoring as an early intervention created advantages for both the mentee and the institution by increasing retention rates, having a positive effect on the GPA of the mentee, and creating a sense of belonging to their institution for the mentee. Conversely, Uy et al. (2019) examined the benefits of peer mentoring for Southeast Asian American college students who were not experiencing academic hardship but had difficulties with college and career readiness skills. Student participants in the study indicated that peer mentoring provided valuable insight into course requirements and potential career pathways after graduation.

The advantages of peer mentoring also include a positive psychosocial impact for the participating mentee. Peer mentoring can be an effective practice to help alleviate stress and anxiety associated with the demands of HE (Kachaturoff et al., 2020). Mentoring helps acclimatize the mentee to the practices of the institution and creates a greater sense of belonging (Banks & Dohy, 2019). In a study that explored the relationship between freshman learning communities, Brouwer et al. (2018) evaluated the preferences of mentees on the academic and scholastic achievement of a desired mentor. Mentees demonstrated the tendency to move frequently towards or align with mentors who exhibited similar social preferences and goals and similar academic achievements to feel a greater sense of social acceptance among their peers (Brouwer et al., 2018).

Developing Purpose for Mentees

The function of the mentee in the mentorship relationship is a learning process through observation and emulation of a mentor (Gruber et al., 2020). In this exchange, the mentee

develops or enhances a variety of skills such as communication skills, skills associated with a potential career pathway, and the skills necessary to be successful in academic pursuits based on observation and practice (Clarke et al., 2019). The social skills that the mentee possesses prior to engaging in a mentoring relationship are a predictor of mentorship success (Osman & Gottlieb, 2018; Schenk et al., 2020). The mentee must have the motivation and the willingness to be mentored and to participate actively in the process before engaging in a mentee-mentor agreement (Cobb et al., 2018).

Developing purpose for mentees can be achieved by mentors in a variety of approaches. Mentors can identify purpose through supportive actions that include appraisal, emotional, instrumental, and informational (White et al., 2020). In a study conducted by Heeneman and de Grave (2019), it was suggested that the environment in which the mentor and mentee interact should be supportive. The environment should be conducive for the mentee to feel supported while, at the same time, be able to feel free to share their thoughts and concerns with their mentor without trepidation.

Hierarchical mentoring can also serve to assist mentees in identifying their purpose while pursuing post-secondary studies. Lund et al. (2019) examined how hierarchical mentoring could help college-level mentees determine their purpose. They identified that quality mentorship served to help mentees identify their purpose and role while the number of mentors during a mentee's time in college was not significant. Similarly, Burns (2020) investigated how mentoring through project development helped student mentees develop purpose, which translated into identifying desirable career steps and career goal fulfillment (Atkins et al., 2020; Burns, 2020; Domingo et al., 2019).

Developing Purpose for Mentors

The mentor serves multiple overlapping roles that include initiating and facilitating the learning process of the mentee and serving as a source of support and guidance and a role model (Kubberød et al., 2018). Historically, the role of a mentor was served by someone older and more seasoned than compared to someone who is younger with less experience; however, this is no longer the case (Ellis et al., 2020). The role of the mentor also subscribes to the tenets of the goal-setting theory by identifying the goals of the mentee through frequent questioning to gain a better understanding of the desired goals of the mentee (Robert et al., 2019). Mentoring also serves as a source of support for the mentor to enhance and further develop their professional identity in their respective field of practice (Holland, 2018).

Reciprocally, the feelings of purpose experienced by mentees are also shared by mentors (Godó et al., 2020; Kraiger et al., 2018). Faculty and staff members serving as mentors have indicated that mentoring provides them with a sense of purpose in addition to maintaining feelings of competence Gordon et al., 2019; (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Likewise, hierarchical mentoring can serve as a professional development strategy for participating faculty and staff members alike (Cleary et al., 2017). The learning exchange between the mentor and the mentee is not one-way, and learning can occur bidirectionally (Ahmadmehrabi et al., 2021).

Mentors can learn from mentees what are some of the current challenges or issues that mentees face as a way for the mentor to adapt and learn in a changing social environment (Chiroma, 2017). Garza et al. (2019) explored best practices for successful outcomes for the mentor. The research highlighted the importance of the creation of frameworks that provide a clear understanding of the roles and expected functions of the mentor. For the mentor to have a purpose, they must understand the purpose of the relationship between the mentor and mentee (Al Hilali et al., 2020). Additionally, the act of mentoring provides the mentor with a sense of

personal satisfaction or the fulfillment of other motives (Rekha & Ganesh, 2019).

Access and Support for FGCSs

Though the definition of a FGCS continues to evolve, the lack of support from family and insecurities about needed resources remains unchanged (House et al., 2019). Evidence from previous research findings has indicated that FGCSs are faced with a plethora of challenges and obstacles that are not shared with continuing-generation students such as a lack of self-confidence and identity (Mazlan et al., 2017). Additionally, other challenges and factors first-generation students could face include social integration, familial obligations, and financial resources (Chelberg & Bosman, 2019; Grace-Odeleye & Santiago, 2019; Katrevich & Aruguete, 2017). Moreover, FGCSs comparatively experience greater levels of stress and lack the needed coping skills and mechanisms their non-first-generation colleagues might have (Garriott & Nisle, 2018).

FGCSs often face polarizing cultural shifts between their backgrounds and the cultural norms and expectations of university and college life (Covarrubias et al., 2018). Interestingly, some FGCSs faced difficulties with communication and maintaining relationships from home once they were immersed in their new culture in HE (Capannola & Johnson, 2020). Moreover, FGCSs might not be as prepared for the rigors and expectations that HE demands as compared to the rigors of graduating high school (Wahleithner, 2020).

To combat increasing attrition rates and declining persistence rates, universities and colleges continue to adopt and implement supplemental programs such as additional funding and scholarships, enhanced support and monitoring systems, and increasing opportunities for hierarchical and peer mentoring (Cotton et al., 2017; Lisberg & Woods, 2018). Furthermore, peer mentoring can occur between a single mentor and mentee or through two or more mentors and a

mentee. The structural arrangement of mentoring is known as a constellation network and can take on different forms based on the number of mentors existing in the mentor-mentee relationship (Hines et al., 2019; Nowell et al., 2017).

Constellation Networks

As prior research has indicated, FGCSs often are faced with a variety of stressors that their non-first-generation college peers would experience (Albright & Hurd, 2018). Constellation networks have been indicated to provide multiple layers of mentorship and support from a variety of sources including family, faculty and staff, peers or near-peers, and administrators (Hines et al., 2019; Long et al., 2018). Not to be confused with cascade mentoring where mentoring follows a vertical, hierarchical flow, constellation networking evolves as a network drawing support from multiple sources (Wallace et al., 2022). What is more is that the creation of a constellation network can include other mentors and mentees pursuing similar interests to help facilitate a desired outcome such as an academic goal or project completion (Sellers et al., 2021).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the modality of instruction went from the traditional, face-to-face to the virtual environment. During this move, Hall et al. (2021) explored the different forms of mentorship including constellation to examine and identify best practices for undergraduate research students. Embracing the fundamentals of constellation mentorship provided mentee participants access to peers who also were mentees, near-peer mentors in the upper classes, and multiple mentors that culminated in successful outcomes for the mentees. To enhance efficacy, establishing a constellation network that facilitates multiple connections among mentors and mentees through diverse networking schemes serves to maximize effectiveness (McRae & Zimmerman, 2019).

Limitations of practice

Conversely, peer mentoring with its proven advantages and variety of uses has some limitations in practice. In a recent study conducted by Cree-Green et al. (2020), it was suggested there were a variety of uses and implications for mentoring concerning professional and personal growth. However, there are limitations to peer mentoring that require a closer examination. Research findings suggest that traditional dyadic peer mentoring may not be the best fit for some mentees and that underrepresented or marginalized groups may not have adequate access to opportunities to participate. Furthermore, a lack of staff, faculty, and eligible peers or near-peers willing to participate in mentorship initiatives are prohibitive factors (Farkas et al., 2019).

Brown (2017) conducted an examination to determine the enrollment in HE and what support services were available at present for students presenting with autism spectrum disorder. The research findings indicated that students classified as having autism spectrum disorder were more likely to enroll in a two-year technical or community college than students not presenting with autism spectrum disorder and that at the time of the study, no studies had been conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of peer mentoring for mentees with autism spectrum disorder. These findings support the need for formalized training of mentors before entering into a formalized mentorship (Lucas & James, 2017).

In a recent study, Law et al. (2020) examined undergraduate mentoring practices to identify limitations of practice and limiting factors. Findings from the study indicated that mentorship programs are beneficial for student retention and persistence; however, mentoring programs that lack structure, oversight, and training can hamper desired outcomes. Inadequate mentor training when working with mentees with disabilities can also be seen as a limiting factor. These challenges could include communication barriers or difficulties establishing a

positive rapport or forming a mentor relationship where the mentor is overly protective (Hillier et al., 2018).

Contributing to the list of limiting factors, Robnett et al. (2018) examined the thoughts and input from both the mentor and the mentee in their study of undergraduate students engaged in mentoring. The study highlighted the detrimental effects of negative mentorship due to the poor and unprofessional practices of the mentor. Investigating negative mentoring practices, Limeri et al. (2019) evaluated mentorship practices that lead to negative mentoring. Factors associated with negative mentoring include the absence of the mentor, the mentor acting beyond the parameters of the mentorship, poorly matched mentor/mentee, lack of support and structure, and practices by the mentor that are not equal or seen as an equal or fair treatment to all mentees (Limeri et al., 2019).

Summary

Student retention rates and persistence remain an ongoing area of concern for administrators in HE. Increasing attrition rates and low persistence rates have a negative significant impact on the financial resources of a university or college, as it is less costly to retain students rather than lose students (Al-Sheeb et al., 2018). As the literature has presented, there have been a variety of retention strategies implemented to facilitate persistence including workshop development for best practices for first-year students, the creation and adoption of bridge programs, and the use of mentorships in a variety of formats. Interestingly, the findings presented in this literature review have focused primarily on the four-year and graduate-level programs while findings and reviews for the two-year community and technical college level have proven to be scarce.

The development and implementation of peer mentorship in HE have been indicated

through research to be of great value. Peer mentoring has theoretical significance in practice, as it is a way to stimulate student persistence rates and diminish high attrition rates, especially among first-year, FGCSs. In practice, peer mentoring is deeply rooted in the social cognitive theory postulated by Bandura (1986) The social cognitive theory is based on the premise that learning in the contextual environment can be achieved through the emulation of a model (Schunk, 2020). Peer mentoring closely follows the social cognitive theory in that a mentee serves as an observer and the mentor serves the function of being a model. In this unique relationship, the mentee observes and emulates the behaviors presented by the mentor, who serves the role of a model.

Peer mentoring has evolved over time like instructional modalities and delivery have changed. Historically, mentoring was hierarchical in nature and the relationship was between a faculty member or staff member and a mentee (Livingstone & Naismith, 2018). This relationship would have been dyadic in nature and traditionally maintained in a face-to-face setting. However, hierarchical mentoring can now be two or more mentors assigned to one mentee, and the relationship can last during the entire tenure of a student's time at their respective institution. As the research has suggested, peer mentoring and alumni mentoring have emerged as new forms of mentoring with proven efficacy.

Alumni mentoring has many positive aspects, but the most important is that the alumni mentor serves to guide the mentee to academic success, assist with career goal achievement, and provide an additional layer of emotional support (Nabi et al., 2021). Alumni also play a crucial role in advocacy for their alma mater, serving to advocate for new programs and call for educational reforms with the legislature. Alumni mentoring can also occur remotely to satisfy the needs of students who are distance learners (Leppisaari, 2019). The research concerning alumni

mentoring is weighted heavily on the undergraduate and graduate levels, while research on the two-year level is minimal.

Formalized training has been indicated as being highly beneficial to prepare the mentor for effective mentorship. Furthermore, mentors need to be cognizant of the attributes that mentees have indicated to be the most desirable. Failure to recognize the importance of desirable attributes and leadership styles can have detrimental effects on the institution, the mentee, and the mentor (Hund et al., 2018). The mentor could transform and empower the mentee by enhancing the efficacy of the mentee by developing good time management practices and professional networking (Lim et al., 2017; Pethrick et al., 2020).

Mentoring in any form—alumni-based, hierarchical, peer, or through the development of a constellation—can be beneficial for the mentee. However, there are limitations to this practice that need to be considered prior to implementing a mentorship program. Specifically, understanding the needs of the mentee, such as academic goals or if the mentee has any disabilities that could require additional training for the mentor before mentorship. Continued research for best practices will create a better outcome for the mentee and serve to diminish increasing attrition rates while serving to augment declining persistence rates.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this qualitative case study is to explore the lived experiences of mentees involved in a University Transfer program in a two-year technical community college. Student persistence at a two-year technical college can be defined as students who complete the first semester of initial enrollment and continue to the subsequent second semester. Chapter 3 presents the methodology that was employed to determine the efficacy of peer mentoring. Chapter 3 is composed of the following sections: research design, research questions, setting, and participants, researching positionality, procedures, data collection plan, and trustworthiness.

Research Design

According to Creswell and Poth (2017), three different types of case studies can be employed when conducting qualitative studies. The different types of case studies may include instrumental, collective, and intrinsic. The case study that I have proposed to conduct is best identified as an intrinsic case study. An intrinsic study is best suited for this research construct as it is used to evaluate the effectiveness of a new program (Yin, 2014). For this study, I plan to explore the lived experiences of mentees involved in a university transfer program in a two-year technical college. Furthermore, I will also evaluate the perception of mentors by participating mentees.

The major component of this intrinsic case study will be the selected participants who are to be used in the study. Another component of the study will be a personal interview to develop a better understanding of the experiences of each participating mentee. Focus groups will also be created and incorporated into the study to facilitate open and candid conversations among mentees regarding their experiences during the study. Finally, all participating mentees in the

study will be asked to maintain a reflective journal. The use of reflective journals will allow mentees to express their personal thoughts and opinions about their interactions with their assigned mentor in a nonintimidating manner. In a similar study conducted by Collier (2017), adoption of a formal mentoring program was indicated as a valuable resource; however, resources to maintain such a large initiative were determined to be a concern of HE administrators (Collier, 2017).

The decision to employ a case study is best used when researching a case within a real-life, contemporary context or setting (Yin, 2014). This case study will be conducted to examine student participants identified as mentees and their perceptions of their assigned mentor. The mentee, a first-year student, will be assigned to a second-year student in the same program. A two-year technical college will serve as the setting for which the proposed case study will take place.

Considerations given to the appropriateness and utilization of an intrinsic case study include a variety of reasons. First, through student interviews, a detailed student perspective can be collected and analyzed to evaluate efficacy. In an attempt like student interviews, round table discussions will be conducted with student mentees. These discussions will allow mentees to openly discuss their thoughts about peer mentoring programs and the ways the program could be enhanced to make the experience a more positive one. Finally, student reflective journals will be issued to determine if the thoughts and perceptions of a peer mentoring program change from beginning to end. Designing multiple opportunities for student mentees to express their thoughts and opinions is essential in this case study to develop a comprehensive understanding of the value and need of a peer mentoring program.

Research Questions

Central Research Question

What are the lived experiences of mentees in the university transfer program at a two-year technical college?

Sub-Question One

As a mentee, what leadership attributes of your mentor did you find most beneficial to you?

Sub-Question Two

As a mentee, what were some of your memorable experiences while being mentored?

Sub-Question Three

As a mentee, what are some of your experiences that would potentially inhibit you from persisting in your current program of study?

Setting and Participants

Site (or Setting)

The purpose of this qualitative case study is to explore the lived experiences of mentees involved in a university transfer program in a two-year technical college. Triad Technical College will serve as the research site for this intrinsic case study. Triad Technical College is a medium-sized technical college situated in the Southeastern United States. At present, the college serves an annual student enrollment of 25,603 students enrolled in a variety of course modalities including face-to-face, hybrid, and fully online. The college comprises 10 campuses located within Guilford County. Each of the campuses is in a highly developed, urbanized area. Triad Technical College maintains a well-developed hierarchy that includes a president, a senior executive vice president, deans, department chairs, and assistant chairs.

Triad Technical College was selected due to its situation in an urbanized setting with a significant number of entering students being FGCSs. Furthermore, each campus offers courses that serve as requirements for the University Transfer program. Triad Technical College is also composed of early/middle college high school campuses located on three campuses. Additionally, the college offers dual enrollment for eligible high school students who meet the core requirements for the Career and College Promise. These programs, coupled with a highly diversified student body demographic, make Triad Technical College an ideal and desirable research site.

Participants

Ten student mentee participants will be selected based on meeting the student criteria and the recommendation of an instructor or faculty academic advisor who is familiar with a student's coursework. Selected mentee participants must meet the requirements of being a first year, FGCS enrolled in the University Transfer program at Triad Technical College. Prospective mentee candidates will be required to complete a brief study application to confirm eligibility for the study requirements. Selected students will be directly contacted by me once applicant criteria have been reviewed and approved for the study.

Triad Technical College is made up of a student body population that is 41.6% White, 33.1% African American, 13.4% Hispanic, 5.9% Asian, and 6.1% other. Furthermore, the student body population is composed of 58.7% females and 41.3% males. The average age of the student population is 24.6 years and 36.9% of the student population is considered full-time students while 63.1% is considered part-time students.

Researcher's Positionality

Interpretive Framework

I currently serve as an anatomy and physiology instructor, and my educational and research background is deeply rooted in biological sciences. Having an extensive background in science, I am intrigued by how things work or how they are developed and subscribe to the tenets of social constructivism. Creswell and Poth (2017) describe the possible research goals of a social constructivist as trying to understand the world in which they live and work. As a STEM educator, I rely heavily on dissection to help my students develop a deeper understanding of the arrangement and construction of different organ systems. As a constructivist, I have adopted and employed methodologies that help me identify new ways of learning and conveying new information to my students and colleagues. The sharing of knowledge and findings strengthens the relationship between student to teacher and colleague to colleague.

Philosophical Assumptions

As a Christian qualitative researcher, I am grounded by scripture to do all things that will bring glory to God. To seek the meaning and the relevance of the topic I will be researching, I gravitate towards and embrace Romans 12:2 (ESV): "Do not be conformed to the world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect" (*The Holy Bible, English Standard Version*, 2016). Therefore, the data I collect for this study should be exclusively the thoughts and expressions of the participants. Furthermore, any biased opinions held by me should not be made evident in the yielded findings of the study. Similarly, my thoughts and opinions regarding the research topic should remain mine and should not be used to augment those of the research participants.

Ontological Assumption

Creswell and Poth (2017) assert that the ontological issue relates to the nature of reality and its characteristics. As a biologist, I subscribe to the idea that reality is what is occurring and is observable during the time of observation. However, the reality observed by one researcher could be described or identified by another as being completely different.

Epistemological Assumption

Embracing epistemological assumptions, the observer will gain knowledge based on the level of closeness and direct interaction with participants (Creswell & Poth, 2017). I employ similar techniques in the laboratory setting by using dissection and other hands-on modalities that provide students with the ability to gain knowledge using each of their senses. My background in the biological sciences helped to shape the belief that knowledge is gained by doing. For example, conducting experiments in the lab setting or in the field helped me develop a more solidified knowledge of the subject material in question.

Axiological Assumption

The axiological assumptions of a researcher serve to address and identify what the researcher values (Creswell & Poth, 2017). As a Christian researcher, I am often questioned about my values and beliefs, as they differ from popular theories and assumptions in the scientific world. I remind my colleagues and students that what we are examining is exactly that, a theory and in fact not a scientific law in most cases. I place value on what is observable and what can be studied to explain the how and why of what has been observed.

Researcher's Role

My role as a qualitative researcher is to serve as an observer and facilitator. I will be responsible for securing the required approval from Liberty University's institutional review

board (IRB) before the start of the study. I will also accept full responsibility for securing the appropriate clearances and approval from the site in which the study will take place. All participants chosen for the study will be briefed about the study and will be required to sign participatory agreements before the start of the study. I will maintain the role of a human instrument serving the function of a research facilitator when conducting personal interviews and focus groups and reviewing all submitted reflective journals. The data from these interactions will be the thoughts, opinions, and views of research participants exclusively and not mine. Furthermore, interviews, focus group discussions, and writings from reflective journals will be transcribed, coded, and analyzed as is without manipulation or augmentation by me. Finally, all data from the study will be presented as the exclusive thoughts, opinions, and expressions of the research participants.

Procedures

To explore the lived experiences of mentees in the university transfer program at a two-year technical college site, approval will be secured from Triad Technical College's Institutional Research Department. After site permission has been granted, IRB permission will be formally applied for to gain permission from Liberty University to conduct the proposed study. After securing the necessary site approval and IRB permission, all participants identified and selected for the study will be contacted via email by me. All study participants will be provided with participatory agreements that will fully outline the expectations, length of study, role of participants, and the purpose of the study. The participatory agreements will remain in a fully secured cabinet with no one other than me having access.

Permissions

The proposed study will be composed of 10 mentees and four peer mentors. To qualify as

a mentee, the candidate will need to be a first year, FGCS enrolled in the University Transfer program. The identified site for the study is highly diversified with an age range of 15 years to 65 years, with varying ethnicities, races, and religious backgrounds. Prospective candidates will be selected with the assistance of faculty academic advisors who will identify participants based on study criteria. Permissions will also be applied for at the anticipated research site. After securing the necessary permission from the research site, a formal request will be made to Liberty University's IRB to obtain permission to conduct the study.

Study criteria for candidates will be exclusively based on the student being a first-year, FGCS enrolled in the University Transfer program at Triad Technical College. The participants' ages, sex, ethnicity, and religious backgrounds will not be considered for the study. The sampling criteria will be based specifically on criterion sampling. Any candidate seeking entry into the study who does not fit the desired criteria will not be approved to participate in the study. The candidates chosen for participation will be provided with an informed consent form to complete. The form will identify the purpose, duration, role, and expectations of participants in the study and assure them that all information collected in the study will remain confidential.

Recruitment Plan

Candidates will be selected based exclusively on meeting the eligibility criteria of the study and by a recommendation of a faculty member or faculty academic advisor familiar with the course work of the student. The study pool will comprise first-year, FGCSs in the University Transfer program at Triad Technical College. The sample size for the study will consist of 10 mentees who are students who have met all eligibility criteria. Eligibility criteria will be evaluated by either a recommending faculty member or faculty academic advisor and through a final evaluation conducted by me. Once the study candidates are identified, a formal invitation

will be sent to each candidate via email to request a formal meeting to orient the participant to the study.

Identified participants will be provided with consent forms before the start of the study and before any data are officially collected. Moreover, consent forms will be issued to all identified student mentors who meet eligibility requirements. The requirements for a mentor are to be a second-year student in the Associate of Science program or University Transfer biology pathway and who is in good academic standing with Triad Technical College. Mentors will be required to complete an application for study participation and will be required to present a letter of recommendation from a faculty member who is familiar with the student's academic work, academic and social maturity, and willingness to participate. Mentor candidates will be provided with the same consent forms given to mentees; these will need to be completed before any data are collected. Regardless of interest, all study participants, both the mentees and mentors, must meet all eligibility criteria and complete and sign consent and informed consent forms before the start of the study.

Data Collection Plan

This study explores the lived experiences of mentees in the University Transfer program at a two-year technical community college. To collect data for this qualitative intrinsic case study, mentees will be asked to maintain a reflective journal that will be reviewed at the conclusion of the study. The reflective summaries provided will serve to develop a deeper understanding of each mentee's individual experience and perspective of collaborating with a peer mentor. Focus groups will be conducted to further explore the experiences and perspectives of mentee participants. Finally, each mentee will be individually interviewed during the study to gather feedback regarding their experiences and opinions regarding their relationship with their

assigned mentee.

Focus groups will be conducted during the study and consist of five participating mentees. The creation of focus groups will serve two primary purposes during the study. The first is to determine if the perceptions and personal experiences of mentees shifted from their personal interview and, if so, which areas shifted and were these positive or negative shifts. Secondly, the focus groups will be held as a way for mentees to collaborate and discuss what they thought were favorable experiences while collaborating with their mentor and which experiences, if any, were unfavorable. This feedback will allow future mentorships to be augmented in a manner that is more conducive to mentee satisfaction and provide an additional layer of guidance for the participating mentor.

Another means of collecting data during the study will include personal interviews. Mentees will be individually interviewed to develop a deeper understanding of their personal experiences while working with their mentor. The feedback collected during the personal interviews will be used in comparison to the feedback provided during the focus groups. The comparison of the data collected during the individual interviews and focus groups will be closely examined to deepen the understanding of the relationship between the mentees and their respective mentors during the time of the study.

Data Collection Approach: Individual Interviews

Individual interviews will be conducted during the study to glean rich data from the experiences of each of the mentees. Each study candidate will have to meet the study criteria of being a FGCS in the University Transfer program and being selected by an academic faculty advisor. The individual interview process will consist of a proposed set of questions that each mentee will be asked. Each mentee will be asked the same set of questions as the other

participants in the study. The data from the individual interviews will be used to compare the feedback provided during the focus group meetings and each reflective journal.

Individual Interview Questions

1. What was your most memorable experience while working with the mentor that made you want to continue in the University Transfer program? CRQ
2. Describe the favorable attributes or characteristics of your mentor that were impactful or beneficial to you. SQ1
3. What attributes or characteristics of your assigned mentor were not beneficial to you? SQ1
4. How would you best describe the self-efficacy of your assigned mentor? SQ1
5. How would you describe the interactions between you and your assigned mentor? SQ1
6. When meeting with your mentor, were the meetings conducted in a face-to-face setting or virtually using Teams or Zoom? SQ2
7. When meeting with your mentor did you find it easy to openly discuss issues of concern to you with your mentor? SQ2
8. Do you believe your time as a mentee was well served or do you believe you would have been okay without a mentor? SQ2
9. If you were meeting with your mentor in a face-to-face setting, which location did you frequently use as your meeting site? SQ2
10. What were some of the most impactful interactions you had with your mentor? SQ3
11. After participating in the mentorship program, what are some obstacles that you can still see as being a roadblock to persisting in your current program of study? SQ3
12. As a mentee in the mentorship program, how have you benefited from being assigned a

mentor? SQ3

The questions listed above will be used for the personal interview data collection. Questions concerning the relationship between the mentee and mentor are derived from Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory. The formulated questions focus on the relationship between the mentee and the mentor as the social cognitive theory stresses the importance of knowledge attainment through the emulation of a mentor. Moreover, the questions help to develop a clear understanding of what is needed by the mentee to sustain persistence in the University Transfer program. Finally, the questions help to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the mentor, which will serve the need of recommending a leadership training workshop before mentoring. The proposed questions presented for the individual interview data collection will be further examined by a professional in qualitative research.

Individual Interview Data Analysis Plan

Each mentee participant in the study will be interviewed individually during the study. The initial interviews will be coded to determine the themes that begin to present. A cross-analysis will be conducted to determine what parallels exist between the initial individual interview and the initial focus group discussions. Data from personal interviews, focus groups, and reflective journals will be analyzed. The analysis will be used to develop a deeper understanding of the relationship between the mentee and the mentor. In a similar study conducted by McConnell et al. (2019), individual interviews were conducted to collect data on mentor perspectives of a peer mentoring program (McConnell et al., 2019). Expressed thoughts and opinions of the mentees will be examined to determine if the relationship between the mentee and mentor was either favorable or unfavorable.

Data Collection Approach: Focus Groups

Focus groups will be created to facilitate an open discussion among mentees. Similar to individual interviews, members of each focus group will be asked a variety of questions to gauge interest in participating in a peer mentoring program, discuss thoughts, feelings, and concerns as a first year, FGCS, and determine what expectations mentees have of their assigned mentors. The focus groups will closely parallel the individual interviews concerning the questions being asked. Furthermore, the formation and implementation of the focus groups will help to develop a deeper, more genuine understanding of the thoughts and perceptions of student mentee participants.

Focus Group Questions

Focus group questions have been created to determine if any differences exist between the responses provided in the personal interview responses and those in the group discussions. The questions seek to explore the concerns, expectations, goals, and experiences mentees have regarding enrollment in the Associate of Science program and their expectations of their assigned mentor. The lived relational experience of a mentee with their mentor is a dynamic relationship that can serve the needs of the mentee. A relationship that becomes a negative experience for the mentee can create a negative impact and cause a decline in persistence rates. The mentor must have a considerable level of self-efficacy and be willing to develop a genuine understanding of the needs and wants of assigned mentees.

1. Please tell me about your experiences as a student in the University Transfer program before participating in the mentoring program. (CRQ)
2. While working with a mentor, do you feel more empowered as a mentee? (CRQ)
3. If you experienced the feeling of connectedness with your mentor, what did your mentor

do to make you feel that way? (SQ1)

4. Has participating in a mentorship program given you a sense of belonging to the college? (SQ1)
5. During your time with your mentor, what would you consider to be the most memorable or impactful moment you experienced? (SQ2)
6. Have you experienced a pivotal moment with your mentor that made you want to persist with your current studies to reach your academic goals? (SQ3)

Focus Groups Data Analysis Plan

Data from the responses of mentees during focus group meetings will be recorded. The recordings from each focus group meeting will first be coded. Collectively, the coded data will be analyzed to determine the recurring themes that begin to emerge. Furthermore, the emerging themes will be analyzed to determine if there is a continuity between the data from the individual interviews and the data from the focus group findings. Data from the individual interviews and focus groups will be cross analyzed to determine whether any parallels exist between each form of data collection and what those parallels are. The emerging themes presented from focus groups data will be analyzed to determine the weaknesses and strengths of the peer mentoring program.

Data Collection Approach: Reflective Journal

Mentee participants will be provided with the outlet to give a personal accounting of the time spent after each meeting with their assigned mentor. Mentees will be asked to provide personal thoughts and opinions after the completion of each mentoring session. The adoption of reflective journals in this study will create the opportunity for mentee participants to examine behaviors and interactions with their assigned mentors, describe their personal feelings

(Sudiraman et al., 2021), and identify their own unique experiences (Girgin, 2020) through journal entries. Furthermore, the implementation of reflective journals promotes higher-order thinking skills and encourages a growth mindset that will translate to more positive outcomes (Hussein, 2018).

Reflective Journal Data Analysis Plan

At the beginning of the study, mentee participants will be issued a journal and will be asked to write a reflective entry after each mentoring meeting. Reflective journals will be collected and reviewed at the conclusion of the study. The content presented in each journal will be analyzed by coding. Respective of qualitative analysis, coding can be implemented in a study to reduce the volume of empirical data for synthesis and analysis (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). Emerging themes identified from the journal submissions will be evaluated to explore and examine the relationship between mentoring and mentee persistence in the University Transfer program.

Data Synthesis

The data for this qualitative research study will stem from an aggregate of sources and consist of individual interviews, focus groups, and reflective journals. Data specifically from individual interviews, focus groups, and reflective journals will be qualitatively analyzed through coding and theme development. Each method of data collection will not serve as an independent source of data but contribute to a combined culmination of the data.

Trustworthiness

Guba and Lincoln (2005) conceived of the foundational concepts and terms that establish the trustworthiness of a study; specifically, credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. The data collected from discussion group responses, individual interviews, and

individual reflections from reflection journals are the expressions of each study participant. The collected data was analyzed using triangulation to identify emerging themes based on the research participants' beliefs, thoughts, and expressions. Triangulation of the data serves to highlight patterns of the collected data which also serves to reinforce the trustworthiness of the research findings (Stahl & King, 2020).

Credibility

To establish credibility, a variety of techniques will be employed. To determine the efficacy and reliability of the data, the research study will take place over the course of one academic semester. Personal interviews and focus groups will be conducted during the study to collect data from mentee participants. The mentees will also be asked to maintain a personal reflection journal to record their thoughts and perceptions after each encounter with their assigned mentor. To ensure the trustworthiness of the data from the interviews and discussion groups, all conversations will be recorded and then transcribed to ensure accuracy (Kyngäs et al., 2019).

Transferability

The proposed study will examine the effect peer mentoring has on persistence for first year, FGCSs entering the University Transfer program at a two-year technical community college. The findings of the study will have universal application and the findings can be used in a variety of contexts (Daniel, 2019). Furthermore, detailed descriptors recorded in the study, such as methods and participant information, will be described in great detail to ensure future replication by researchers with similar interests. Finally, the transferability of a study and its findings depends on the dynamic interaction of conditional criteria in the target context as well as on the process of replication (Schloemer & Schröder-Bäck, 2018).

Dependability

The dependability of a study is based on the systemic relationship that exists between research findings and the methods employed to arrive at the indicated findings (Hanson et al., 2016). Methods used in the study should be relevant and relate to the context of the study. It should be noted, however, that a qualitative study is unique in that a qualitative study cannot be fully replicated by future researchers. To ensure dependability, the primary researcher can use audio recordings of the collected data, the transcriptions of audio data, and software to code data for increased transparency for research dependability (Hanson et al., 2016).

Confirmability

According to Eldh et al. (2020), confirmability is related to the audit trail and the ability to follow exactly how the data were collected and analyzed. Furthermore, to ensure the confirmability of the findings respective of a qualitative study, the findings must be those of the participants and not augmented to reflect the thoughts and opinions of the researcher. Similarly, consideration must be given to triangulation by the qualitative researcher to keep the data collected and analyzed from the researcher's beliefs and predispositions (Abdalla et al., 2018).

Ethical Considerations

To ensure that the study is conducted to the highest ethical standards, all considerations will be adhered to. Before the start of the study, permission and clearance will be secured from Liberty University's IRB. Once secured, permission will be requested to conduct the study at the chosen site. Once all study participants have been identified and selected, they will be briefed in detail on the purpose of the study and the participants' specific roles within the study. Participants will be provided with an authorization form that will need to be signed before their participation. All data from participants, including personal reflective journals and notes, will be

securely locked in a cabinet or other secured construct to ensure unauthorized access. To protect the privacy of the research site and those of the study, pseudonyms will be used in all instances.

Summary

The qualitative methods presented in this chapter will be used to collect data to determine the relationship between peer mentoring and student persistence in a two-year technical college setting. Methodologies for this study will include individual interviews, focus groups, and the review of reflective journals provided by mentees. The data from each qualitative method will be recorded and transcribed to minimize data collection errors. Once collected, the data will be analyzed through coding and re-evaluated to determine the themes that begin to emerge. The data will be evaluated as a collection rather than having each source serving as an independent source. The data will be the thoughts, opinions, and views of the participants and will not be impacted by the thoughts or biases of the researcher.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The focus of this qualitative case study was to explore the lived experiences of first year, FGCSs (mentees) who at the start of the study were enrolled in the University Transfer program at Triad Technical Community College. The study was reflective of Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory. Study participants serving as mentees were assigned to a second-year mentor enrolled in the University Transfer program who was not on academic probation and had a cumulative GPA of 2.0 or better. The mentor served as a guidepost to help mentees learn behaviors and practices, potentially enhancing persistence rates. During their time with their assigned mentors, the mentees had the opportunity to observe and discuss the academic practices and tendencies of their mentors that have afforded them academic success. This chapter includes participant demographics, the data presented by themes, and research question responses.

Participants

The initial recruitment plan was to identify study participants based on the recommendations from faculty members and academic advisors. Potential study candidates were required to be in good academic standing with Triad Technical Community College. Faculty members and academic advisors were sent a recruitment email to share with their students and were asked to have any interested students contact me via email. After 1 to 2 weeks, this plan yielded very few interested students and even fewer who met the eligibility criteria.

To generate more attention to this research study and to attract potential study candidates, the department chair of biology, the dean of STEM, the dean of humanities and social sciences, the director of student life, and the director of academic engagement were contacted and asked to speak with all associated staff and faculty members to share a study recruitment email with their

students. This quickly resulted in securing the number of mentees and mentors required for the study to move forward. Additionally, there were enough candidates identified to replace two research participants who withdrew due to hardships during the study. The demographic characteristics of the ten mentees who completed the study are indicated in Table 1.

Wick

Wick is a full-time student who works a full-time job in customer service at a local home improvement store. At the time of the study, Wick had completed his first semester with a great deal of difficulties resulting in undesirable course outcomes. During our first conversation as we discussed eligibility criteria for the study, Wick was eager to learn more about college resources and how to be successful and was hopeful that he would be able to make new friends as this was something that he struggled to do.

Gia

Gia is a full-time student who works after school and on the weekends as her school schedule permits. Gia is a multilingual student who in 2017 immigrated to the United States with her family from Zimbabwe and hopes to attend medical school to fulfill a lifelong dream of becoming a pediatrician. During the study, Gia received a letter stating that she had been accepted by her first-choice university where she will begin in the Fall of 2024 as a pre-med student.

Gon

Gon is a full-time student with a full-time job who has career aspirations of attending medical school. To help prepare for a career in medicine, he is completing an EMT program during the 2024 summer that he hopes will gain him some valuable insight into the various aspects of the medical field. Gon also expressed interest in participating in extracurricular

activities that help boost his student resume and enhance his opportunity for scholarships and entry into a four-year university once he has completed the University Transfer program.

Ari

Ari is a full-time student who experienced a great deal of difficulties during her first semester in an attempt to juggle school and a full-time job at a local chain doughnut shop. Ari had expressed that she was hopeful to learn about time management, study skills, and how to be successful in school to accomplish getting her associate's degree. Ari was unsure about her career goals but showed interest in pursuing something in the medical field.

Rebecca

Rebecca is a retired member of the United States Armed Forces and currently works as a busy stay-at-home mom. When the opportunity presented itself, Rebecca decided to enroll in the University Transfer program to pursue her second career in life as a physical education teacher. As a mature student, Rebecca expressed great interest in learning about different technologies that were available to assist her in her academic journey. Moreover, Rebecca was partnered with a much younger mentor who spent time orienting Rebecca to note-taking techniques used on an iPad or tablet and the resources available at the college, including student clubs and organizations.

Karina

Karina is a full-time student with a full-time life outside of school that involves working a full-time job and spending time with family and friends when possible. After her first semester, Karina said she had difficulties with balancing time between work and school. Karina has a very warm and bubbly personality and wants to pursue a career that allows her to help others, such as becoming a social worker.

Rockwell

Rockwell is a student who knows exactly what his academic and career goals are and works tirelessly in an attempt to make these goals a reality. During our first conversation about the study, Rockwell expressed with great excitement that his personal goal was to attend medical school. While attending school as a full-time student, Rockwell also has maintained a full-time job, and his determination to achieve success was unwavering. Rockwell had expressed that he had hoped to have a mentor with whom he could share ideas about transferring to a four-year university after completing the University Transfer program.

Zack

Zack is a full-time student who also works a full-time job and is not sure what his career goals are or what he plans to do after finishing the University Transfer program. Zack has faced difficulties transitioning from high school, where he was heavily involved in athletics and school came easy for him. Zack expressed concern that he is not acclimating to college life and has found it hard to make new friends or acquaintances. Zack said during the eligibility interview that he had hoped his mentor would help him feel more connected to the college and learn more about potential careers that he would be interested in.

Elise

Elise is a recent transplant to the area and is working as a caregiver while attending college as a full-time student. Elise, like Zack and Wick, is hoping to make a connection to the college while attending classes and is even more hopeful that she will be able to make new friends. Elise hopes her mentor will help her learn more about the college and improve her skills as a student so she can pursue a career in the medical field as a nurse.

Janet

Janet, an immigrant to the United States, is classified as an English language learner. Janet is a full-time student and also serves as a caregiver for her father. Janet is interested in pursuing a degree in nursing after completing the required coursework in her current program. Janet shared with me during her eligibility review that her greatest difficulty is learning the necessary skills to be a better student, specifically how to take notes. Janet was hopeful that she and her mentor would be able to discuss ways to take better notes in class to prepare for exams:

Table 1

Mentee Participant Demographics

Mentee participant	Employed while attending college	Career goal	Enrolled in subsequent semester
Janet	Yes	Nursing	Yes
Rockwell	Yes	Medical	No
Karina	Yes	Social worker	Yes
Gia	Yes	Medical	Yes
Gon	Yes	Medical	Yes
Ari	Yes	Medical	Yes
Wick	Yes	Business	Yes
Rebecca	Yes	PE teacher	Yes
Elise	Yes	Medical	No
Zach	Yes	Undecided	No

Results

Through the progression of this study, the data illuminated three emerging themes. Table 2 identifies the primary and secondary themes that emerged during the study. The mentees during the individual interview process and focus group discussion emphasized the importance of having a mentor who was relatable to them and their life experiences. The mentees expressed that their ideal mentor would share a variety of commonalities including background and common career aspirations. The mentees also expressed the importance of gaining insightful knowledge from their mentor on best practices for achieving academic success. The most interesting theme identified during the study was the feeling of being disconnected from their mentor when interacting digitally. The need for the mentees to interact with their mentor in person was remarked as being of significant importance. At the beginning of the study, each mentor and mentee were advised that they could interact with each other by any means most suitable for them. All initial interactions occurred through email or text messages; however, the data indicated that all the mentees expressed a preference for in-person interactions when meeting their mentors.

Table 2

Themes & Subthemes

Theme	Subthemes
1. Relatability of the assigned mentor	1. Similar backgrounds 2. Common interests in career pathways
2. A feeling of disconnect in the digital world	1. Preference given for face-to-face interaction 2. Developing a sense of connectedness to the college through face-to-face interaction
3. Learning best practices for achieving academic success	1. Advising concerns 2. Developing a better understanding of college resources and extracurricular offerings

Relatability of the Assigned Mentor

During the data collection process when the mentees participated in the focus group discussion and individual interviews were conducted, the mentees expressed the importance of relatability and commonalities among backgrounds and future career goal interests with their assigned mentor. When asked, "Do you feel more empowered as a mentee while working with a mentor in the focus group discussion?" Gon asserted, "Yes, having a mentor who is relatable and shares a similar background and future career goals helped me to feel more empowered." Reflective of Gon's assertions, Rockwell, when asked about his pivotal moment with his mentor, remarked, "Learning that we have had similar struggles, share similar accomplishments, and the

relatability of my mentor have been pivotal." Similarly, Gia reflected in her journal after her second interaction with her mentor and learning about his educational experiences and pathways writing, "I found his story relatable and comforting, especially as I was about to transition from a two-year program to a four-year university."

Mentors who had completed specific areas of coursework were also seen as key factors of relatability that the mentees had identified as an area of importance to them. During the individual interview, when asked, "What was your most memorable experience while working with your assigned mentor that made you want to continue in the University Transfer program?" Elise remarked, "My mentor was easy to talk with, and learning more about her background and how our backgrounds were similar. It was nice having her to talk with." As the relationship between the mentor and mentee evolves there is a benefit from having the opportunity to work together in accomplishing related tasks and goals. Rebecca, when asked about the benefits of mentoring, stated,

> Just having someone that you can relate to, ask questions about their experiences on and off campus, about hybrid classes, distance learning, and university organizations in general. Just having that mentor that you can call and say, "Hey, have you done this before?" And they can say yes or no. If it was a no, "Let's look into it together." So yes. Yeah, very beneficial.

Similar Backgrounds

An area of importance for the mentees was working with a mentor who shared a similar background. Having a mentor who had familial obligations, maintained a job while attending school, or had overcome learning difficulties in certain subject areas were some of the similarities that the mentees were seeking to identify in their mentors. When asked about his

most memorable experience, Wick stated, “Meeting someone and knowing that I have somebody else that’s going through similar struggles as a student, I think is very beneficial.” Similarly, Ari, when asked about her most memorable experience while working with her assigned mentor that made her want to continue in the University Transfer program replied, “Learning that my mentor had a similar experience that I had when first starting college. It just kind of inspired me to continue.”

Learning more about the mentors and identifying similarities between them and the mentees helped to enhance the learning experience. For example, during the individual interview with Elise, she was asked about some of her most impactful interactions, and she replied, “Just learning about her background. She’s very forthcoming with her own experiences, and I learned off of hearing some of her own experiences.” Interestingly, Rebecca was paired with a mentor who was younger than she, and their backgrounds differed; however, their backgrounds in the University Transfer program were similar, and Rebecca was able to learn from her mentor’s previous experiences. Rebecca commented during the individual interview when asked about impactful moments, “Someone that was younger taught me a lot and you’re never too old to learn. Come back to school and get your education and the young people can teach you a lot of things.”

Common Interests in Career Pathways

The majority of the mentees and their assigned mentors shared a similar interest in pursuing a career in some aspect of the medical field. Some of the mentees expressed concern about what they needed to do to move in the right direction towards their desired career before the study. When answering the question, “Did you find it easy to openly discuss issues of concern during the individual interview,” Gon replied, “Yeah, I think it was easy to discuss

issues of concern because she wants the same job as I do. So, I asked her questions about problems to see what she would do." For most mentees, after having interacted with their mentor, they were able to develop a better understanding of what is needed. During the individual interview, Rockwell was asked to describe the favorable attributes or characteristics of his mentor that were impactful to him, and he responded,

> The most beneficial characteristic of my mentor was that we were going along a terribly similar path. In our academic career and, in a sense, eventually our professional careers, we had a very similar outlook on what kind of job we would want. As a result, there was a lot of extracurricular, professional, and academic advice she had for me.

Learning more about career pathways was a source of empowerment for Elise. During the focus group discussion when the group was asked about feeling more empowered now after working with a mentor, Elise responded, "Yes, because of the relatability to my mentor to similar future career paths." Moreover, mentors provided mentees with ways to learn more about potential career opportunities. In an excerpt reflective journal entry, Wick reported,

> This meeting was about job fairs and how important they are for every student. Even if you like the company you're with, you still go to job fairs. I learned a lot about networking and meeting people, and I think that will be important to my success in the future.

A Feeling of Disconnect in the Digital World

Before the start of the study, each mentor and mentee were briefed on how they could interact. Mentors and mentees were permitted to interact however was most suitable for them. Initially, introductory interactions occurred via texting and emailing. However, these interactions left the mentees feeling disconnected from their mentor when they desired a more personal, face-

to-face interaction. In her first reflective journal entry, Karina wrote about her first meeting with her assigned mentor, and though it went well, Karina finished her entry by writing, "I don't feel a connection yet, I hope to get to know her more, hopefully, meet in person." Similarly, Rockwell wrote in his journal after a phone conversation with his mentor, "Most productive meeting yet. Although, the subjects that were discussed would have been better discussed in person. We talked about medical internships and volunteering."

The mentees' feelings of disconnect through digital interactions were expressed during the focus group discussion. When the mentees were asked, "If you experienced the feeling of connectedness with your mentor what did your mentor do to make you feel that way?" each participant said, "No!" and each exclaimed, "I want more in-person interactions with my mentor." Rockwell explained, "I am looking for more in-person interactions that would be more natural than texting or calling." Karina explained that her first interactions had taken place via text and remarked, "No feelings of connectedness at that time, in-person interaction is needed." Wick responded, "I want in-person interactions and that there was a lack of personable experience with digital interactions." Echoing similar sentiments as the other focus group participants, Elise asserted, "No, I am not feeling connected, and I am hoping for and would prefer more in-person interactions with my mentor." Contrary to other participant responses, Gon exclaimed that he had started feeling connected to his mentor after discovering, "We have the same job outlook and a similar journey."

Preference Given for Face-to-Face Interaction

Prior to the start of the study, each mentee and mentor were instructed that they could interact in any way most suitable to them. All mentor and mentee initial interactions took place via phone calls, texting, or emails. However, a commonality among the mentees was the positive

feedback reported when discussing face-to-face interactions. In a reflection journal entry after a face-to-face meeting with his mentor, Rockwell wrote, “Met with my mentor today in person on campus and it was a much more connecting experience than I had hoped.” In a similar experience, Karina wrote in her reflective journal, “My mentor and I met in person for the first time, and I love my mentor, we instantly connected!”

When conducting the individual interviews with the mentee participants, each mentee was asked, “When meeting with your mentor, were the meetings conducted in a face-to-face setting or virtually using Teams or Zoom,” and “If you were meeting with your mentor in a face-to-face setting, which location did you frequently use as your meeting site?” As each individual interview was being held, the mentees expressed that their initial introductory meetings took place via text, phone, or email. However, subsequent meetings would be held face-to-face in a variety of places. Elise and Rebecca, when asked which location they frequently used as a meeting place with their mentor, replied, “Local coffee shop.” Janet and Ari responded, “Place of employment” while Gia, Rockwell, Wick, and Zach stated, “On campus.” Moreover, the preference given for face-to-face interaction was indicated when questioned about the feeling of connectedness with their mentor.

Developing a Sense of Connectedness to the College Through Face-to-Face Interaction

Collectively, the mentees indicated the need and desire for face-to-face interactions with their assigned mentor. These same sentiments were indicated by mentees when discussing their sense of belonging to the college. During the focus group meeting, Rockwell, Elise, Wick, Gon, and Karina, when asked, “Has participating in a mentorship program given you a sense of belonging to the college?” each focus group participant responded, “Yes, I have developed a stronger sense of belonging to the college through their participation in the mentorship program.”

Developing a sense of belonging and connectedness to the college can be achieved through participation in student clubs and organizations, student government, and student athletic teams. After an interaction with her mentor, Rebecca reflected in her journal, "Today's topics included clubs and organizations offered at the college include the American Dental Hygienist Association, Black Student Union Club, Student Nurses Association, and Student Veterans Association." Having a peer mentor to connect mentees to the college and serve as the bridge between being a student and being a student who is actively engaged and connected was a benefit of the peer mentoring study. During the individual interview process, the mentees had the opportunity to explain how they benefited from participating in the peer mentorship program. Ari responded, "Having someone to talk to you and someone you can ask for advice pertaining to the college and what resources they have." Elise remarked, "Learning more about the college," while Gon asserted, "Having a mentor just gave me an idea of what to expect really made me feel a lot more comfortable pursuing my program."

Learning How to Achieve Academic Success

Developing the skills necessary to achieve academic success was a topic of interest for each mentee participating in the study. Mentees expressed the need to learn how to prepare for course assignments better, to learn how to balance personal life, work, and school, to develop better note-taking skills when in the lecture and laboratory settings, and to learn more about the resources provided by the college that are available to them. In a reflective summary, Rebecca wrote,

> Today, I met with my mentor with whom I had a pleasant conversation about a few note-taking items that have given students the ability to help them study for their exams, tests, and quizzes. The items discussed were Goodnotes, Quizlet, and Rocket Notebook.

In a similar reflection, Janet recounted, “Today me and my mentor talked about materials that help with notetaking like flashcards and Rocket book.”

For some mentees, learning how to achieve academic success required conversations about their previous work and what their experiences were that caused the mentees not to enjoy academic success. In such instances, Wick reflected,

> For meeting two we talked about how to get better grades, what did I do wrong the first semester, and what I can do better the next. It was very helpful because now I know what I need to do for next time, I feel more prepared now.

In some instances, the mentees with their mentors compared and contrasted the ways in which they studied. Gon reflected after his meeting with his mentor, “Today, me and my mentor talked about our methods of studying.” In a similar conversation with his mentor, Zach reflected, “We discussed the amount of time for studying needed to increase and when was the best times for me to study, and how to prepare for tests instead of the night before.” Learning how to develop good time management practices was of importance to both Elise and Ari. During the individual interview with Elise, when asked how she had benefited from interacting with her mentor, she said, “I’m kind of just, I’m working on some of the same issues, but organization and time management has gotten better.” After a meeting with her peer mentor, Ari wrote about the advice she had received about using a day planner to help with time management and organization and wrote, “Now that I am back in school, I think I should get myself a planner to help me stay on track so that I’m not stressing myself out last minute trying to get everything done.”

Advising Concerns

Students are assigned an academic faculty advisor in addition to having access to staff

advisors to assist as needed. During the focus group discussion, the mentees were asked to describe their experiences as students in the University Transfer program before participating in the mentoring study. Wick and Rockwell both replied with similar responses stating, “Advising issues exist and that receiving guidance from a peer mentor has been beneficial.” When asked “Do you believe your time as a mentee was well served?” Wick explained, “I believe the time is well served and I feel like a mentor is really needed for every student, especially first-generation college students and people who are just starting college.”

The mentee study participants were all first year, FGCSs who, at the time of the study, knew which career field they wanted to pursue. However, the issue that each mentee mentioned, reflected upon, and spoke of was how to achieve their goals. Seeking beneficial advice was a crucial element in this study. Rockwell reflected after his first meeting with his mentor, “I felt at first that she may not have the experience to help me; however, she did have some helpful tips on how to diversify my resume as a transfer student.” In a comparable response, when asked “What are your favorite attributes or characteristics of your mentor that were impactful or beneficial?” Gon stated, “My mentor was really helpful because she just gave me advice during our call and gave me an idea of what to do in the future.” When asked the same question during her individual interview, Ari remarked, “So having a mentor, like having someone in the same situation and almost about to finish their program and start a new program really inspired me to just keep going.”

Developing a Better Understanding of College Resources and Extracurricular Offerings

To assist students with academic and career goals, the Triad Community Technical College has a well-equipped Center for Academic Engagement. Resources available to students include academic success classes; tutoring, both online and in-person; and services for English

language learners. Moreover, the college hosts a variety of clubs and organizations that students can join. During a meeting with his mentor, Wick reflected in his journal:

> Talked about school resources like clubs and made me aware of the different resources that were available if needed. We also discussed how to make friends by connecting with other students who use the same resources that I need.

Gon, in a related reflection, wrote, "My mentor and I discussed how I should look to getting into extracurricular activities prior to applying for medical school."

Having mentors with a high level of self-efficacy and who are knowledgeable about the college resources and extracurricular offerings that the college offers was seen as a benefit by the mentees. When asked about the self-efficacy of her mentor, Janet explained, "Yeah, she knows a lot about the college like grades, transfer programs, their clubs, and organizations." Elise, when asked in the individual interview about how she has benefited from the peer mentorship program replied, "I am continuing to learn about the college. Any questions I had she was able to answer them. She has been helping me to become more acclimated to everything and what the college has to offer."

Research Question Responses

Central Research Question

What are the lived experiences of mentees in the University Transfer program at a two-year technical community college? The mentees, when asked about their experience in the mentor program, regarded their experience as positive and beneficial in helping them to achieve their academic and career goals. The mentees shared that they had certain academic and career goals; however, each mentee posed the question, "How do I achieve my goals, either academically-related or future career goals?" For some mentees, the moment their mentor shared

with them their background and personal goals was a pivotal and connecting moment in the mentee–mentor relationship. When asked about her most memorable experience while working with her mentor, Janet remarked,

> The first time she reached out to me she explained everything that she has done and everything she has been through, and everything that helps her to transfer. My mentor gave me important information, and she's trying to help me achieve my goals, and I was like, "Yeah, that's really what I want." So that was really memorable when she was telling me, "It's going to be OK!"

The mentees who participated in the study all held jobs outside school while some had familial obligations in addition to working. Limited time for study, personal lives, work, and family left some mentees wondering how they would ever accomplish their academic goals. Karina remarked during the individual interview, "My most memorable experience was getting advice from her on how to balance school and work life." Rockwell, when asked about his most memorable experience with his mentor, said it was "learning how to go about continuing in the University Transfer program and what was needed to help me in the transfer process. This information made me a lot more confident." When speaking with Ari to get a better understanding of her most memorable experience with her mentor, she quickly responded, "Honestly, it was like the first call we had because we really clicked and I learned that my mentor had similar experiences when first going to college, it just kind of inspired me to continue."

Sub-Question One

As a mentee, what leadership attributes of your mentor did you find most beneficial to you? The mentees in the study expressed a variety of attributes, including empathy, support, and

guidance. Gia reflected on her mentor providing support when she wrote,

> To my delight, my mentor generously offered to arrange a tour for me through his friend who currently attends the university. This gesture of support meant a lot to me, as it would give me the opportunity to explore the campus and get a feel for the university environment.

Elise, during the individual interview, shared, “Having someone to talk to you was helpful, but she also helped me get acclimated to the environment of the college.” Zach, similar to Elise, said, “I appreciated the honest advice and suggestions about professors, classes, and how to do things in the program, to, to be successful and prepare to move on to the next level.” Wick responded, “I appreciated their honesty and wanting to share about their experiences.”

Sub-Question Two

As a mentee, what were some of your memorable experiences while being mentored? The mentees described their memorable moments as being the moment that they connected with their mentor and arrived at the pivotal moment that they could relate to their mentor as they both found they had a variety of experiences, accomplishments, and goals in common. During the focus group discussion, Gon asserted, “My most memorable experience is when I learned that my mentor has the same job path and a similar journey that I have.” Wick, when describing his memorable experiences, recalled, “Talking about life, classes, and future plans.” Rebecca, who is a mature student, was paired with a younger mentor; however, the experience proved to be beneficial for both the mentee and mentor. Rebecca, when asked about her memorable experiences, responded,

> Just talking about our different experiences, me being older, but she’s an adult too, but me being an older adult benefited a lot coming from someone that was younger who

taught me a lot. The young people can teach you a lot of things.

During the focus group discussion, the mentees were asked, “During your time with your mentor, what would you consider to be the most memorable or impactful moment you experienced?” Interestingly, Karina and Wick both stated that they “had not had their moment yet and were looking to have more face-to-face interaction with their assigned mentor.” However, Gon, Rockwell, and Elise began to discuss their interactions, specifically, those that were face-to-face, and all agreed that it was learning more about their mentor and their pathway in the University Transfer program, their previous experiences, career goals, and future academic plans and how each of those related to their own goals and experiences.

Sub-Question Three

As a mentee, what are some of your experiences that would potentially inhibit you from persisting in your current program of study? The mentees expressed a variety of concerns such as study habits, course rigor and difficulty, time management, and work-school-life balance. Gon, during the individual interview, when asked what potential roadblocks could inhibit his persistence in the University Transfer program replied,

> I think balancing work and school at the same time because you have to have certain days off during the week for school and the certain days off in the week for work as well. Because I want to, I would like to see if I can balance that. That’s the only roadblock I have really because I have to pay bills, you know. But I also want to pursue my program.

In a similar reflection as Gon, Elise stated, “I’m working on some of the same issues, but organization and time management. This is the stuff that I need to kind of stay on top of.” When speaking with Zach about potential obstacles that would prevent him from persisting in the program, without hesitation Zach replied, “Financial responsibilities. Gotta be able to eat and

have a roof over my head!" Ari expressed that her main concern was "not 'bombing' her current courses and actually finishing the required courses needed to transfer."

Summary

The data gleaned from the study suggest that peer mentoring provides a valuable benefit for the participating mentees. Several themes emerged from the data, including the need for mentors to be relatable to the mentees and addressing the mentees' concerns of how to achieve academic success. However, the most notable finding in the study was the mentees' preference for having face-to-face interactions with their assigned mentor rather than interacting through meetings held in a digital environment such as Zoom or Teams. Additionally, the mentees indicated that the desirable leadership traits demonstrated by their assigned mentors included empathy, strong communication skills, supportiveness, and the willingness to offer sound guidance when needed.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The focus of the proposed qualitative case study is to explore the lived experiences of first-year, FGCS mentees who are currently enrolled in the University Transfer program at Triad Technical Community College. The study is reflective of Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory. Study participants serving as mentees were assigned to a second-year mentor enrolled in the University Transfer program who is in good academic standing. The mentors serve as a guidepost to help mentees learn behaviors and practices that will potentially enhance persistence rates. The mentees during their time with their assigned mentors had the opportunity to observe and discuss the academic practices and tendencies of their mentors that have afforded them academic success. The following sections present the interpretation of findings, implications for policy and practice, theoretical and methodological implications, limitations and delimitations, and recommendations for future research.

Discussion

Mentoring is not a new practice found on any college or university campus. Historically, mentorship has been seen as a unique relationship between the student and either a staff or senior faculty member (Goerisch et al., 2019). The mentee has the invaluable opportunity to gain insight into potential career pathways, research experience, and networking opportunities that for some would be difficult otherwise to obtain. In recent adaptations, mentoring has evolved to now include interactions with alumni who serve as points of contact inside desired career fields that are of interest to the mentee (Khatri & Raheja, 2018).

Mentoring has a unique position in that through the use of social capital, such as peer mentoring, the relationships formed between the mentor and the mentee can create a sense of

community and comradery and can help students develop a deeper sense of connectedness and empowerment in their respective programs of study (Martin et al., 2020). Moreover, mentees seek mentors who can demonstrate knowledge, credibility, clear and concise communication, devotion, and commitment by the mentor with whom they are engaging (Holmes et al., 2018). Mentoring serves as a benefit for both the mentor and the mentee involved in the mentorship. The learning exchange between the mentor and the mentee is not one-way, and learning can occur bidirectionally (Ahmadmehrabi et al., 2021).

The data gleaned from this study investigating the lived experiences of mentees who were involved in a University Transfer program indicated the need for relatability, face-to-face interaction, and thoughtful insight on how to achieve success from their mentors. As each conversation, interview, and reflective journal entry was carefully examined, analyzed, and coded, the wants and needs of the mentees became clearly in focus. In the present day, interactions between people commonly occur within a digital environment through the use of texting, messaging, calls, and video conferencing utilizing either Zoom or Teams. Interestingly, the mentees in the study all indicated that they prefer a more organic and natural engagement with their mentor that involves face-to-face meetings. Though the location of these meetings varied from mentee to mentee, the data strongly indicated the need for traditional face-to-face interactions.

The mentees in the study come from varied backgrounds, countries, and cultures, and have significant obligations beyond their coursework. The mentees expressed the importance of having a mentor who was relatable to them. Working with someone who had completed courses they still needed to complete, preparing for the transition between a two-year technical community college and a four-year university, and learning more about the hardships the mentor

faced was of great value to the mentees. In one such instance, a mentee expressed how important the mentorship was to him as he found it hard to make friends on campus and was seeking friendship. In each reflective journal, the mentees expressed the desire to continue interacting with their assigned mentor after the conclusion of the study.

During the initial meeting I had with each mentee to determine if the eligibility criteria for the study were met, the mentees openly shared their academic and career goals. In certain pairings, the mentees with their mentors shared similar academic and career goals. However, the question posed by the mentees was "How do I achieve these goals?" Working with a mentor helped the mentees learn more about achieving academic success and bridging the gap between establishing goals and identifying strategies and practices needed to achieve those goals.

Summary of Thematic Findings

After a thorough examination of the data, three emerging themes were identified. The first theme is the relatability of the mentor to the mentee. Mentees expressed the importance of being paired with a mentor who shared a similar background, academic pursuits, and career goals. Before the start of the study, each mentee and mentor were briefed on ways in which they could interact with each other. Interestingly, the mentees each expressed an overwhelming preference for face-to-face interactions with their assigned mentor. These repeated sentiments gave rise to the second theme of the study, which was the sense of or the feeling of being disconnected in the digital world. Finally, each mentee expressed in the study that they had an academic goal they wanted to achieve as they pursued their future career goals. However, the question posed by most mentees and what gave rise to the third theme was learning how to achieve academic success while in the University Transfer program.

Interpretation of Findings

The thematic findings from the study include the relatability of the assigned mentors to the mentees, the feelings of disconnect by the mentees while interacting with their assigned mentors in a digital environment, and learning to achieve academic success while navigating through the University Transfer program. The following interpretations are based on the findings of the study and articulate in a deeper sense what each derived theme means.

Can Someone Like Me Actually Do This?

In a passage taken from Gon's reflective journal, Gon asserted:

> Today, me and my mentor talked primarily about what classes I was taking and more about my background and schools of interest. Overall, my mentor did great and makes me feel more confident going towards a career in the medical field.

As each mentee shared their background with their mentor, the mentees wanted to hear the background story of their mentor. They desperately, on a deeper cognitive level, wanted to know if their mentor was someone like them who at some point along their journey experienced difficulties, hardships, or setbacks that could have derailed their academic and career pursuits and how they overcame those.

When a desired outcome is not achieved in a course, it can have a devastating effect on the confidence of a first year, FGCS. As first year, FGCSs, the mentees do not have parents or guardians who can share their experiences of their time in college. Moreover, some of the mentees do not have the learned skills that are needed to enjoy success when attempting to complete more challenging coursework. Before Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory can be embraced, and before a mentee can begin emulating the learned behaviors of a mentor, the mentee is not just interested, but rather, seeks to know how similar the background of the mentor

is to their own. The mentee can only emulate what they see in themselves as being the same as what they see in their mentor.

Before learning about their mentor's background, the mentees in some instances feel isolated, believing they are the only ones who are experiencing college life for the very first time while their contemporaries have more knowledge. As suggested by LeBouef and Dworkin (2021), FGCSs, compared to their non-first-generation colleagues, will not experience the same social and cultural capital in theory due to their parents not attending college. A pivotal moment in the evolving relationship between the mentee and mentor is the mentee learning the background of the mentor. Furthermore, mentees may be hesitant to open up about their backgrounds or discuss academic misses in the past for fear of rejection or judgment by their mentor. The learning process about the background of the mentor can also serve as the catalyst for the future growth of the mentee. For example, in an excerpt taken from Karina's reflective journal after her fifth interaction with her mentor, she wrote,

> She opened up to me again and we talked about it. I definitely see us getting closer, I do plan on still reaching out to her after this study. I think it's important that I keep people who know more than me in my life because they'll help me grow.

Historically, the mentor-mentee relationship has been hierarchical in nature where a mentee interacted with a senior faculty member or staff member (Goerisch et al., 2019). However, for first year, FGCSs, there is a lack of commonality of similar backgrounds, struggles, and cultural perspectives between them and older mentors in some instances. Finding a mentor with a similar background as the mentee and a sizeable knowledge of the culture of the college and the resources that are available for academic success are variables that are required of a mentor demonstrating a high level of self-efficacy. Barrett et al. (2017) asserted after

concluding their study that effective mentor attributes included frequency of engagement with their mentee, regular communication, and shared similar interests between the mentor and the mentee. It is the mentee finding that commonality within their mentor when asking themselves the question, “Can someone like me do this?”

Making a Deeper Connection.

Before the start of this study, each mentor and mentee were briefed on the merits of the study, how their participation could help future students, and how they were allowed to engage with each other. In the digital world, there are social media platforms to engage with people who share similar interests, texting and messaging for a quick exchange, and program software such as Zoom or Teams for virtual meetings and conferences. How the mentees and mentors could interact is limitless. Interestingly, the overwhelming preference for interaction among mentors and mentees was face-to-face.

During the focus group discussion when the mentees were asked if they had experienced a feeling of connectedness with their mentor, the unanimous response from Rockwell, Elise, Wick, Gon, and Karina was that there needed to be more face-to-face interaction between them and their assigned mentors. Specifically, Karina and Wick agreed with the group saying, “There has been a lack of personable experiences with digital interactions such as texting or emailing.” To form a meaningful bond with their mentors, the mentees preferred face-to-face contact.

In-person social engagement can alleviate the issues of communication and the feelings of being disconnected from the cultural practices and norms exhibited on campus. Capannola and Johnson (2020) asserted that some FGCSs faced difficulties with communication and maintaining relationships from home once they were immersed in their new culture in HE. The need for first-year, FGCSs to make and to have these connections, especially with a mentor, is

the connectedness that is needed to initiate future connections with classmates, student clubs and organizations members, and to the college.

Meeting the need for social interaction for some mentees can be difficult and can leave the mentee feeling isolated. Establishing and maintaining friendships are just as important to them as their program of study is. For Wick, he was seeking to make a deeper connection and wanted to make friends, as this was something he had expressed difficulties in doing. Wick, reflecting after a meeting with his mentor stated, "We talked about how to make friends, which connects nicely with the school resources we talked about during our meeting. It was very helpful because I struggle to make any friends."

Establishing deeper connections, making friends, and making those deeper connections are goals that are important to the mentees. Moreover, the mentors thought they were of value. Rebecca and Janet were assigned to the same mentor, and each noted in their reflective journals that their mentor had discussed the different clubs and organizations that were hosted by the college. In an entry in her reflective journal after her third meeting with her mentor, Rebecca wrote, "Today's topics included clubs and organizations. American Dental Hygienist Association, Black Student Union Club, Student Nurses Association, Student Veterans Association."

Explain to Me What I Need to Do

Embracing the tenet of Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory that learning is achieved through emulating the behaviors of a model, each of the 10 mentees who participated in this study was assigned a peer mentor, a model to emulate. Each mentee during this study expressed either the need to learn how to perform better in the classroom, learn how to navigate the University Transfer program needed to transition to a four-year university, or how to be a better

candidate to secure a seat in a future medical program of interest. For the mentees, the mentors served as the conduit between setting goals and knowing how to accomplish those established goals.

The mentees' desire to achieve goals is rooted in Locke's 1968 goal-setting theory (Locke & Latham, 2019). Each mentee described a certain goal that was specific and of great importance to them. Gon's goal was to attend medical school; consequently, his conversations with his mentor revolved around what he could do to become a competitive candidate. After his first meeting with his mentor, Gon wrote,

> My mentor was a great help! She answered questions I had such as how to go about obtaining research prior to med school. In addition, she asked me what my timeline was and plan towards med school. Overall, my mentor was great, she answered all the questions I had.

For some mentees, creating short-term goals was necessary after experiencing difficulties during their first semester in the University Transfer program. Zack, during his first semester, experienced a great deal of difficulties, resulting in poor academic performance that resulted in being placed on academic probation. Although he was undecided on what his career goal was, Zack knew he had to do something differently to do better. Moreover, during the individual interview when asked about obstacles that he could still see as being a roadblock to persisting in his current program of study, Zack replied, "Learning how to be a better student and not failing courses."

Each mentee in the study was a student in the University Transfer program, but each mentee was also a student in the peer mentoring program and was there to learn more about how to achieve success in the classroom, making friends, and transferring from a two-year technical

community college to a four-year university. Noncognitive factors that were learned by the mentees are the same factors that were studied by Farruggia et al. (2018) and were indicated as being factors that resulted in enhanced academic performance and retention. These factors included academic mindsets, perseverance, social skills, and academic behaviors. Moreover, the use of peer mentoring can serve as a means of early intervention, increasing retention rates, having a positive effect on the GPA of the mentee, and creating a sense of belonging for the mentee to their institution (Hall et al., 2020).

Implications for Policy or Practice

The implications for policy and practice of adopting a peer mentoring program are to provide additional resources to students who could potentially be seen as high risk, such as those who are first year, FGCSs. With the limited resources needed to adopt a peer mentoring program, the leadership of a technical or community college could enact a new policy that creates a program that combines a college success seminar course with a corequisite peer mentoring external lab. This external lab would serve as an interactive experience between a mentee and a previous college success seminar student serving as a mentor. Because of the universal application of peer mentoring, the mentors and mentees could interact and engage in either a face-to-face setting or a digital environment through the use of Teams or Zoom.

Implications for Policy

At the time of this study, Triad Technical Community College mandated all students in the University Transfer program to complete ACA-111. ACA-111 is a one-credit course designed to familiarize new students with skills needed to succeed in college and to introduce and acquaint the student with the college's culture, policies, and practices. As a means to enhance the student learning outcomes for students enrolled in ACA-111, the adoption and

implementation of peer mentoring by previous ACA-111 students could serve as a way to increase student persistence. Students who previously completed ACA-111 and demonstrated strong proficiency in the course would ideally serve as mentors; mentees would be current ACA-111 students.

In current existence is the Triad Technical Community College Student Ambassador program. This program serves as a platform for interested students to serve as representatives of the college during institutional functions, engage in recruitment activities, and participate in civic and cultural activities hosted by the college. Changing the current policy to expand the duties of the student ambassadors is a strategy the college could employ to utilize the existing social capital without the need to identify additional resources. Newly adopted policies could create the opportunity for student ambassadors to serve as peer mentors for new and transfer students.

Implications for Practice

The utilization of social capital to implement a peer mentoring program could be an effective strategy to increase persistence rates. Technical and community college deans and department chairs could employ the use of peer mentoring as a potential way to suppress high attrition rates among students, specifically those who are high risk, such as first year, FGCSs. For smaller colleges or colleges with limited resources, the implementation of a peer mentoring program could be seen as a cost-saving measure in providing additional resources for students. Furthermore, peer mentoring, because of its universal application, could be put into practice in a variety of settings such as face-to-face or a digital environment.

Empirical and Theoretical Implications

The practice of mentoring within a technical community college or university is not new, nor is it a practice that has not seen change. College students have historically engaged in

mentoring that involved interacting with a senior faculty member or a seasoned staff member (Goerisch et al., 2019). This form of mentorship is known as hierarchical mentoring and has been the normative form of mentoring on college campuses. The advantages for participating mentees in this form of mentorship are substantial. The mentor in hierarchical mentoring provides the mentee with guidance related to academics while also serving to enhance noncurricular skills such as professionalism and being a source of emotional support and encouragement (Henry-Noel et al., 2018).

The literature indicates the relevance and significance of hierarchical mentoring for college. However, this more traditional form of mentorship is being met by newer forms of mentorship that include alumni mentoring, peer-to-peer mentoring, near-peer mentoring, and virtual environment peer mentoring (Hall et al. 2021). In these more recent forms of mentoring, the mentor is no longer a senior faculty member imparting knowledge and insight to the mentee from years of experience. Rather, the mentors are now the contemporaries of the mentee. As the constructs of these relationships continue to evolve, the purpose of mentorship remains the same, thus providing a multitude of advantages for the mentor.

Respective to this study, mentee participants were first-year, FGCSs who were each assigned a peer mentor who also was enrolled in the University Transfer program. As recent literature has defined, first-year, FGCSs are students who are the first in the family to pursue a degree in HE (Kim et al., 2021). The existing literature has indicated that first year, FGCSs experience difficulties assimilating the culture of their HE institution, creating stress and a lack of a sense of belonging (Gist-Mackey et al., 2018; Museus & Chang, 2021). Moreover, the lack of support networks that first-year, FGCSs often face can translate into an increase in health and financial barriers (Vasil & McCall, 2018). Finally, first year, FGCSs in some instances were not

prepared for the rigors of their selected programs, believing that HE was a continuance of their secondary studies (Hassel & Ridout, 2018).

In the infancy stages of this study, Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory was the theoretical foundation upon which this study was built upon. Bandura postulated that much of the learning that is achieved by humans is done within the social context. Specifically, the learner is characterized as being the observer, which in the case of this study is the mentee. The behavior and practices of the mentor are what the mentee will observe and emulate. One of the emerging themes from the study was how to achieve academic success. Each mentee described their academic goals; however, some of the mentees expressed uncertainty about how to achieve those goals.

In conjunction with Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory, Locke's (2019) goal-setting theory came into play. The mentees had described different goals that were of importance to them and their careers as students. However, the mentees were unsure of how to develop plans to carry out their intended goals. In the data collected from the reflective journals, the mentees expressed that they learned more about how to move forward with pursuing their goals after interacting with their mentor. For example, the mentees indicated that they learned that there are resources available by the college to help with course study, student groups and organizations for networking, and learned best practices from their mentors on how to successfully navigate the University Transfer program.

The progression of the study revealed other theories at play that had not been previously considered. Tajfel and Turner's (2019) social identity theory became the guiding theory when the emergence of the theme relatability of the assigned mentor was identified. The mentees in the study indicated that it was important to them that their mentor share a similar background to

them including cultural practices, familial obligations, and academic and career goals. As the mentees learned more about their assigned mentor, it became clear that there were more people like them attending college, and their experiences were not unique to them but rather similar to a much larger collective community of students.

Stemming from Tajfel and Turner's (2019) social identity theory was the need for face-to-face interactions by mentees when interacting with their assigned mentor. This was a major and unexpected theme that was first identified during the focus group discussion and, based on mentee reporting, continued to become more prevalent as the study progressed. Before the start of the study, each mentee and mentor was given the option of how to interact with their assigned mentor or mentee that best suited their preferences. Initial interactions occurred digitally, either through texting, email, or phone calls. Subsequently, interactions between mentees and mentors would occur face-to-face whenever possible and became the preferred method of communication.

Empirical Implications

As previous studies have indicated, the first year, FGCS is more susceptible to experiences on campus that often do not yield desired outcomes or experiences hardships due to a lack of necessary resources. For example, first year, FGCSs may experience greater difficulties, such as the inability to assimilate the culture of their HE institution, resulting in a heightened level of stress and a lack of sense of belonging (Gist-Mackey et al., 2018; Museus & Chang, 2021). In some instances, the first year, FGCS can experience a lack of supporting resources, resulting in health and financial barriers (Vasil & McCall, 2018). Moreover, the mindset and expectations of a first year, FGCS may not align with the expectations and demands of HE due to the belief that HE is a continuance of their secondary studies (Hassel & Ridout,

2018).

The implications of previous research findings were reflected in this study. The mentees all shared with their mentors the barriers and challenges each faced. For some, the lack of financial resources resulted in the mentees having to balance the demands of working a full-time job and the rigors of being a full-time student. In certain instances, a few of the mentees had shared they had experienced academic hardships and were unaware of the resources available to them. Additionally, some of the mentees had expressed they were hopeful that they would be able to make new friends through participation in this study, as this was something they had difficulties doing previously.

This study supported the findings of Wahleithner (2020), who suggested that FGCSs might not be as prepared for the rigors and expectations that HE demands as compared to the rigors of graduating high school. This was a major theme that developed within my study as the mentees sought to better understand how to achieve academic success. Similar to the findings of Wahleithner (2020), Hall et al. (2020) suggested that the use of peer mentoring as an early intervention created advantages for both the mentee and the institution by increasing persistence rates, having a positive effect on the GPA of the mentee, and creating a sense of belonging to the institution. In multiple instances during this study, the mentees discussed with their mentors the different ways to take notes, prepare for exams and practical, and best practices for time management. As indicated previously, the mentees in this study all maintained jobs while attending college in addition to fulfilling personal and familial obligations.

Conversely, the findings from this study did not align with the findings of previous studies concerning conducting peer mentoring in the virtual or digital environment. In a study conducted by Fayram et al. (2018), the findings indicated positive benefits for mentoring online

that included mentor-facilitated discussion forums and threads that gave participating mentees more of an opportunity to engage and interact with online mentors and learn from other participants, which increased feelings of belonging and relatedness. During the focus group discussion when the mentees were asked, “Have you experienced the feeling of connectedness with your mentor?” each mentee participant responded by saying, “No,” and expressed the need for more face-to-face interactions with their assigned mentors.

Supporting the cause for e-mentoring, research conducted by Ongoz (2018) examined the most effective information and communication technologies to use, which included email, social media platforms, conversations via phone, SMS, text messaging, blogging, learning management systems, teleconferencing, social media, and instant messaging. The mentees in this study reported using phone calls, texting, emails, and Teams when making initial contact with their assigned mentor; however, their preference was for in-person interaction. Supporting the mentees’ sentiments for having face-to-face interactions with their mentors, Fruiht and Chan (2018) asserted that the move to online interactions could serve as an inhibiting or limiting factor for FGCSs who seek traditional and naturally occurring mentors seen on campuses.

Theoretical Implications

At the beginning of the study, Bandura’s (1986) social cognitive theory was adopted to serve as the theoretical foundation. The social cognitive theory postulates that learning can be achieved through the imitation of a model by an observer (Schunk, 2020). For this study, the mentor served as the model that the mentee, serving as the observer, emulated. Each mentee in the study expressed an academic goal that was unique to them and their academic journey. For some, it was learning skills, such as note-taking, study habits, and developing time management skills to balance school, work, and personal life, to better equip them as a student. For others, it

was learning more about the university transfer process and what was needed to make the transition between attending a two-year technical community college and a four-year university, thus moving closer to applying to medical school.

As the data from the study were being coded for thematic development, it quickly became evident that each mentee knew what they wanted to do; however, they were unsure how to move forward with accomplishing what they wanted to do. The mentors were able to create a bridge for their mentees that would take their mentees from lacking knowledge regarding college resources, time management, and study skills and practices to developing a solidified understanding of how to accomplish their goals. This bridging that the mentors did for their mentees was Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory being carried out, and this study aligned with the tenets of the social cognitive theory.

Tajfel and Turner's (2019) social identification theory postulates that social identity is a part of self-identity, and is derived from the social groups that individuals belong to and to which those individuals do not belong. From the data from the mentees, the word "background" was either written in their reflective journals or spoken in the focus group or individual interviews. The mentees wanted a mentor who shared similar experiences, whether in life, in school, or on a personal level. The emerging theme that resulted was the relatability of the assigned mentor.

In a short period of time and occurring organically, the mentors and the mentees began to share their backgrounds. Consequently, as a result, each mentee and their assigned mentor were able to establish that they shared a commonality that would serve to create a bond between the pair. Once the mentee and the mentor had identified their shared bond, then the process of emulation could begin. Additionally, this commonality gave the mentee a sense of belonging, knowing that someone was pursuing similar interests with a similar background or life story as

their own.

Another reoccurring term that was frequently seen in the data was “goal.” As mentioned previously, each mentee had expressed a specific and unique academic goal that needed to be accomplished to move forward with accomplishing their respective career goals. Unknowingly, Locke’s (2019) goal-setting theory was in play by each of the mentees. The primary tenet of the goal-setting theory states that working toward a goal is motivating throughout a process and helps to reach a goal, which in turn improves performance. The mentees in this study had goals; however, providing them with a mentor to emulate and exposing them to different ways as to how to accomplish those goals catalyzed goal attainment.

The theoretical implications of this study are derived from an aggregate of theories. Bandura’s (1986) social cognitive theory exposed the roles and functions of a mentor and mentee. Tajfel and Turner’s (2019) social identification theory identified the importance and the need by the mentees to have a mentor who mirrored their own experiences either culturally, academically, or personally. Finally, Locke’s (2019) goal-setting theory that indicated what was needed to fulfill the mentees’ goals was unknowingly carried out during the mentorship process.

Limitations and Delimitations

The scope of this study was to examine the lived experiences of mentees involved in the University Transfer program at Triad Technical Community College. Students eligible for the study had to have been 18 years of age or older at the start of the study, currently enrolled in the University Transfer program in good academic standing with Trident Technical College, and willing to interact with an assigned mentor. Specifically, this study was designed to explore the lived experiences of students who were first year, FGCSs.

Limitations

The limitations experienced during the study period included participant dropout and lack of participants willing to participate due to time constraints. After securing site approval from Triad Technical Community College, a recruiting campaign was launched to identify and secure research participants. A combination of administrative faculty and staff including the department chair of biological sciences, the dean of stem, and the director of student life and student activities were enlisted to help. Recruitment emails were shared with students by several faculty members including faculty who facilitated academic success classes. Although numerous candidates expressed interest in the study, most opted not to participate due to time conflicts related to work, school, and familial obligations. Furthermore, two participants withdrew from the study after withdrawing from the college due to reasons beyond their control.

Delimitations

Inclusion criteria for this study were narrowed to include only students who were 18 years of age or older at the start of the study and who were classified as first year, FGCS enrolled in the University Transfer program and in good academic standing. Triad Technical Community College houses an on-campus Middle College with students who are not 18 years of age; therefore, for safety and privacy concerns these potential candidates were not admitted to the study. Research candidates were asked to provide a letter of recommendation from a faculty or staff member who was familiar with their coursework and ability to participate. The academic advising profile for each participant was reviewed further to determine eligibility.

Recommendations for Future Research

The scope of this study was to explore the lived experiences of mentees involved in a University Transfer program in a two-year technical community college. The limitations of this study included finding students who were willing to participate and met the eligibility criteria.

The delimitations included factors such as requiring a minimum age of 18 years, being a first year, FGCS, and being enrolled in the University Transfer program. Previous literature related to peer mentoring focused on students who were attending a four-year institution or in a graduate-level program of study. Current literature regarding peer mentoring among students attending a two-year technical community college is minimal and merits further study.

The data from this study were collected from focus group discussions, individual interviews, and reflective journal entries provided by the mentees after each mentor interaction. After careful analysis, the data have indicated the need for continued study of peer mentoring to identify more equitable and effective solutions to enhance persistence rates, academic performance, and acclimatization to the two-year technical community college environment. Students identified as first year, FGCS who were enrolled in the University Transfer program served as mentee participants. Future researchers could examine a similar cohort involved in other programs such as Associate of Arts or Associate of Science.

Future research exploring first year, FGCSs and their experiences with academic advising should be given consideration. The qualitative researcher could employ research methods that include individual interviews and focus groups as ways to collect data. Furthermore, researchers could investigate the experiences of partnering first year, FGCSs with student ambassadors in an attempt to develop a stronger sense of connectedness to the college, learn more about available resources, and engage with other students pursuing similar academic and career interests. Methodologies to gather data could include the use of individual interviews, focus groups, and reflective journals.

The site of this research study required students enrolled in the University Transfer program to enroll in ACA-122 College Transfer Success to assist the student with creating

academic and career goals, refining student skills such as note-taking, and assisting the student with the university transfer process. Future research should be conducted to explore the experiences of students who have successfully completed ACA-122 and have been partnered with students who are enrolled in ACA-122. This would be an opportunity for the researcher to explore whether peer or near-peer mentoring is more meaningful for ACA-122 students as compared to having no form of mentorship. The researcher could interact with the course instructor to have participating students maintain a reflective journal and participate in either focus groups or individual interviews.

Study participants for my study were identified as being first year FGCS and had completed either their first or second semester within that first year. To develop greater insight into the challenges faced by new students whether first year, FGCS or not, researchers should try to focus on students who are in their first semester. The first-semester student could be seen as the most vulnerable, resulting in poor academic performance, minimal course attendance, and no sense of connectedness to the college. These are all factors that should be considered in attempts to suppress increasing program attrition rates, and declining persistence rates.

Conclusion

First year, FGCSs are faced with various potential hardships and difficulties before they even begin their respective programs of study. For some students, the challenge is the lack of financial resources needed for essential necessities such as housing and transportation. For others, the challenge is the lack of knowledge regarding the available resources their college has to offer to achieve academic success. Peer mentoring creates the opportunity for the college to utilize their most valuable asset—their existing social capital, the students. Utilizing the students to serve as peer mentors is a proven way to enhance persistence rates, suppress increasing

program attrition rates, and help students fulfill the goals they set out to accomplish. Peer mentoring, as evidenced by empirical implications, has proven efficacy and value for both the mentor and the mentee. Theoretically, peer mentoring adheres to the tenets of Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory, Tajfel and Turner's (2019) social identification theory, and Locke's (2019) goal-setting theory. The findings from this study indicate that mentees want a mentor who shares a similar background or experiences, in-person, face-to-face interactions when interacting with their mentor, and if they already have established goals, someone to identify ways to achieve their goals.

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Appendix A

IRB Approval Letter

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY.
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

February 22, 2024

Jason Whiteside
Janet Deck

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY23-24-399 Exploring the Lived Experiences of Mentees Involved in a
Transfer Program in a Two-Year Technical College: A Qualitative Case Study

Dear Jason Whiteside, Janet Deck,

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your application in accordanc
for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations an
to be exempt from further IRB review. This means you may begin your research with the data safe
mentioned in your approved application, and no further IRB oversight is required.

Your study falls under the following exemption category, which identifies specific situations in whic
participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46:104(d):

Category 2.(ii). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diag
achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (includir
auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met:
Any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research would not reasonably place
risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, edu
advancement, or reputation; or

**For a PDF of your exemption letter, click on your study number in the My Studies card on your Cay
Next, click the Submissions bar beside the Study Details bar on the Study details page. Finally, cli
Submission Type and choose the Letters tab toward the bottom of the Submission Details page. Y
sheet and final versions of your study documents can also be found on the same page under the A**

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any modifica
protocol must be reported to the Liberty University IRB for verification of continued exemption statu
report these changes by completing a modification submission through your Cayuse IRB account.

If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether possibl

Appendix B

Informed Consent Form

Consent

Title of the Project: Exploring the Lived Experiences of Mentees Involved in a University Transfer Program in a Two-Year Technical College: A Qualitative Case Study
Principal Investigator: Jason R. Whiteside Doctoral Candidate School of Education, Liberty University

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be 18 years of age or older, a first-year, first-generation college student, currently enrolled in the University Transfer program, and can provide a letter of recommendation from a faculty member who is familiar with the course work of the participant. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research.

The purpose of the study is to study the lived experiences of a mentee involved in the University Transfer program.

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following:

1. Participate in an in-person, audio-recorded interview that will take no more than 1 hour.
2. Participate in a focus group discussion that will be audio-recorded and will take no more than 1 hour.
3. After each meeting with your assigned mentor, you are asked to write a brief but detailed entry in your reflective journal describing your experience with your mentor. The time spent writing about your experience should take 2 hours for the study.

The direct benefits participants should expect to receive from taking part in this study include networking with an assigned mentor who is studying in a similar pathway, gaining insightful knowledge on the resources available to students in the University Transfer program, and learning ways to enhance existing communication, time management, and study skills and practices.

Benefits to society include identifying a viable approach that will serve to increase persistence rates among first-year, first-generation students at a two-year technical college. The data gleaned from the study will provide educators and administrators with the knowledge needed to better serve the needs of current and prospective students. Contributions to the existing literature would include best practices for two-year technical and community colleges when attempting to identify ways to reduce attrition rates for first-year, first-generation students.

The expected risks from participating in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential by replacing names with pseudonyms.
- Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in focus group settings. While discouraged, other members of the focus group may share what was discussed with persons outside of the group.
- Data will be stored [on a password-locked computer and in a locked file cabinet. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted, and all hardcopy records will be shredded.
- Recordings will be stored on a password-locked computer for three years and then deleted. The researcher and members of his doctoral committee will have access to these recordings.

Participants will not be compensated for participating in this study. Participants will be entered into a raffle to win a $100.00 Amazon gift card at the end of the study.

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision on whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University or Guilford Technical Community College. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you, apart from focus group data, will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study. Focus group data will not be destroyed, but your contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study if you choose to withdraw.

The researcher conducting this study is Jason R. Whiteside. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact him by phone: [redacted]. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Janet Deck, at [redacted].

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the IRB. Our physical address is Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA, 24515; our phone number is 434-592-5530, and our email address is irb@liberty.edu.

Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

☐ The researcher has my permission to audio-record/video-record me as part of my participation in this study.

_____
Printed Subject Name

_____
Signature & Date

Appendix C

Focus Group Questions

Focus Group Questions

1. Please tell me about your experiences as a student in the university transfer program before participating in the mentoring program. (CRQ)
2. While working with a mentor do you feel more empowered as a mentee? (CRQ)
3. If you experienced the feeling of connectedness with your mentor what did your mentor do to make you feel that way? (SQ1)
4. Has participating in a mentorship program given you a sense of belonging to the college? (SQ1)
5. During your time with your mentor, what would you consider to be the most memorable or impactful moment you experienced? (SQ2)
6. (Have you experienced a pivotal moment with your mentor that made you want to persist with your current studies to reach your academic goals? (SQ3)

Appendix D

Individual Interview Questions

Individual Interview Questions

1. What was your most memorable experience while working with the mentor that made you want to continue in the University Transfer program? CRQ
2. Describe the favorable attributes or characteristics of your mentor that were impactful or beneficial to you. SQ1
3. What attributes or characteristics of your assigned mentor were not beneficial to you? SQ1
4. How would you best describe the self-efficacy of your assigned mentor? SQ1
5. How would you describe the interactions between you and your assigned mentor? SQ1
6. When meeting with your mentor, were the meetings conducted in a face-to-face setting or virtually using Teams or Zoom? SQ2
7. When meeting with your mentor did you find it easy to openly discuss issues of concern to you with your mentor? SQ2
8. Do you believe your time as a mentee was well served or do you believe you would have been okay without a mentor? SQ2
9. If you were meeting with your mentor in a face-to-face setting which location did you frequently use as your meeting site? SQ2
10. What were some of the most impactful interactions you had with your mentor? SQ3
11. After participating in the mentorship program what are some obstacles that you can still see as being a roadblock to persisting in your current program of study? SQ3
12. As a mentee in the mentorship program, how have you benefited from being assigned a mentor? SQ3

Appendix E

Reflective Journal Prompt

Reflective Journal Entry Prompt

After each meeting with your assigned mentor, please write a journal entry detailing your personal thoughts and opinions about your experience with your assigned mentor.

Appendix F

Sample Individual Interview Transcript

Rockwell Personal Interview

New Recording 8.m4a

Transcript

00:00:01 Speaker 1

All right, this is Jason Whiteside at GTCC today is May the 2nd and I have minty Grady with us. This is the personal interview.

00:00:13 Speaker 1

All right. So Grady, first question, what was your most memorable experience while working with the mentor that made you want to continue in the university transfer program?

00:00:23 Speaker 2

The first time I met Addison in person, which I believe was our second meeting, I realized.

00:00:30 Speaker 2

How?

00:00:32 Speaker 2

How to go about continuing the university transfer program? I learned some things, some things that would.

00:00:36 Speaker 2

Help me in.

00:00:38 Speaker 2

The transfer process and that made me a lot more.

00:00:41 Speaker 1

Confident. OK, so question #2 describe the favorable attributes or characteristics of your mentor that were impactful or beneficial to you?

00:00:51 Speaker 2

The most beneficial characteristics of my mentor was that we were going along a very similar path in.

00:00:59 Speaker 2

Our academic career and in a sense, eventually our professional careers, we had a very similar outlook on what kind of job we would want. And so there was a lot of extracurricular, professional and academic advice she had for me.

00:01:15 Speaker 1

OK, good. So question #3, what attributes or characteristics of your assigned mentor were not beneficial to you?

00:01:25 Speaker 2

My mentor was.

00:01:30 Speaker 2

Not the most experienced in some small regards. Some things like FAFSA forms.

00:01:41 Speaker 2

Building a a degree audit for your college things in that regard.

00:01:49 Speaker 1

Alright, #4, how would you best describe the self-efficacy of your assigned mentor?

00:01:56 Speaker 2

My mentor was like very confident and you know the thing she was able to help me with things like, you know, and cat exams, extracurriculars, internships, those things. She was very confident and able to help me on and she was able to demonstrate why she had that confidence because she had a very knowledgeable background in it.

00:02:15 Speaker 2

It was just some other the, you know, the things I was not able to get assistance with her where she was still very honest, that she did not know how to.

00:02:23 Speaker 2

Help me with that, OK?

00:02:25 Speaker 1

OK, #5, how would you describe the interactions between you and your assigned mentor?

00:02:31 Speaker 2

The interactions were sort of punctuated depending on if it was in person or.

00:02:38 Speaker 2

Phone call. The phone calls were definitely more punctuated, so they would be bouts of productivity and good come-back-and-forth conversation and then sort of periods of silence or

trying to find like, think of the next subject. We need to jump to so somewhat disorganized, but still productive at the the end result.

00:02:53 Speaker 1

OK.

00:02:59 Speaker 1

All right. So question number six. When meeting with your mentor, were the meetings conducted in a face-to-face setting or virtually using Teams or Zoom?

00:03:08 Speaker 2

We did half phone calls and half in-person meetings.

00:03:13 Speaker 1

Alright, so question #7, when meeting with your mentor, did you find it easy to openly?

00:03:18 Speaker 1

Discuss issues of concern to you with your mentor. OK. All right. Good. #8, do you believe your time as a mentee was well served, or do you believe you would have been OK without a?

00:03:31 Speaker 1

Mentor it was well served.

00:03:34 Speaker 1

Or #9 if you're meeting with your mentor at face-to-face setting. Which location did you frequently use as a meeting site?

00:03:42 Speaker 2

The Med Living Campus Center.

00:03:44 Speaker 1

OK. Medland OK, #10, what were some of the most impactful interactions you had with your mentor?

00:03:52 Speaker 2

All of the in-person meetings and where we were able to sort of like get to know each other a little bit. Those were more impactful as we were able to kind of like discuss more.

00:03:57 Speaker 1

OK.

00:04:01 Speaker 2

Complex topics.

00:04:04 Speaker 1

All right, #11, after participating in the mentorship program, what are some of the obstacles that you can still see as being a roadblock to persisting in your current program of study?

00:04:18 Speaker 2

I'd say some of the obstacles I have would be things in regards to sort of financial balance, that sort of side of things, like making sure you have enough.

00:04:30 Speaker 2

Need to get you through your semester boards as a way to get a job that's still gonna help you with your degree and not take you time away from your studies.

00:04:40 Speaker 1

All right. Last question, #12 as a mentee in the mentorship program, how have you benefited from being assigned a mentor?

00:04:49 Speaker 2

I benefited the the path I wanted to take in my academic and eventually professional career seems a lot more structured and I've seen the the way I've.

00:04:59 Speaker 2

Wanted to structure it.

00:05:00 Speaker 2

Similar to how other people who are more knowledgeable than me on how to conduct that path had very similar ideas, so it kind of validated the way I wanted to do things and it gave me some confidence in my future.

00:05:13 Speaker 1

OK, excellent. Thank you very much for your time.