Group Mentoring & the Pursuit Self-Understanding

Mentoring can be understood as a developmentally rich, educationally powerful, relational learning experience. As such, it has important implications regarding students’ development of self-understanding and their ability to make informed decisions. This paper suggests that a specific type of mentoring – *group mentorship* – can serve Virginia Tech and institutions across the higher education landscape as they nurture students to cultivate a deeper sense of self. Three learning outcomes provide direction for this paper and the subsequent presentation at the Aspirations for Student Learning Symposium. These include:

- Learning about the defining characteristics of mentorship.
- Learning about group mentoring in relation to traditional one-to-one mentorship.
- Learning about implications for group mentoring within university communities.

Mentorship Definitions and Defining Characteristics

To many, mentorship is not a foreign concept. Decidedly, individuals may not be familiar with the academic literature or best practices. Due to rich oral histories that include myths, folklore, and fairytales, as children grow through adolescents and into adulthood, an awareness of these types developmental relationships and experiences is cultivated.

From early in childhood, children are inundated with fantasies of adventure and accomplishment. The heroes of these tales are frequently personified as either one of two characters (Bierhorst, 1990). The hero is either a youngster in need of mentorship or is depicted as elderly, wise, typically male, person who is indispensable to the youngster. In the first scenario, children require a mentoring experience that will enable them to grow into the heroes they are destined to become. Or, as the elderly sage, the hero provides the mentorship. Regardless, the
mentor represents the benevolent, protecting power of destiny (Campbell, 2008). For example, Merlin the Magician in King Arthur’s Camelot served as overseer and protector. As a mentor, he warned of dangers and guided Arthur as he fulfilled his duties as King. Cinderella’s fairy godmother provided emotional support and important instruction. It was her nurturing that encouraged Cinderella as she transformed from an enslaved second-class member of the family into a princess.

As children grow into their adolescence and young adulthood, they are indoctrinated with popular culture that also celebrates mentorship. Mr. Miyagi from the film Karate Kid is one such example. In the original trilogy (1984, 1986, 1989), Mr. Miyagi, an Okinawan immigrant to the United States, mentors Daniel, a high school student new to town. In addition to learning Karate, Daniel engages in lessons that reveal the importance of hard work, patience, resilience, focus, and care. The mentoring empowers Daniel to transcend from a weak, shy, boy into a powerful young man.

This global familiarity with mentorship is both a blessing and a curse. As a blessing mentorship appears to be universally recognizable. Regardless of educational level or professional status, individuals at all locales within the social hierarchy commonly recognize this concept. The curse is that these individuals have varying perspectives and understandings about mentorship. This has led to confusion and misuse of the term.

**Mentoring as compared to other developmental relationships.** Supervising, coaching, assisting, guiding, advising, modeling, leading, and teaching (Hansman, 2002; Mullen, 2005) are used casually and interchangeably with mentorship. Although these associations are vital to theory and practice, they fail to address the wider and deeper dimensions of the mentoring experience (Mullen, 2009).
Students engage in a variety of developmental relationships while studying at higher education institutions. These include supervisory and advisory relationships, role modeling, and coaching experiences. These developmental experiences are important to the learning and growth of students. Recognizing the differences among them will assist educators in appropriately engaging with students in these various contexts.

Mentorship differs from other developmental experiences due to the level of involvement and intent associated with the relationship (Mertz, 2004). Mentorship involves a high level of both. Intent is concerned with the rationale behind the relationship. For what purposes are those individuals engaging in the experience? Mentoring requires that the collaborators have an intrinsic interest in participating and expect the experience to be one rich with learning, growth, and development. Involvement is concerned with the potency associated with the relationship. Mentoring requires physical and emotional investment, balancing challenge and support techniques, as well as cultivating a holding environment that encourages vulnerability.

Role modeling, for example, necessitates low levels of intent and involvement. Although role models may display skills and worthy attributes, they do not necessarily intend to model behavior. For example, supervising and coaching demand a reasonable amount of intention and involvement. Compared with mentorship, these relationships have a different intent – they are performance-based whereas mentoring is more holistic (Clutterbuck, 2008). Furthermore, supervising and coaching often have a lower level of relational involvement. Being vulnerable and sharing struggles, an expectation of mentoring engagements, may not be encouraged within supervisory or coaching relationships – in fact, presenting one’s limitations or fears may be flatly discouraged.
Mentorship definitions. As an attempt to differentiate mentorship from other terms, scholars and practitioners have attempted to describe mentorship experiences and relationships. Rather than utilize a single characterization, a range of definitions has emerged. In 2009, over 50 definitions varying in scale and scope were identified (Crisp & Cruz, 2009). This is a substantial increase over the 15 definitions identified by Jacobi in 1991.

It is more than passing interest that the original Mentor was inhabited by Athena. Clearly, the mentor is concerned with transmission of wisdom. How, then, do mentors transmit wisdom? Most often, it seems, they take us on a journey. In this aspect of their work, mentors are guides. They lead us along the journey of our lives. We trust them because they have been there before. They embody our hopes, cast light on the way ahead, interpret arcane signs, warn us of lurking dangers, and point out unexpected delights along the way. There is a certain luminosity about them, and they often pose as magicians in tales of transformation” (Daloz, 1999, p. 18)

As demonstrated here, some descriptions of mentors and mentoring relationships have a metaphysical air. Other descriptions are less abstract. Lucas (2001) posited that individuals are mentoring when they support each other in developing, critiquing, and clarifying ideas. And still other descriptions focus on specific contexts. Within an organizational space, mentorship is described as the vehicle for handing down knowledge, maintaining culture, supporting talent, and securing future leadership (Darwin, 2000).

Components of mentoring relationships. For the purposes of this paper, mentorship shall be understood as a distinctive relational learning experience whereby participants, through
intentional challenge and support, enhance the personal growth and professional/skills
development of their collaborator(s).

Mentorship relationships are unique relationships. Mentoring is different from and far more robust than giving advice, supervising, coaching, or the other activities commonly attributed to mentorship. Mentorship is “best reserved for a distinctive role in the story of human becoming” (Daloz Parks, 2000, p. 128).

Mentoring is designed and practiced as learning partnerships. Collaborators commit to one another and to the experience. Within this learning partnership, the collaborators are co-mentors. The individual and collective attitude is that everyone has something to learn and everyone has something to offer. The nature of this co-mentoring experience “extends our imaginations and invites us to trespass, to cross the lines that divide the experts from the ignorant, the masters from the apprentices” (Bona, Rinehart, & Volbrecht, 1995, p. 6).

Mentoring is a process. These developmental relationships are not cultivated overnight. As a time and energy intensive process, mentoring collaborators need to intentionally work at the relationship including persistent development, motivation, planning, and orchestration (Barrett-Hayes, 1999). If mentoring collaborators are to enhance the capacity for growth, productivity, and achievement of their partners, time and space is needed to allow the relationship to realize and reach its full potential (Mullen, 2009).

Mentoring, as a developmental experience capitalizes on the practices of challenge and support. Mentoring can be characterized differently than other growth-oriented relationships by the implementation of challenge and support techniques. “Mentors dance an intricate two-step, because they practice the art of supporting and challenging more or less simultaneously” (Daloz Parks, 2000, p. 130). Support is manifested through recognition and validation. In practice,
mentors provide support when they serve as a guide to resources and a source of comfort and healing (Daloz Parks, 2000). Without challenge, however, support is simply affirmation.

Challenge has been identified as an appropriate mentor strategy and a key ingredient to mentee growth (Butcher, 1999; McNally & Martin, 1998). Challenge is utilized to create cognitive dissonance through the questioning of thinking and the critiquing of preconceptions and tacit assumptions (Butcher, 1999). Daloz’s (1986) model of mentoring relationships, echoing Sanford (1967) highlighted the connection between challenge and support. Low levels of both challenge and support result in stasis. High levels of challenge with low levels of support lead to retreat. High levels of support and low levels of challenge produce confirmation. Moreover, high levels of both challenge and support generate growth. Challenge creates disequilibrium in the existing paradigmatic mindset. But it is evoked with supportive care and compassion.

Lastly, this construct of mentorship emphasizes cura personalis – caring for the whole person. Mentorship is not limited to the workplace as professional development. Mentorship concerns the learning and development of all aspects of a participant’s identity. It is holistic.

**Traditional and Group Mentoring**

The definition offered above presents a constructivist perspective on mentoring. The following section describes the difference between traditional one-to-one mentoring and constructivist one-to-one mentoring. Furthermore, this section highlights group mentoring.

**Traditional one-to-one mentoring.** Mentorship is an integral part of the developmental fabric of human and organizational life. Most mentorship experiences are understood by the traditional apprenticeship model – as dyadic engagements where a typically older, wiser, and experienced individual (habitually male) guides, educates, and trains a younger novice.
Empirical evidence demonstrates that within traditional forms of mentorship, both mentees and mentors benefit from participation (Johnson & Harrel, 2012; Lunsford, 2012; Zalaquett & Lopez, 2006). There is much to be celebrated about the traditional practice of mentoring. Notwithstanding, the one-to-one mentorship relationship, as judged against other dyadic relationships, is the most hierarchical, exclusionary, and elitist (Hunt & Michael, 1983). Traditional mentorship may serve as a reinforcing process designed to protect existing role orthodoxies and traditions (Southworth, 1995). Darwin (2000) contextualized this.

Implicit in traditional mentoring practices are unchallenged assumptions about knowledge and power. Learning was a means of transmitting knowledge to protégés’s and the mentor’s primary role was to maintain culture. The mentor was a protective teacher, guide, or sponsor. This is not surprising, as the etymological meaning of the term comes from the root men, which means to remember, think, counsel. The word protégé comes from the French verb protéger, to protect. Thus, traditionally, the mentoring relationship has been framed in a language of paternalism and dependency and stems from a power-dependent, hierarchical relationship aimed at maintaining the status quo. (p. 198)

Traditional forms of mentorship are described in a variety of ways; grooming (Haring, 1999), functionalist (Darwin, 2000), apprenticeship (Cramer & Prentice-Dunn, 2007), technical (Mullen 2009), or transmission-based mentoring (Jones & Brown, 2011). This approach, if not engaged in mindfully, may be problematic on two fronts. First, it can be exclusive and may perpetuate the cultural socializing forces that produce inequities. Second, mentoring may be treated as a power-laden and hierarchical mechanical process.
Functionalist forms of mentorship may be exclusive. Marginalized groups such as women, sexual minorities, and people of color have historically been exempt from formal mentoring programs. These individuals have struggled to develop mentorship relationships through informal settings: golf courses, private clubs, and sporting events (Mott, 2002). The exclusionary practices of organizational mentorship norms for women and racial minorities have granted these populations limited access to cycles of power (Mullen, 2009). The power dynamics and hierarchical nature of traditional mentoring is only heightened in cross-gender and cross-cultural mentoring due to differing locations of societal hierarchies (Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 2002).

Apprenticeship models of mentorship can be power-laden and hierarchical. This paradigm is synonymous with ‘banking’ (Freire, 1970, 2002). Essentially, this is a system where mentors treat mentees as repositories of information to whom they make “deposits” (Mullen, 2009). Mentorship approached in this way perpetuates oppressive, degrading, and dehumanizing actions. In order to affect desired personal and professional change, the traditional model of mentoring, where experts who are certain about their craft can pass it on to novices, should no longer be applied (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2000). Alternative forms of mentorship can have a marked difference to groups who face exclusion (Gulam & Zulfiqar, 1998).

With the emergence of the 21st century, an alternative form of mentorship, and more importantly, a new mentorship paradigm emerged. Specifically, a model that challenges power-laden, frequently unexamined, and uncritically applied traditional forms of mentorship (Mott, 2002). This alternative paradigm is a constructivist approach (McGowan, Stone, & Kegan, 2007; Millwater & Yarrow, 1997). Although constructivist mentorship models can be structured as one-
to-one mentoring experiences, an alternative group approach is advocated as a mechanism to assist students in developing self-understanding.

**Constructivist one-to-one mentorship.** A constructivist paradigm of mentorship posits that mentors and mentees do not happen upon knowledge but actively compose their knowledge. This knowledge is value-laden. It is heavily imbedded within each person’s beliefs, experiences, and values. While engaging in the mentorship experience, both mentors and mentees simultaneously make meaning of their experience.

Within this framework of mentoring, social justice is in the foreground, power dynamics are purposefully challenged, and subjectivity is considered sacred. Within one-to-one mentoring relationships, intentional effort – from both the mentor and mentee – is needed. The mentoring collaborators purposefully step away from a traditional power-dependent hierarchal mentoring relationship and into a power-balanced hierarchically-distributed mentorship experience.

The constructivist approach to dyadic mentoring relationships are *learning partnerships* (Baxter Magolda & King, 2004). Effective mentoring learning partnerships can be created by validating mentees capacity to know, situating the mentoring engagement in the mentee’s experience, and defining learning as mutually constructed. A learning partnership challenges internal belief systems and identities. In this mentoring relationship, the mentor relinquishes authority so that a mutual relationship based upon shared authority and expertise may unfold (Baxter Magolda & King, 2004).

Although learning partnerships are constructivist in nature, there is a concern that significant responsibility for the mentoring engagement is retained by the *mentor*. Much of the literature on learning partnerships solely emphasizes the mentor’s role in creating the conditions for a vibrant, engaging learning partnership. In theory, this dynamic only serves as a continuation
of the power dynamic and hierarchy distribution issues relevant to traditional dyadic mentoring. Ideally, in practice, the mentorship experience is one in which there is shared responsibility for the mentoring. Furthermore, the mentoring relationship creates the conditions for both participants to see themselves as mentor and mentee – oscillating between offering and receiving mentorship. To accomplish this, those expected to serve in the mentor capacity ought to be particularly mindful of how they create the conditions for a healthy and developmental learning experience. Figure 1 is a visual display of the power dynamics associated with both traditional and constructivist mentoring relationships.

Figure 1: Portrayal of traditional and constructivist one-to-one mentoring relationships. This figure details the hierarchal structure and power dynamics in mentoring relationship between mentors and mentees in both traditional dyadic as well as constructivist learning partnerships.

Constructivist group mentorship. The constructivist approach is also recognized by another arrangement. This paradigm encourages collective forms of mentorship – group mentoring. Group mentoring experiences are those in which more than two individuals’ mentoring interactions are simultaneous and collaborative (Huizing, 2012). Four typologies have been identified: one-to-many, many-to-one, many-to-many, and the most popular form, peer...
group mentoring (Huizing, 2012). One-to-many and many-to-one mentoring relationships are considered facilitated group mentoring wherein a selected mentor (or mentors) with greater experience or knowledge facilitates the mentorship experience (Zachary, 2014). Many-to-many is synonymous with Zachary’s (2014) team mentoring approach. In this construct, participants serve in distinct roles (i.e., mentor or mentee) while engaging as a group of mentors and mentees.

Peer group mentoring is designed as a group-directed and group-managed mentoring experience of individuals who identify similarities. Regardless of age, professional title, leadership responsibilities, and life experiences, individual participants oscillate between mentoring roles. Each individual serves as mentee as well as mentor to their mentoring collaborators. In this structure, all members, through challenge and support, provide value for other participants. Furthermore, learning occurs through dialogue and social interaction (Heikkinen, Jokinen, & Tynjala, 2012). Lastly, this peerness endures the whole of their mentoring engagement. Four descriptions of group mentoring are offered below.

**Co-mentoring.** Co-mentoring, a group model of mentoring was initially presented as a response to the male-dominated hierarchical nature of mentoring (Bona et al., 1995). The derivation of mentorship and traditional usage indicate a presumption of hierarchy. The mentor leads and the mentee trails – the mentor shows the way and the mentee follows. “Co-mentoring gives a name to supportive assistance provided by several connected individuals” (Bona et al., 1995, p. 5). The “co” is placed intentionally before the “mentoring”. It reconstructs the relationship as nonhierarchical. The “co” establishes the mentoring relationship as reciprocal and mutual. The prefix invites the participants to shift roles and to share responsibilities as mentors and mentees. “It does not, however, remove the elements of counseling, modeling, and teaching preserved in the term mentoring” (Bona et al., 1995, p. 5).
Co-mentoring is not a method, but a relationship; a way of being together. Co-mentoring is an intentional developmental experience where mentoring collaborators act as teachers and counselors for one another. It differs significantly from the traditional androcentric conception of mentoring – that is, centered upon the experiences of men, hierarchical in nature, and grounded in knowledge and power differences (Bona et al., 1995).

**Mentoring community.** Specifically with regard to young adults, Daloz Parks (2000) described the importance of mentoring communities.

Because we are social beings, if each new generation is to contribute to the ongoing creation and renewal of life and culture, young adults need more than to be challenged individually…Ideas and possibilities take hold in the imagination of the young adult in the most profound ways when he or she is met by more than a mentor alone – by a mentoring community (Daloz Parks, 2000, p. 134).

Mentoring communities are built upon recognition, support, challenge, and inspiration. It is this type of mentoring experience that distinctively honors and animates the lives of young adults, and more so, nourishes “the renewal of culture for the common good” (Daloz Parks, 2000, p. 135).

**Collaborative mentoring.** The term collaborative mentoring was introduced by Mullen (2000) to describe a group mentoring experience between school and university professionals. The Partnership Support Group (PSG) was devised to generate closer ties between individuals at The Florida State University School and Florida State University. Seventeen participants – teachers, professors, administrators, librarians, doctoral students, therapists – gathered biweekly to explore mentorship in theory and practice.
The collaborative mentoring model allows for new possibilities in human relationships and institutional change. Mullen (2000) suggested that collaborative mentoring serves as a significant catalyst for the change through the development of synergistic relationships and organizational structures. Similar to the two types of groups described above, collaborative mentoring promotes a counter-culture to traditional mentorship. This counter-culture is one that is opposed to the prevailing intuitive practices of separation and exploitation (Mullen, 2000). Mentoring in this way is “a catalyst for changing traditional practices, hierarchical systems, and homogeneous cultures that result in stagnation.

**Mentoring circles.** Darwin (2000) also proposed a different perspective of mentoring than the traditional one-to-one structure. The scholar utilized the circle concept. She emphasized that this notion of mentorship is rooted in co-learning that encourages authentic dialogue and power sharing across cultures, genders, and hierarchical levels. Within mentorship circles, the group members share experiences, challenges, and opportunities for the purpose of creating solutions.

These circles combine experiences and diverse perspectives that go above and beyond what any one participant could contribute. Advantages of mentoring circles include access to networks, reductions in feelings of isolation, greater connectivity, increased confidence and commitment, career progression, knowledge acquisition, and better understanding of the organizational culture (Darwin, 2000). And for organizations, these types of group-based developmental relationships engender diversities-of-opinion as well as expertise and relationship-building that can better serve a constantly changing workplace (Darwin & Palmer, 2009).

Figure two is a visual representation of group mentoring during which participants serve collaboratively. In that capacity, they each perform mentor and mentee functions, Mentoring
collaborators challenge and support one another in a non-hierarchical, power-distributed, inclusive way.

Figure 2: Portrayal of group mentoring relationships. This figure depicts the intentional distribution of hierarchy and power in constructivist group mentoring.

**Implications for Group Mentoring on University Campuses**

Group mentoring, a constructivist approach to mentorship has profound implications for higher education institutions. This paper suggests three critical implications that include – and reach beyond – students development of self-understanding. By engaging in a group mentorship
practice, students will experience, explore, and better understand their personal values as well as the values with which their families and communities are committed. Furthermore, they will experience, explore, and come to understand the diverse values of individuals and communities through the intimate engagement with others. Group mentoring also results in greater connectively across campus and enlivened individuals. A third implication of group mentoring suggested in this paper is that these developmental relationships may lead to student-driven community-change initiatives.

**Group mentoring and the pursuit of self-understanding.** Group mentoring, by its very nature encourages the pursuit of self-understanding. The high levels of involvement and intent allows for a deep experiencing, exploring, and understanding of one’s personal, familial, and communal values. Southern (2007) reflected on her role as a mentor engaging with students:

> When students know that I care about them as people striving to make a difference in their own lives and the lives of others, and as learners on the path to greater understanding, they are more willing to take risks and be vulnerable as they question their own assumptions and ways of being and doing. (p. 330)

When a group of individuals comes together in care as mentoring collaborators, a holding environment is created. Through the deliberate use of challenge and support techniques, this container is one in which the participants are able to safely scrutinize their own assumptions and ways of being and doing. In this space, students can critically analyze their values, beliefs, and core principles. They move away from heirloom values – those that have been passed along from generation to generation – towards self-authored values (Kegan, 1982). The authoring of their
values, through the healthy engagement of their mentoring collaborators, can lead students to make decisions that align with their authentic selves.

Based upon this author’s dissertation research, several challenge and support techniques particular to group mentoring are offered below. The qualitative narrative inquiry involved 12 individuals representing four distinct mentoring groups. Although these research participants are executive-level women in an American mid-west city, parallels can be drawn for group mentoring experiences with students, specifically those at Virginia Tech.

**Challenge.** Within group mentoring experiences, challenge occurs by “pushing the envelope to make you think differently” (Alexandra, personal communication). This “pushing the envelope” occurs in two specific ways. Challenge is facilitated with gentleness and through the strategic use of questions.

Group mentoring collaborators are compassionate with one another. The mentoring holding environment is not one of critique and criticism, “no one's put on the spot to be made to feel like they've done something wrong, they've made a mistake” (Alexandra, personal communication). Challenge is approached gently and with compassion. The intent of group mentorship is to assist the others learn, grow, and develop. By challenging gently and with compassion, mentoring collaborators are able to push the envelope in a way that welcomes rather than threatens.

Challenge is also employed through the use of strategic questions. Questioning is a tangible way to provoke learning and development in a peer group mentoring experience. Susanna described it in this way,

> What it looks like is that the group members are, they're not holding your hand because it's not an enabling type of thing, but they're saying to you, what's holding
you back? What's stopping you? It's that question(ing)…and their unwillingness to accept a wimpy answer. It's their tenacity in continuing to ask that question until they get what they think is a *real* answer. (personal communication)

The process of asking questions has several important effects that stimulate action (Quinn & Spreitzer, 2006). Asking questions enhances mindfulness – the ability to pay attention to an experience from moment to moment. Mindfulness engages one’s whole self and ensures the mind does not drift into thoughts of the past, concerns of the future, or opinions. Quinn and Spreitzer (2006) suggest that questions help change one’s perspective by moving from a passive state to an active state. In a passive state, without questions, one simply listens -- there is no provocation. In an active state, with questions, one is placed in a mode of inquiry and is provoked to think deeply and then move into action.

**Support.** The research participants described three of many distinct ways that support manifested in group mentoring and other developmental relationships. Support was exhibited through validating and encouraging, offering recommendations, and advocating. Validation and encouragement were expressed as the foundation of effective peer group mentorship practice. Validation ensures that each participant cultivates a powerful vision and voice. Encouragement confirms for the participants that they are valued and valuable to the others within the group.

As group mentoring collaborators balance challenge with support, questions are balanced with recommendations. Recommendations were described as *options* – simply provided as suggestions. Recommendations are not dictated as the only way, but one of several choices. Furthermore, the person in need of mentorship reviews the options and serves as the sole
decision-maker. They proceed from the gathering with a self-authored action plan rather than being told what to do.

Advocacy is another form of support. Group mentoring collaborators are advocates for their peers. Paula declared, “We're there to help each other and promote each other and see each other succeed both personally and professionally” (personal communication). Advocating on one another’s behalf is a responsibility of group mentoring partners. Susanna reflected upon what it meant for her to have her mentoring collaborators as advocates;

I think it emboldens you and empowers you. I think that it's one place in your life where you can find at the same time somebody who knows how to help you, who knows who to talk to on your behalf, and is actually actively willing to do it…Within these groups you have a group of women that can tell you what they would suggest to you as next steps and they can help you, because getting a new job, it is who you know (personal communication)

Greener connectivity across campus and enlivened individuals. Scholarship suggests that group mentoring has resulted in access to networks, increased confidence and commitment, and greater connectivity (Darwin & Palmer, 2009). When group mentorship experiences are implemented within residence hall communities, across fraternities and sororities, throughout cultural and affinity groups, and amongst athletes, greater connectivity throughout the university occurs. Mentoring engagements allow for relationships to be developed that strengthen both individual and collective ties across campus.
Not only does group mentoring create stronger and broader connections amongst members of the university community, as a mechanism for student engagement, participants are enlivened. Group mentoring can be considered an experience of intense engagement.

In moments of intense engagement, the participant feels a profound sense of personal agency, well-being, completeness, and harmony with the world. Some experience a rush of energy, power, and confidence associated with genesis…An intensely engaged person feels a sense of direct experience and expression of their whole, authentic self, not a version of themselves limited by neuroses or conformity with social expectations. Intensely engaged people can feel a close connection with the people and things around them and can become acutely aware of new possibilities. (Hoffman, Perillo, Calizo, Hadfield, & Lee, 2005)

Group mentoring sets the conditions for individuals to become intensely engaged and is a conduit for high-quality connections (Dutton & Heaphy, 2003) that are developed between mentoring collaborators. High-quality connections (HQC) are synergistic ones identified by three characteristics. First, mentoring collaborators display higher emotional carrying capacities (i.e., there is comfortablity in showing various emotions). Second, mentoring collaborators are resilient and can withstand strain (tensility). Third, mentoring collaborators are more generative and open to new ideas and influences. Both literally and figuratively, because of the cultivation of high-quality connections, group mentoring experiences enliven individuals (Dutton & Heaphy, 2003). Howard Thurman suggested that what the world needs are people who come alive. Group mentoring is such an experience that brings forth individuals who are resonant, engaged, joyful, and alive.
**Student-driven community change practices.** Institutional change, driven by student imagination, voice, and effort is possible through group mentoring. Group mentoring does not just result in deeper understandings of the self, others, and the institution. Nor does it just lead to enlivened individuals and connected communities. Group mentoring creates a forum for important change. This is exemplified by Benjamin Franklin and his Leather Apron Club.

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania in 1727 was the fastest-growing city in all of the British settlements. A bustling urban environment of 51,000 colonists. It was on the verge of becoming the commercial, economic, and political power of the Thirteen Colonies – more culturally relevant and influential than the other dominant settlements of the New World (Lyons, 2013). This is the same year the Benjamin Franklin, just 21 years of age, gathered friends and colleagues to create The Leather Apron Club. Much of Philadelphia’s emergence is due, in fact, to the work of Franklin and his collaborators.

This secretive society was comprised of men who donned leather aprons as part of their trade – artisans, craftsmen, and merchants. These middle class entrepreneurs dreamed of a city that would better serve its populous and utilized this forum to realize those dreams. When together, these dozen men discussed issues of the day, debated philosophical topics, devised schemes for self-improvement, and developed a network that allowed for the furtherance of their own careers and tangible improvements to the city (Isaacson, 2003). The Leather Apron Club combined the “conviviality of a private drinking club with the advantages of a mutual-aid society, the moral and intellectual improvement of a discussion circle, and the altruism of a civic association” (Lyons, 2013, p. 46).

At its core, this Club served as a cauldron for social change. Multitudes of civic improvements rooted in social utility and social improvement were devised within the gatherings.
Some of the crowing achievements include the establishment of paper currency, a system for regular road repair, and consistent street cleaning. A volunteer fire company, city hospital, educational academy (which would become the University of Pennsylvania), and the first subscription library all were the direct result of these mentoring gatherings (Lyons, 2013).

Benjamin Franklin’s Leather Apron Club can serve as a model for group mentorship. The Leather Apron Club served as a forum for personal growth, professional development, and community change. On college campuses, students can be guided and empowered to gather in a similar manner to learn about themselves and the world with which they engage, gain skills for academic pursuits and the professions, and establish initiatives that create local and global change.

Conclusion

Group mentorship is a developmentally rich, educationally powerful, relational learning experience where participants oscillate between mentee and mentor for their mentoring collaborators. This paper detailed the defining characteristics of mentorship, discussed the difference between traditional one-to-one mentoring and constructivist perspectives on mentorship, and provided three implications for group mentoring within university communities. This paper has argued that group mentoring is an experience of intense engagement. It leads a deeper sense of self and stronger connections with others within the university community. Furthermore, it is a holding environment that encourages students to self-author their campus experiences and establish student-directed change initiatives.
References


