

**Faculty Participation in a Mentoring-Focused Community of Practice**

Hannah H. Scherer  
Department of Agricultural, Leadership, and Community Education  
Virginia Tech  
175 W. Campus Drive (0343)  
Blacksburg, VA 24060  
(540) 231-1759  
hscherer@vt.edu

Jacob Rowell  
Department of Agricultural, Leadership, and Community Education  
Virginia Tech  
175 W. Campus Drive (0343)  
Blacksburg, VA 24060  
jrowell1@vt.edu

Kayla M. Harris  
Housing and Residence Life  
Virginia Tech  
Payne Hall 109  
Blacksburg, VA 24060  
kaylamh2@vt.edu

Tiffany Drape  
Department of Agricultural, Leadership, and Community Education  
Virginia Tech  
175 W. Campus Drive (0343)  
Blacksburg, VA 24060  
tdrape@vt.edu

## Faculty Participation in a Mentoring-Focused Community of Practice

### Introduction

McNair & Albertine (2012) state that “our society can no longer afford to reserve ‘islands of innovation’ for a select group of students while others, often students traditionally underserved, receive an education more suited to the industrial age” (p.4). High-impact practices (HIPs), which often include developing strong, reciprocal partnerships between students and faculty, are an essential component of engaging students in socially and intellectually meaningful ways (Kuh, 2008). Programs aimed at increasing student success must address issues related to the diverse nature of students who are entering higher education today. In a previous study, however, we found that when working with underrepresented minority (URM) students in their research groups, few faculty participants took time to learn about the cultures of students who might have backgrounds different from theirs (Scherer & Westfall-Rudd, 2019). Mentoring within HIP programs can help with URM student persistence in STEM fields (Mondisa & McComb, 2015), yet these students may face discrimination due to their race (Drape et al., 2017) or not find effective mentors (Harris, 2019) in colleges of agriculture at predominately white institutions (PWIs). There is a need to invest in programs that help faculty support all students (McNair & Albertine, 2012). Studying nascent interventions at PWIs that aim to develop faculty capacity to effectively mentor URM students generates new knowledge to guide practice.

### Theoretical framework

Our study is grounded in sociocultural theories of learning (Brown et al, 1989; Lave, 1988; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) wherein the context of the learning experience (with its attendant social and cultural aspects) is central to a learner’s construction of new knowledge. We draw on Lattuca (2002) and Lattuca and Creamer’s (2005) use of sociocultural traditions to theorize faculty work itself as learning; an embodied process that emphasizes the significance of socially-constructed and tool-mediated activity. Lave (1988) and Lave and Wenger (1991) assert that learning should be viewed not just in terms of cognitive gains, but also as an “increasing sense of identity as a master practitioner” (p. 111); they posit that learning is situated in context and that evidence of learning lies in the ability to enact sociocultural practices of experts. In this study, we view potential outcomes for faculty participating in a mentoring-focused Community of Practice (CoP) in terms of their evolving identity as someone who can effectively mentor undergraduate students.

### Methodology

Our study was conducted within the context of a structured undergraduate academic experience focused on issues of sustainability in food, agricultural, natural resources and human sciences (FANH). The program targets first-generation and URM undergraduate students and pairs them with faculty mentors who work with them on experiential learning projects. Mentors were from a range of academic departments across the university. *The purpose of this study was to explore faculty expectations and outcomes while participating in a mentoring-focused CoP and mentoring students.* We utilized a qualitative case study design. A case study approach is useful in the in-depth investigation of a phenomenon within its real-world context (Yin, 2017). The research was conducted as a holistic case study bounded with 13 faculty mentors from two cohorts. As defined by Creswell & Plano Clark (2011), purposeful sampling was conducted to understand the experience of participation within the program. Semi-structured individual and focus-group interviews were conducted using a standard protocol; interviews were audio

recorded and transcribed. Interviews as a common case study method were chosen to gain insights on participants' perspectives (Yin, 2017). Transcripts were open coded following the constant comparative method (Glaser, 1965). Codes were grouped into similar clusters of ideas under themes for understanding the case (Creswell & Poth, 2014). Trustworthiness was established following criteria as described by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Artifacts from CoP sessions and assignments were used to describe the intervention and provide context for the case.

### **Results/findings**

Analysis of entrance interviews revealed that faculty initially had an interest in learning about mentorship, yet had concerns about their own ability to mentor, both generally and with respect to mentoring URM students in particular. Participants expressed interest in the program, such as one participant who stated: "I want to learn from and contribute to...the faculty group...anytime you get people together who care about students and think carefully about the ways in which they want to support student goals. That to me is exciting." Participants indicated that they "never received any formal training" on mentoring. Further, as one participant stated, there were concerns about mentoring underrepresented students:

I'm a bit maybe sometimes worried if I say something that the student might be offended by or, and you know, I don't have any intention of that, but...I don't think it has happened yet, but I catch myself sometimes having thoughts that I wonder would I think that if that was a student from a majority.

SSP mentors completed readings, reflection assignments, and participated in monthly CoP meetings. Topics addressed included: past mentoring experiences, current successes and challenges, setting expectations with mentees, best practices in mentoring, being accessible and available to students (particularly URM students), recognizing and addressing student mental health issues, and proactive mentoring to support diversity and inclusion on a predominantly white campus. Findings from exit interviews for the first cohort indicate that mentors developed an understanding that mentoring relationships are unique to the students they work with. Mentors voiced that the program helped to increase their understanding of what it means to be a mentor and described potential changes in how they will practice mentorship.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations for Practice**

Our findings show that participation in the CoP met the expressed needs of participants in terms of deepening their ability to serve as mentors. The realization that mentoring is not a "one size fits all" practice is an important step forward in being able to better support the unique needs of all students (Schlosser & Foley, 2008). Further research exploring ways to address faculty concerns about mentoring URM students will help contribute to increasing recruitment and retention of URM students in FANH (AAAE Research Priority 3, Stripling & Ricketts, 2016) by deepening the abilities of faculty who mentor URM students. Agricultural education professionals have a key role to play in efforts to prepare faculty colleagues in other departments to work with URM students, such as leading initiatives to train majority faculty to attend to the array of potential needs that URM students may have due to their unique experience of climate within their home department on a PWI campus (Harris, 2019). We recommend creating opportunities for majority faculty to develop cultural competence (NEA, 2008), share concerns, reflect on their experience and privilege (Harris & Scherer, 2019), and learn together in a supportive environment. Our model of pairing a CoP with the lived experience of mentoring an URM student shows early promise for replication at other institutions.

## References

- Creswell, J. & Plano Clark, V. (2011). *Designing and conducting mixed methods research*. SAGE Publications.
- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2016). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches*. SAGE Publications.
- Drape, T., Anderson, G., Church, A., Jain, S., Slabach, R., & Amaral, R. (2017). Is diversity on their minds? Perceptions of diversity in an undergraduate population using a mixed-methods design. *NACTA Journal*, 61(3), 255-561.
- Glaser, B. G. (1965). The constant comparative method of qualitative analysis. *Social problems*, 12(4), 436-445.
- Harris, K. (2019). "Care and authenticity is something that I was seeking": Mentoring experiences of African American undergraduate students studying agriculture at an 1862 Land Grant Institution. (MS thesis), Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, VA.
- Harris, K., & Scherer, H. H. (2019, June). Cross-Race Mentoring: Bridging the Gap. *NACTA Journal Abstracts*, 65(Supplement 1), 96.
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Beverly Hills, Calif: Sage Publications.
- McNair, T. B., & Albertine, S. (2012). Seeking high-quality, high-impact learning: The imperative of faculty development and curricular intentionality. *Peer Review*, 14(3), 4-5.
- Mondisa, J. L., & McComb, S. A. (2015). Social Community: A mechanism to explain the success of STEM minority mentoring programs. *Mentoring and Tutoring: Partnership in Learning*, 23(2), 149–163. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13611267.2015.1049018>
- NEA. (2008). Promoting Educators' Cultural Competence to Better Serve Culturally Diverse Students. [http://www.nea.org/assets/docs/PB13\\_CulturalCompetence08.pdf](http://www.nea.org/assets/docs/PB13_CulturalCompetence08.pdf)
- Roney, K., & Carney, M. (2013). Get HIP: Facilitating student and faculty success. *Peer Review*, 15(2), 29-30.
- Scherer, H. H., & Westfall-Rudd, D. M. (2019, June). CALS faculty perspectives on mentoring underrepresented minority students in research. *NACTA Journal Abstracts*, 63(Supplement 1), 25.
- Schlosser, L. Z., & Foley, P. F. (2008). Ethical issues in multicultural student-faculty mentoring relationships in higher education. *Mentoring & Tutoring: Partnership in Learning*, 16(1), 63-75. doi:10.1080/13611260701801015
- Stripling, C., & Ricketts, J. C. (2016). Research priority 3: Sufficient scientific and professional workforce that addresses the challenges of the 21st century. In T. G. Roberts, A. Harder, & M. T. Brashears (Eds.), *American Association for Agricultural Education national research agenda: 2016-2020*. Gainesville, FL: Department of Agricultural Education and Communication.
- Yin, R. K. (2017). *Case study research and applications: Design and methods*. SAGE Publications.