

Exploring Student Perceptions of Mentorship: A Photovoice Evaluation Project

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### Introduction

Each year, the University of Missouri selects a cohort of approximately twenty sophomore agriculture students for involvement in the Litton Leadership Scholars. This program focuses on developing the whole student through leadership education coursework, academic field-based mentorship, and impactful change. To better understand how 2023-2024 Litton Leadership Scholars perceive mentorship, investigators utilized Photovoice; a participatory action research process that allows participants to tell a story using pictures (Wang & Burris, 1997). The goal of this Photovoice evaluation project was to understand how undergraduates involved in the Litton Leadership Scholars program view mentorship. Keller & Mott (2020) suggest Photovoice can help practitioners understand what program content is most salient to program participants through picture clues and discussion. By gaining deeper understanding about scholars' perspectives about mentorship, more robust learning experiences can be designed to help meet the needs of participants.

### How it Works

Photographs, combined with written and spoken language, are a powerful communication tool that allow for more richness and depth than traditional survey methods (Wang & Burris, 1997). Photovoice methodology allowed investigators to see the concept of mentorship through the eyes of Litton Leadership scholars (Sanders, 2011). This project was approved through the university's institutional review board and conducted by faculty members and a graduate student with ties to the program. Litton Leadership scholars were invited to take the following steps during their winter breaks: 1). Using a phone or camera, take pictures that represent or depict mentorship to them. 2). Choose the photo that best explains their most impactful mentorship observation. 3). Be prepared to reflect on and participate in a discussion with others in the program about their photo and experiences upon return from break.

In a regular weekly program session during the spring semester, investigators conducted and audio recorded focus groups with program participants. Discussion with the group of nine students lasted 45 minutes in length, and the group of ten continued for 60 minutes. We used an adapted SHOWeD model of questioning to learn about participants' photographs and the meaning they attribute to them (Wallerstein, 1994, Wang, 1999). The SHOWeD model includes the following basic prompts: What do we *SEE* in the photo? What is really *HAPPENING*? *WHY* does this exist? How might we be *EMPOWERED*? What can we *DO*? How does the story relate to *OUR* lives? Before the discussion began, students were provided the prompts associated with the SHOWeD model so they could engage in written reflection in advance. At the conclusion of the Photovoice project, faculty and graduate student investigators engaged in thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012) of transcribed audio recordings of focus groups, reflective writings, and photographs to identify themes about how participants understood mentorship. Steps included: data familiarization, coding, theme generation, theme review, naming themes, and explaining themes (Braun & Clarke, 2012). The use of multiple investigators, reflexivity, and an audit trail helped promote trustworthiness.

### Results / Implications

Three themes emerged from focus group discussions, reflection worksheets, and photographs.

Theme 1: Mentorship involves providing safety when challenges arise

Photographs and participant interviews emphasized the importance of helping mentees feel safe. One participant shared a photograph of a young woman walking ahead of a group down a steep hill, advising followers where to step *“when the path was rough.”* She explained that mentors help make the challenge *“less difficult for others.”* Other participants used words like *safety net, safe space, assurance, relieving pressure, and comfort zone* to describe their photographs.

Theme 2: Mentorship includes reciprocity between two parties

Several participants' photographs depicted reciprocity in a mentoring relationship. One participant who shared a photograph of two horses explained, *“The mutual grooming in this photograph demonstrates how mentorship is double sided. To get the most out of the bond, both parties need to participate in the relationship.”* Another participant photographed two people standing under an umbrella and explained, *“Where we are in life is always changing. Sometimes you're the person holding the umbrella, and sometimes you're not.”*

Theme 3: Mentorship includes challenging someone in a positive way

One participant shared a picture of a kindergarten teacher sitting on the floor with her students helping them learn to read. She explained that mentors *“lift others up when needed and are the biggest and loudest cheerleader.”* Other students noted that mentors *“push someone to do bigger things by providing positive feedback and acknowledge and encourage to help people feel empowered.”*

#### Future Plans / Advice to Others

Future plans include sharing photographs captioned by the participants at a gallery event for program funders and stakeholders. It is a frequent practice for Photovoice projects to be displayed at a public or community event. We hope this exhibition will help the mentorship conversation to continue among program participants and interested stakeholders. Additionally, we will consider these mentorship themes as we plan future program coursework and activities.

Although Photovoice has the potential to inspire and empower participants while promoting discussion, it is not an appropriate technique for all groups. While adolescents and adults can think abstractly about complex issues, younger audiences may not yet have this ability. Additionally, when utilizing Photovoice to conduct evaluation or research, investigators should be prepared with a plan to provide picture taking devices to participants who may not have access to a phone or camera.

#### Costs/Resources

The cost of this project was minimal. We planned our gallery event in a way that was budget-friendly, spending approximately \$200 enlarging, printing, and matting photographs for display. If financial resources are limited, we recommend utilizing technology to display photographs in a slide show during an event. However, it is important to note that personnel time is required to help with facilitation, planning, and organization.

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