A Narrative Case Study: The Role of Culturally Responsive Mentorship to Navigate, Empower, and Level the Playing Field for Black and Brown Students in Higher Education

Chotsani Williams West

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A NARRATIVE CASE STUDY:
THE ROLE OF CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE MENTORSHIP TO NAVIGATE, EMPOWER,
AND LEVEL THE PLAYING FIELD FOR BLACK AND BROWN STUDENTS IN HIGHER
EDUCATION

A Dissertation Submitted to Molloy University
The School of Education and Human Services
Ed. D. in Educational Leadership for Diverse Environments

In partial fulfillment of the
Requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education
By

CHOTSANI WILLIAMS WEST

Molloy University
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Abstract

As the rate of enrollment increases for Black and Brown students in U.S. colleges and universities, in part, due to innovative and strategic recruitment and enrollment efforts to attract them, research shows that students of color benefit from intentional and strength-based college support services to ensure that they can thrive and persist toward graduation. In this narrative case study, I explored the perceived experiences of Black and Brown alumni who were participants in a mentoring program at a predominantly White institution (PWI). In-depth interviews with 20 alumni chronicled their lived experiences and perceptions as they navigated the PWI with the help of their assigned mentor.

Utilizing critical race theory (CRT) and culturally relevant education as frameworks, I found that student mentees described how their mentors assisted them with cultural competence and critical consciousness skills. I conceptualize this type of mentoring as culturally responsive as both White mentors and mentors of color provided the students with 1) strategies to combat feelings of isolation and microaggressions, 2) clarity for next steps post-graduation, and 3) a thought partner to help them think through prominent racial equity issues on campus, some of which were unique to PWI’s. Mentors of color were perceived to give students of color the additional value of role modeling.

Limitations and implications for future research as well as suggestions and considerations for institutions of higher learning to implement culturally responsive mentoring programs are presented.
Dedication

This work is dedicated to my ancestors, my family both near and far and to the countless mentors and educators who believe that students will thrive with access to equitable and high-quality education.
Acknowledgments

I give thanks and honor to God who is the head of my life and source of my strength. I deeply appreciate my husband, Jamiyl Sr., our children Jendayi and Jamiyl Jr., for being my light and inspiration. To my mother, mother-in-law, and all in my sisterhood circle, you have been a source of motivation. My family, both near and far, have supported me throughout my entire educational journey, and I am forever grateful. Thank you for encouraging me to continue to ask questions – the right questions - and “stay the course.”

I send a special thank you to the esteemed leadership of Molloy University, to my cohort, the blended Family, my colleagues and friends, Florence Barbour and Tara Anglim. I am incredibly grateful to my Chairperson, Dr. Allison Roda for your guidance, expertise, positivity, and transformative feedback, pushing me to think more broadly about this critical work and the significant gaps this research filled. Your gift as a qualitative researcher and scholar translated beautifully into your teaching as a professor. I began to truly embrace my qualitative skills with your encouragement. To committee members Dr. Warren Whitaker and Dr. Perry Greene, thank you for being equally passionate about my vision for this research. Thank you to Dr. Ryan Coughlan, Dean Joanne O'Brien, Dr. Andrea Honigsfeld, Dr. Tricia Kress, Dr. Joanna Alcruz and Dr. Andrea Silverstein, for your unwavering support on this journey. I would like to extend my heartfelt appreciation to Gina Nedelka for expertise, patience, guidance, and professionalism for this entire process.

Thank you to the participants for taking the time to share your lived experiences with the Lindenstar University mentoring program. Your transparency and candid sharing will contribute to the literature and ongoing discussions about the value of mentoring. I hope will impact policy and shape the lives of generations of college students.
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Chapter One: Introduction

“We tend to think of the achievement gap as the problem of those who suffer from it. But the problem belongs to us all, making the closure of that gap imperative.”

(Rucker Johnson, 2019, p. 4)

A wide array of literature highlights the significant college completion gaps for undergraduate students of color. Graduation rate data reported by National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) in 2018 revealed that the six-year graduation rate for first-time, full-time undergraduate students who began their pursuit of a bachelor’s degree at a four-year degree-granting institution in Fall 2010 was highest for Asian students (74%), followed by White students (64%), students of two or more races (60%), Hispanic students (54%), Pacific Islander students (51%), Black students (40%), and American Indian/Alaska Native students (39%). Based on these data, some educators and youth development professionals suggest that additional support in educational spaces, particularly in higher education, such as mentoring from the support of a trusting adult and confidante, can help students thrive and not simply survive (Love, 2019).

When pursuing a successful future, persistence toward graduation is critical. Graduation can become more of a reality when students of color have a mentor. Having a mentor during college is linked to academic success, including graduates’ well-being (Supiano, 2018). A historical look at the inequities within education systems helps explain why some of the gaps exist, including an accumulation of factors, but not limited to school segregation, the quality of foundational educational experiences, coupled with a lack of resources in schools (Howard, 2019; Johnson, 2019). Borman and Dowling (2010) addressed the combined issues of the racial and socioeconomic composition of schools in strong relation to student outcomes, indicating the
effects of racial segregation on achievement patterns are factors that involve material resources, instructional focus, and overall school quality. Since immigration reform and the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, there have been increasing numbers of historically underrepresented racial and ethnic groups (e.g., Black, Indigenous, Asian, and Latinx) enrolling in institutions of higher learning (Tawa et al., 2016). Given the history of the United States and the issues of racism that surround suburban areas, inequities within housing, zoning for schools, and a stark history of segregation, a concrete conversation about school quality is critical.

Overwhelmingly, enrollment for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) is growing. However, there is a disconnect between the enrollment and persistence toward graduation for these students. Tunstall (2019) stated that students of color access higher education opportunities at rates far lower than their White and Asian peers. Tunstall attributed this to the overwhelming lack of access to the resources at the K-12 level that support college preparation and college enrollment. College success requires resilience and early exposure to a college-going culture. Tunstall pointed out that students must not only possess academic skills but also the social and soft skills required to succeed.

Research has shown that young people with mentors have more positive visions of themselves and their futures; they also achieve more positive outcomes in school, the workplace, and their communities (Mentor, New York, 2018). While much is known about the academic and social-emotional benefits of college mentoring programs for students of color, less research has focused on the perceived role a culturally responsive mentoring program has on Black and Brown students’ experiences of thriving and graduating from college. For this study, I define a culturally responsive mentoring program as one that centers and supports the voices, lived experiences, and identities of the student mentee.
Through structured orientation and training, the focal college mentoring program trains faculty and staff mentors to become acutely aware of biases, misperceptions, and stereotypes that Black and Brown students may face because of societal attitudes and perceptions. In a culturally responsive mentoring program, mentors become equipped to help guide students through a complex structural system that might be new to them as they simultaneously cope with micro-aggressive experiences, which may derail their success and persistence toward graduation. This type of mentoring program focuses on the one-to-one relationship between the mentor and mentee. It also has a comprehensive program component that fosters bonding, connectivity, and communal experiences with the campus community and participants in the program, with a goal of creating a sense of belonging for the student.

With the understanding that institutionalized racism in education has contributed to achievement gaps which have created barriers and have had a lingering impact on student success, mentors in culturally responsive programs offer tools to navigate racial bias effectively, and to feel a sense of belonging while also providing knowledge of soft skills such as time management, communication, problem-solving and adaptability (College Consensus, 2022), which close gaps of knowledge and improve performance. This multilayered level of support is helpful to overcome barriers of the hidden curriculum by sharing the soft skills that are critical to the students’ success. In alignment with culturally responsive pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995), a theoretical model, which Lynch (2016) defined as “a student-centered approach to teaching in which the students’ unique cultural strengths are identified and nurtured to promote student achievement and a sense of well-being about the student’s cultural place in the world” (p. 1), culturally responsive mentoring supports the mentee in the same spirit, which may help students feel more of a sense of belonging.
According to Liberal Arts Colleges, forming vital and meaningful relationships is a critical aspect of the college experience. Mentors can assist in navigating the complexities of higher education, including the uncertainty and anticipation of what post-college life has in store. Liberal Arts Colleges also stated that the importance of mentors is often overlooked and undervalued until students experience the impact of mentorship for themselves. The value of mentoring for underrepresented students is even more critical. Research from the College of Charleston (2017) found that the mentoring relationship is invaluable for first-year Black students, as it provides academic, social, and career guidance during the undergraduate years.

As an equity-minded African American higher education administrator and adjunct faculty member with experience in the K-12 and not-for-profit settings, I have spent my career fostering meaningful relationships among professional staff and students, building sustainable and culturally responsive mentoring programs to support academic achievement. With this background, my experience illuminated the need for research to examine achievement and opportunity gaps for Black and Brown students in higher education. For the purpose of this discussion, Black and Brown youth include African American, Caribbean, Latinx, and South Asian students.

**Purpose of the Study**

This narrative case study explored the value of mentoring connected to the concepts of a sense of belonging, culturally responsive mentoring, and the unspoken language of college, referenced within this proposal as the hidden curriculum due to my profound interest in how mentoring in higher education may impact the success of students. The work of culturally responsive mentoring is of particular interest to me. Stake (1995) stated that this type of case study occurs because we need to learn more about a particular case. Stake offered the example of
the teacher who desires to study with a student who is experiencing challenges or when one wants to evaluate a program.

I sought to understand how structured mentoring programs for Black and Brown students can help address barriers toward graduation, focusing on these three areas within a specific mentoring program. For the purpose of this narrative case study, I focused on the experiences of Black and Brown alumni who participated in a mentoring program. Through this study, I sought to understand how experiences with mentors shaped their understanding and navigation of an institution of higher learning.

**Background Literature**

I explored how culturally responsive mentoring from qualified mentors helped guide Black and Brown students and if it helped foster a sense of belonging, including their belief about their ability to succeed in college. It is important to note that students can internalize how others see them in academic environments, which shapes their academic self-concept early on (Tunstall, 2019). Perez-Felkn (2015) offered that underrepresented youth perceive their potential through multiple lenses and layers, including perceptions of how others regard them. This contributes to their view of themselves, based on Du Bois’ (2008) description of how African Americans measure themselves through the perspective of others in addition to their own perspective, developing a double consciousness. In the early years of education, hearing “you can do it,” from a school community with a college-going culture can make the difference in how a student succeeds in college based on the expectations of others.

Knight and Duncheon (2020) recommended that high schools develop a college-going culture in early academic environments, particularly in schools with historically underserved students. A college-going culture builds students’ college aspirations and prepares them to
succeed in higher education. Knight and Duncheon (2020) suggested access to college preparation through coursework and college counseling to enhance this culture. If this “you can do it” concept is employed while in college, one can infer that successful outcomes will follow. Goldner (2009) stated that mentors who offer companionship, genuine care, and support might challenge and help change the negative views protégé’s have about themselves and their relationships with adults.

Tunstall (2021) reinforced the idea that access to adequate resources can help students succeed and debunked the myth and the narrative that some Black and Brown youth who might be from disadvantaged backgrounds are deficient. Tunstall stated, “The idea that students of color from disadvantaged backgrounds cannot compete is erroneous” (p. 106). This study will contribute to the literature by examining how Black and Brown students made meaning and found value within their mentoring experience. Black and Brown undergraduates face unique retention and persistence challenges, which present barriers toward their graduation trajectory from institutions of higher learning, partly due to not feeling a sense of belonging and other contributing factors in the way of support and the quality of education in foundational schools.

Therefore, I propose that culturally responsive mentoring, much like culturally relevant pedagogy, can help to provide an understanding of the history that has contributed to the trajectory of educational outcomes for some Black and Brown students. This type of mentoring can help strike a healthy balance between how students navigate their real-life experiences that impact their collegiate career and help manage encounters that might prevent them from graduating. With the understanding that college employees and some faculty employees often view Black and Brown students through a deficient lens, mentors can be mindful and helpful with experiences that mentees encounter with bias and misperceptions.
Research Questions

The following research questions helped guide the research. The overarching research question is – What does it mean for Black and Brown alumni students to experience culturally responsive mentoring in college? The following related questions helped shape my research design:

1) In what ways did a formal mentoring program at Lindenstar University (pseudonym) help Black and Brown student graduates navigate the culture and climate of college to support and promote student success and persistence?

2) What guidance, if any, did mentors provide about the college completion gap for Black and Brown students to help them develop critical consciousness and challenge the status quo?

Methodology

I employed a narrative case study for this research (Stake, 1995). The selected design for this study is intentional and seeks to give voice to the participants (Merriam, 2015). Twenty alumni who graduated from the structured mentoring program shared stories of their lived experiences as undergraduate students in the culturally responsive mentoring program. The mentoring program began in 2014 and was designed to close the achievement gaps among underrepresented students by providing holistic support. The program began with ten student mentees, an equal number of mentors, and it continues to grow.

I used individual interviews to capture the authentic experience and voices of the alumni. Factored into this consideration is my positionality as an experienced group facilitator and trainer who “understands group dynamics with skills in understanding and working with people” (Monette et al., 2013, p. 189). My intention is to ensure that readers feel as if they have “walked a mile in the shoes” of study participants (Padgett, 2017, p. 42) by sharing relevant
quotes of participants in Chapters Four and Five. As the principal investigator, I noted the reality that I was the only person collecting and analyzing the data; therefore, allotting ample time for access to the population was imperative. This approach was most flexible and conducive for my particular focus; examination of the ‘lived experience’ of undergraduate students of color who participated in a structured mentoring program. Another goal of this research was to capture their voices and perspectives about mentoring as a potential vehicle toward equity.

**Setting and Participants**

The study took place in a metropolitan area, adjacent to New York City. Lindenstar University is a predominantly White institution (PWI). It is primarily a commuter school where the Black and Brown individuals, former students, and alumni of the structured mentoring program attended. Holistic support services students had access to included, a Health and Wellness Center, Student Counseling Center, and an Office of Academic Services and Retention. The decision for this location was to have the students reflect on their experiences as students during their time of participation. Between 2010 and 2012, racial gaps in retention rates and persistence toward graduation for Black and Brown students prompted consideration for solutions in support of students' success, including the launch of the mentoring program in 2014.

Each interview was conducted via Zoom, audio-recorded with participant permission, using the Zoom record feature. I transcribed interviews within 48 hours of the interview. I took copious notes throughout each interview to assist my recollection of the interview and notable themes that arose. Interviews were analyzed and coded.
Definition of Terms

**Achievement Gap** - Achievement gaps occur when one group of students outperforms another group, and the difference in average scores for the two groups is statistically significant. (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022).

**Black and Brown** - People who identify as individuals from the African diaspora, including but not limited to African Americans, Caribbean or Latinx, Afro-Latinx, and South Asian. A person having origins in any of the black racial groups of Africa. (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022).

**Critical Race Theory (CRT)** - provides a lens through which to question, critique, and challenge the manner and methods in which race, white supremacy, supposed meritocracy, and racist ideologies have shaped and undermined policy efforts for African American student participation in higher education. CRT became well-known in the 1970s (Delgado, 2020).

**Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP)** - Developed by Ladson-Billings (1995), culturally relevant pedagogy is a model for teacher education to help support new generations of teachers who would “bring an appreciation of their students’ assets to their work in urban classrooms populated with African American students” (p. 75).

**Hidden Curriculum** – Refers to learning that occurs through informal interactions between students, faculty members, and others (Andarvazh et al. 2017). Students need to possess an understanding of the institution's cultural context and social structures. Students who can readily adapt and acclimate to the norms and expectations of the institution will meet with greater success. (Minicozzi & Roda, 2020).
**Hispanic or Latino or Latinx** - A person of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin, regardless of race. (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022).

**Implicit Bias** - Describes the attitudes towards people or associated stereotypes about them without conscious knowledge. There is a preference for (or aversion to) a person or group of people. Implicit biases often predict how we will behave more accurately than our conscious values. (Nikolopoulou, 2023)

**Mentoring** – Academic mentoring can take many forms, and faculty play multiple roles. Mentoring can also focus on providing students with relational outlets to facilitate adjustment to the institution. (Booker & Brevard, 2017).

**Mentor** - A knowledgeable person facilitating the growth, maturation, and development of another person of lesser experience. Functions include a career guide who promotes professional insight, an information source who provides practical advice about academic expectations, and an intellectual guide who can offer constructive criticism about empirical pursuits (Booker & Brevard, 2017).

**Microaggression** – Daily indignities, often unintentional, form of prejudice, instead of an overt declaration of racism or sexism, a microaggression often takes the shape of an offhand comment, an inadvertently painful joke, or a pointed insult. (Pierce, 1970; Psychology Today, 2022).

**Significance and Relevance of Study**

Noting the increasingly diverse student bodies entering colleges and universities while examining the historical educational inequities in the United States presents an opportunity to explore ways to support a students’ path to graduation. This may suggest that there is value in mentoring programs, which can help to level the playing field for underserved students. Finally,
a narrative case study approach offered a better understanding of the necessary support mentoring programs can provide to address barriers towards a holistic academic experience within a Black and Brown students’ collegiate journey. It is worth investigating the value of mentoring programs to help navigate higher education systems.

A closer examination of how colleges and universities are investing and helping students of color thrive on college campuses is part of the rationale that guides this study. Another consideration for research is to examine policy, which would implement culturally responsive mentoring programs as a concrete step toward equity. Mentoring programs can be ideal for creating practical spaces for self-reflective and honest conversations around support, communication, and success of Black and Brown students, where students not only survive, but also thrive (Love, 2019). Culturally responsive mentoring programs can address challenges and barriers to success. Through a comprehensive narrative case study supported by an in-depth literature review, I linked current theories to enhance this evolving discussion. I hope to contribute to the research about student success using mentoring as a vehicle by sharing the documented experiences of student success, retention, and persistence to graduation for Black and Brown students.

As we consider how students are supported throughout their collegiate experience, the use of storytelling for this narrative case study can benefit future undergraduates. The study can be used as a motivational and empowerment tool to help share the path of success using students’ inspirational stories that foster strong connections to their experience (Denning, 2011). Denning posited that through stories, adult learners can gain knowledge useful for undertaking life’s demanding tasks. In this instance, sharing the lived experience of Black and Brown
undergraduate students who received mentoring program support during their college experience is a tool for consideration.

In forthcoming chapters, I further outline the importance of structural academic systems that support and demonstrate the intention to create equity for all students through academic services. Despite efforts to reduce disparities in university admissions, retention, and persistence, Black and Brown students still have unequal experiences meeting their needs while attending college, and this imbalance makes academic success not equally achievable (U.S. Department of Education, 2016; Growe & Montgomery, 2003). Growe and Montgomery stated that future progress toward equity requires a more holistic and comprehensive view to ensure that all students can effectively navigate the university system and complete their education successfully. In Chapter 2, I outline the value of culturally responsive mentoring in relation to addressing these gaps in student experiences.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

Despite the rise in enrollment for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC), issues continue to exist surrounding disproportionate achievement gaps and persistence toward graduation for Black and Brown students. A solution toward closing the achievement gap is mentoring when considering student success programs, Gershenfeld (2014) stated that establishment of mentoring programs occurs different reasons; while the purpose may vary, they generally aim to strengthen student engagement and relationship building to improve academic performance and college retention and assist with career planning. For this reason, examining the impact of mentoring on the higher education experience is a crucial part of this discussion. Despite the increase in enrollment numbers for Black and Brown students, there is a disconnect in success and persistence toward graduation associated with K-12 preparedness.

Before exploring the literature related to each of the relevant concerns, I offer a roadmap of the related frameworks that I present in the upcoming pages and Table 2.1.

Table 2.1: Framework Roadmap

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concept</th>
<th>Theory</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Opportunity and Achievement Gap: Notion of Thriving</td>
<td>Educational Survival Complex (Love, 2019)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culturally Responsive Mentoring</td>
<td>Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resilience; Caring Adult</td>
<td>Resilience Theory (1974)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Critical race theory (CRT) was one framework used to understand how mentoring can support Black and Brown students in college. Harper et al. (2009) stated that CRT provides a
lens through which to question, critique, and challenge the manner and methods in which race, white supremacy, supposed meritocracy, and racist ideologies have shaped and undermined policy efforts for African American student participation in higher education. CRT became well-known in the 1970s (Delgado, 2020). It includes foundations from anthropology, sociology, history, philosophy, and politics, created by Bell (1970) and Crenshaw (1996). One of the foundational principles underlying CRT is that racism is widespread and fully part of American society, embedded in the legal, cultural, and psychological spaces, not isolated acts or incidents by individuals. According to Lloyd et al. (2021), structural racism for centuries has negatively affected the social and fiscal stability of Black Americans.

Policies and practices in the United States, in education, family support, employment, and housing-related policies have caused harmful consequences, including the isolation of Black children from educational opportunities. There is a link between opportunity and achievement gaps and the denial of the right to education and tracking. Barrington (2018) defined tracking as the accommodation of students’ differing needs during which many schools started to separate students by academic ability into different groups or for all subjects. Tyson (2011) stated that this practice continues to be detrimental yet persists in most American secondary schools. Here, Tyson noted the importance of school environments that increase opportunities for more experiences that will lead to success in school and well as the job market.

Creating conditions within schools to afford more students, and not just a select group, opportunities to learn advanced curricular materials will go a long way toward nurturing a sense of fairness among students and preparing a broader group of young people for a diverse array of opportunities in the labor market (Tyson, 2011).
Given what the literature reveals about these linkages, thinking more deeply about how schools make or do not solidify investments in schools is crucial to dismantling an imbalanced system in the United States. Vue et al. (2017) offered insight into this connection. They framed the educational trajectories of Black and Latinx participants through their race experiences. They noted that race and its intersections with other systems of oppression shapes opportunity in American society.

**Opportunity and Achievement Gap**

On both the undergraduate and graduate levels, all students can benefit from having a mentor during their collegiate career to close opportunity and achievement gaps. Carter and Welner (2013) stated, “Opportunity and achievement, while inextricably connected, are very different goals…but every American should be given fair opportunities to be prepared for college” (p. 1). This is particularly the case for Black and Brown students because they typically enter college with lower academic standing because of K-12 school segregation bound to inequitable school funding and less access to challenging curriculum for underfunded schools. These systematically related issues may exclude them from accessing opportunities and successfully completing a degree (Hiraldo, 2010; Minicozzi & Roda, 2020). Hiraldo (2010) stated, “This systematic reality works against building a diverse and inclusive higher education environment because it supports the embedded hierarchical racist paradigms that currently exist in our society” (p. 55).

Disparate and lingering results of opportunity and achievement gaps due to unequal access and legalized segregation in school systems can be attributed to these gaps. The “educational survival complex” (Love, 2019, p. 27) is meant to help students improve at “high stakes standardized testing, assessments, grades, character education” (Love, 2019, p. 21). However, these reforms do not create real change, but rather only the impression that only
properly disciplined bodies will be able to achieve success. Mentoring programs are just one component of academic support to pair a student with a qualified and experienced person to assist in areas beyond academics. Other services like tutoring and writing assistance for structured and formal processes can be effective vehicles to support students on their journey toward college success and persistence toward graduation. Mentor New York (2018) highlighted that mentoring helps college students academically and socially, builds leadership skills, and prepares them for healthy transitions into adulthood.

Some have acknowledged that higher education is a public good through which individual participation accrues benefits for the larger society (Institute for Higher Education Policy, 1998; Kezar, 2007; Lewis & Hearn, 2003). Higher education has been characterized as “one of the greatest hopes for intellectual and civic progress in this country. Yet for many Americans, however, it has been seen as part of the problem rather than the solution” (Boyer, 1997, p. 85). Student success programs indicate gains, but research confirms that too few African Americans have access to the socioeconomic advantages associated with college degree attainment (Harper, 2012; Perna et al., 2006).

While the causes and consequences of persistent college achievement and completion gaps for Black and Brown students are well known, less is known about the role of mentoring programs to support students throughout their collegiate journey, particularly from the student perspective. Therefore, the literature review for this narrative case study will help to frame the exploration of the value of the experiences of students of color in mentoring programs. There will also be a discussion about educational inequities and systematic barriers.
Culturally Responsive Mentoring

Ladson-Billings (1995) developed culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) for teacher education to help support new generations of teachers who would “bring an appreciation of their students’ assets to their work in urban classrooms populated with African American students” (p. 75). Ladson-Billings (1995) stated that using school knowledge beyond the classroom to identify, analyze, and solve real-world problems was the primary purpose of CRP. Ladson-Billings (1995) posited that due to inequitable educational systems and a society in which Black students live with inadequate resources and racist practices in many schools serving them, race has a central and permanent place in the fabric of the theory. Schools continue to underserve Black students due to the structural and institutional inequality experienced across the United States, it is worth investigating how mentoring can help support their success, to enhance their resilience and ability to succeed, which introduces the resilience theory to this discussion.

Resilience Theory

The resilience theory coined by Garmezy (1991) helps us analyze the transition to higher education, which is often a perception critical and stressful adjustment phase in students’ lives (Sk & Halder, 2021). The effects of resilience have received more attention as possible factors that contributing to the college students’ success of Sk and Halder (2021). Additionally, they elaborated that resilience is a measure of successful coping that enables individuals to flourish and can be learned as an achievable trait. In the resilience process, protective factors help to contribute to positive outcomes. Researchers revealed that higher resilience resulted in reductions in adjustment difficulties, depression, and less suicidal ideation among undergraduate students. Undergraduate resilient students experience positive emotions and can cope with stress in a positive manner. Adaptive coping techniques, which mentors can support, can be linked to the specific success of students in their first year to adjust and improve college persistence.
Educational, Social, and Political Implications

Research has shown that support programs contribute to student success, particularly for undergraduate Black and Brown students and other marginalized groups, such as first-generation students. According to the Chronicle (2019), such programs help students feel supported and valued, helping them to graduate at a slightly higher than average rate. Traditionally underserved and underrepresented groups face a myriad of challenges in higher education based on a later start to access and opportunities to learn (Adams et al., 2022). Adams et al. (2022) and Minicozzi and Roda (2020) also pointed out that the challenges are due to a lack of resources in K-12 schools before entering college, unwritten and unknown language in higher education, poverty, and structural inequalities. It is essential to recognize the growing number of first-generation students who can explicitly benefit from learning about the hidden curriculum of college life, such as cultural differences between high school and college and time management and how to prioritize assignments (Minicozzi & Roda, 2020). Lack of preparation in these specific areas, coupled with barriers associated with systemic and institutional racism, is not conducive to success (Adams et al., 2022). It has hampered the success of marginalized communities, particularly Black Americans, throughout history.

Furthermore, persistent achievement and opportunity gaps are traced to discriminatory laws and policies that negatively impact Black and Brown students, particularly African Americans. Research points to seminal cases across the United States, which documents practices, which have led to compounding issues of inequities (Bensimon, 2018; Lash et al., 2020; Oakes & Rogers, 2007). For example, in the case of Brown v. Board of Education (1954), there was a precedent for not carefully considering and implementing equal access to education and success for all students. We have noted from these cases and ever-changing policies related to education that they have served as a powerful mechanism for hindering or advancing the lives
of all Americans. While current practices and policies may not appear to be as overtly racist, the results and intentions remain the same, “leading to an undermining of the stability, prosperity, and economic gains of Black people” (Lloyd et al., 2021, p. 4), and leading to long-term challenges.

**Review of the Literature**

This section provides an extensive overview of the literature to examine themes across the scholarship about mentorship for Black and Brown youth, with an analysis of contrasting ideas. The literature will examine mentoring definitions, student success, integration, sense of belonging, and non-academic factors that lead to degree completion gaps by race. I will explore the value, benefits, and meaning of mentoring for Black and Brown students.

**Mentoring Definition**

An exploration of the literature reveals that there is no single traditional definition of mentoring. The role of mentoring is a high-impact practice that benefits student success, persistence toward graduation, and provides ways for students to navigate college life (Girves et al., 2005). Girves et al., (2005) stated that although mentoring may begin with academic advising or role modeling, mentoring is much more than that. Across areas of research, scholars agree that mentoring can be associated with a wide range of positive outcomes for protégés. Described as a strategy for positive youth development and as a deterrent to risky youth behavior (DuBois, et al., 2002) mentoring is defined as a way to improve the academic adjustment, retention, and success of college students (Johnson, 2019) and as a means to facilitate career development among employees (Kram, 1985).

Mentoring is a strategy to aid in academic progress and career advancement (Girves et al., 2005). Mentoring is worthwhile for many reasons, particularly for marginalized populations.
Whisenhunt (1998) underscores the long-term benefits of mentoring leading to career opportunities, financial stability, and living The American Dream. Whisenhunt stated:

The dream of equality has existed as long as humans have been around, and one way of achieving that, according to some people, has been to share communally. To some people communalism and equality were little more than Utopian dreams, but there have been other dedicated reformers--or idealists, if you will--who have believed their goals were achievable and spent their lives working toward those ends. (p. 300).

As we consider sustainable ways to close the achievement gap, it is critical to note, as Carter and Welner (2013) pointed out, that this has not arisen by coincidence; children learn when they have opportunities to learn, and gaps in opportunities have led to gaps in achievement. Mentoring, particularly culturally responsive mentorship, can help leverage the playing field for Black and Brown students in higher educational settings, ultimately leading to job stability and social mobility. Positive social outcomes such as employment, familial stability, and economic productivity are all areas that mentoring can support (Johnson, 2019).

Student Success

Chapter One introduced an overview of how student success programs, specifically mentoring programs in colleges and universities, impact undergraduate students. Research shows that such programs contribute to student success, offering more in-depth knowledge about undergraduate students of color and their experiences with mentoring by capturing the lived experience from the perspectives of those who live it and creating meaning from it (Padgett, 2017).

While “there are notable gains in access for Black students in U.S. higher education, racial climates and graduation rates remain serious for this population” (Morgan et al., 2020; p. 2). In 2019, the National Center for Education Statistics reported that the national average of six-
year college graduation is 60% for all groups, but Black students graduate at a rate of 40%.

Girves et al. (2005) underscored this point, noting disproportionate numbers for college enrollment, persistence, graduation, and the pursuit of advanced study - all points where students of color and low-income students drop out. Literature has highlighted solutions to close college achievement and opportunity gaps over the years as it relates to student success, particularly for Black and Brown students. Scholars tend to reflect on the overall benefits of mentoring as a solution, which “aims to build on young people’s strengths rather than focus on their problems” (Wood & Mayo-Wilson, 2012, p. 4).

Many positive youth development programs include a mentoring component as one of the many activities (Wood & Mayo-Wilson, 2012). Generally, a conventional mentoring relationship is a strong connection between an older or more experienced person who provides guidance and support to a younger or less experienced protégé (Rhodes, 2002). A common theme within literature is that mentoring aims to build characteristics including but not limited to confidence and connection (Guarino & Hocevar, 2005; Wood & Mayo-Wilson, 2012). While scholars have explored the benefits of mentoring for Black and Brown students, there has not been an extensive review of how students experience integration, a sense of belonging, distinctions in types of two-year or four-year schools, and other specific success strategies that mentoring can offer.

**Unspoken Rules/Hidden Curriculum**

Scholars have pointed to the primary determinant of college success as the unspoken rules of higher education or the hidden curriculum. Research shows that the challenges for Black and Brown students are due to a lack of resources in K-12 schools before entering college, unwritten/unknown language within higher education, and structural inequalities (Adams et al., 2022; Minicozzi & Roda, 2020). Minicozzi and Roda (2020) pointed out linkages between high school and what is expected in college, revealing a pronounced gap between first-generation,
low-income students and students of color who often take fewer advanced courses during high school than non-BIPOC students.

**Sense of Belonging**

Mentoring for college students helps to improve retention and helps create a sense of belonging. Scholars have analyzed several approaches related to student success, including extracurricular activities, involvement in student groups, racial climate, and institutional commitment. (Hiraldo, 2010; Mannan, 2007). One approach that appears throughout the literature is Tinto’s (1975) model of integration. Mannan’s (2007) study analyzed Tinto’s theory of students who bring unique qualities to college, which shape their experiences. Mannan stated that the “central concept of the Tinto model is the level of a student’s integration into the social and academic systems of the college,” (p. 147), leading to persistence or drop out. This study essentially stated that the extent to which a student integrates indicates a greater commitment to the college experience. The findings of this study revealed the existence of a relationship between academics and social integration.

Beyond the classroom, overall college success includes ways to integrate students socially. Guarino and Hocevar (2005) highlighted Tinto (1975) regarding persistence as a function of the quality of a student's interactions with the academic and social systems of the college, asserting two primary factors. One is related to students’ personal characteristics, and the second is the nature of the students’ interaction with the college staff and faculty. These scholars pointed out the shortcomings of Tinto’s theory, stating the inability to detect the potential for dropping out at the start of their academic careers due to “narrow treatment of students' personal characteristics” (p. 43).

While researchers note the usefulness of Tinto’s framework, one criticism is that it is not applicable in all school settings. An exploration of Tinto’s framework may reveal that both
location and students’ personal characteristics are factors toward persistence. As indicated above, similar to the concept of student integration, a sense of belonging also “has been known to influence academic success” (Morgan et al., 2012, p. 2). Morgan et al. (2012) conducted a study of Black undergraduate students, which explored orientation and transitional experiences at an urban university. The scholars stated that a sense of belonging is critical to student success, but the process presents significant challenges. Among their findings were a shortage of Black faculty, limited cultural programming, and a need for identity-based space. This study also illuminated inhibitors to the sense of belonging. The scholars refer to “a true belongingness” in their study (Morgan et al., 2012, p. 6). Morgan et al. (2012) stated that studies on racial climate illustrate that “Black students largely sense a hostile and unwelcoming college environment” (p. 6), influencing persistence and retention. Additional research by Morgan et al. (2012) revealed that academic advisers in orientation could hinder rather than support the transition to college by facilitating a college-going culture with adequate preparedness and qualified staff (Howard, 2019). Therefore, the implications for future research demonstrated that work with an academic adviser (Adams et al., 2022; Minicozzi & Roda, 2020) can be explored further.

Williams (2018) reaffirmed the value of having a mentor to help students persist and thrive in college. He stated, “there is a connection to a sense of belonging and a way to combat isolation on campus” (p. 52). Here, Williams underscored the relationship between having a mentor and a sense of belonging, which can make a difference in a student’s overall success, particularly for underrepresented Black and Brown students who often seek guidance on how to battle feelings of isolation on campus (Williams, 2018).
**College Preparedness**

To address the rigor of college academics, it is no surprise that there is a correlation between a student attending a low-performing school and how well they persist in college. In fact, “a study of school data in ten states found that, of 832 schools considered ‘low performing,’ 92.3% were also high-poverty schools (with more than half of students living in poverty)” (Reville et al., 2005, p. 5). The Rennie Center (Reville et al., 2005) also noted the direct correlation between the students’ socioeconomic status, the schools’ performance on standardized tests, and schools in low-income and urban environments. All too often, these environments serve primarily or exclusively students of color (Adams et al., 2022; Minicozzi & Roda, 2020), as “underperforming” compared with wealthier (and Whiter) suburban communities. Demographics of post-secondary students continue to shift, and the nation’s colleges and universities continue to enroll more significant numbers of students who do not meet the profile of traditional college students entering college directly from high school (Romo, 2018). College knowledge is an integral part of social support for college success.

The literature revealed that a variety of nonacademic factors, as illustrated above, could help or hinder students, particularly BIPOC students, who face unique challenges. Conley (2016) referred to ownership of learning as a significant component of college readiness. “In order for students to be successful beyond high school they need to own their learning and know how to manage their learning” (p. 4). Conley (2016) offered four models, the second of which underscored the importance of motivation and engagement, goal orientation, self-direction, and qualities mentors can help support. Conley’s (2016) scholarship leads with a discussion of the role and importance of ownership of learning, stating that these elements can and should be taught, at the very least, available to all students. Mentoring would be of value in settings where substantial achievement and opportunity gaps exist.
Completion of Higher Education Degree

Mentoring can aid in the successful completion of a degree as it aims “to strengthen attachment, improve social competence, and increase social capital by introducing new connections” (Wood & Mayo-Wilson, 2012, p. 2). To this point, Jenkins (2008) raised resilience as a factor toward success, which can stem from a strong attachment to a caring adult. Several studies have found that social support predicts healthy behavior and academic achievement. Wood and Mayo-Wilson (2012) also stated that improved academic performance might be a distal outcome of mentoring. While McQueen (2009) found that withdrawal rates vary by institution and in relation to student characteristics, this research also pointed to the work of Wilcox et al. (2005), who found various motives for staying or leaving.

Several reasons exist for students who leave college. National Audit Office (2007) highlighted “personal reasons, lack of integration, dissatisfaction with course/institution, lack of preparedness, wrong choice, of course, financial reasons, and to take up a more attractive opportunity” (p. 46). These are not the only reasons; comparatively Higher Education Statistics Agency stated homesickness (Adams et. al, 2022; Minicozzi & Roda, 2020), as a personal reason but one that could be caused or heightened by lack of integration or lack of preparedness. Mentoring relationships can help support students who experience these feelings. Knowledgeable mentors can connect with other student-facing offices on campus designed to promote wellness, understanding, and support. Culturally responsive mentoring can help mentors be aware of the pitfalls that typically serve as deterrents to success.

Natural Mentors

Different types of mentors can serve the various needs of students at different phases of their lives. The literature revealed that not all forms of mentoring relationships are the same, and the range of relationships has key features (Rhodes, 2002). Among the studies explored, I
reviewed the phenomena of natural mentors, those who share similarities and are more familiar with the youth’s culture and background, such as the same ethnicity and gender; they may have a better understanding of the support needed. In an analysis of natural mentors that explored the concept of mentors who are more familiar with the youth’s culture and background, such as the same ethnicity and gender, may better understand the support needed, providing more appropriate guidance (Whitney et al., 2011). The study further distinguished between types of mentors. It is imperative to support an understanding of what benefits undergraduate students most.

Whitney et al. stated that family (kin) members serve as mentors more often for younger adolescents. Alternatively, non-familial (non-kin) mentors and mentors connected with helping with professional backgrounds (e.g., teacher, guidance counselor, and therapist), helping to develop those skills during the middle and secondary school years. Another type of beneficial mentoring relationship, which came to the forefront of the literature, is the informal mentor. Supportive adults are essential as adolescents spend time away from home and family (Fruhiht & Wray-Lake, 2013). A knowledgeable adult can also help students navigate their social worlds and adjust to new environments. Therefore, young people who have significant non-parent adult mentors in their lives demonstrate a variety of positive outcomes in adolescence and beyond. Fruhiht and Wray-Lake (2013) stated that these outcomes include better mental health, academic success, and reduced problem behaviors. In addition, they stated that the prevalence of informal mentoring warrants learning more about the value of positive informal relationships between young people and non-parent adults.

Informal mentoring is more common than formal mentoring for young people. Fruhiht and Wray-Lake (2012) also highlighted that the majority of research over the last three decades has
focused on formal mentoring designed to encourage these positive adult relationships. One study of youth mentoring by the Commonwealth Fund found that 83% of youth with mentors had informal mentors, whereas only 17% had formal ones (McLearn et al., 1998). Additionally, a review reported that between 53 and 83% of adolescents have an informal mentor (Spencer, 2007).

Conclusion

This literature review addressed the importance of having more knowledge about successful mentoring strategies for undergraduate Black and Brown students and the connections between preparation for college and persistence toward graduation. The history of institutional racism that has presented barriers toward access and graduation for Black and Brown students created linkages between achievement and opportunity gaps. Romo (2018) stated that historically underrepresented students have become a substantial segment in higher education in recent years. Research by Romo (2018) (reflected that between 1976 and 2014, college participation for students of color significantly increased.

Since the United States’ higher education system is more racially and ethnically diverse than ever before, with students of color comprising nearly half of all undergraduates (Romo, 2018), there is a need for further examination of the institutional commitment and “culture of mentoring” within the institution (Johnson & Smith, 2020, p. 1); particularly in educational settings that serve traditionally underserved populations. Scholars discussed the seriousness of institutional commitment, which can be explored further for significant implications for the success of BIPOC students in higher education. Finally, continued research and an examination of this topic will help to fill the gap in research to explore the value of culturally responsive mentoring for undergraduate Black and Brown students.
Chapter Three: Methodology

This chapter describes the research methodology I used for this qualitative research study. I used a narrative case study to examine the experiences and value that Black and Brown alumni of the Lindenstar University mentoring program place on a culturally relevant mentoring program during their college experience. As described in Chapter 1, a culturally relevant mentoring program provides students with high academic expectations, relationship-building skills, and critical consciousness to help them see inequities on campus (e.g., the hidden curriculum) and society and strategies for overcoming them. My positionality, as described in this chapter, helps to shape the direction of the research. My lens as an African American educator and leader within the mentoring program drives my interest and passion for in-depth research in this area.

As discussed in Chapter 2, I explored the value of mentoring programs and the potential link between student success programs as a solution toward closing the college completion gap for Black, Brown, and traditionally underrepresented students in colleges and universities. I drew on the theoretical framework of critical race theory (CRT) and social integration (Tinto, 1975) to inform this research study. Each theory brings value to the discussion of student success, including access to resources and opportunities. The relevant data explored from a comprehensive literature review shares evidence that suggests that mentoring for college students helps to improve retention and helps to create a sense of belonging.

I conducted two to three interviews per day, taking copious notes about the rich data gathered during each interview, which I later transcribed within 48 hours. It is important to note that I altered my initial plan, which was to conduct both interviews and focus groups. Due to the in-depth responses and stories shared in the interviews and early emerging themes, the interviews were sufficient. Before noting specific themes, I noted the overarching benefits of mentoring as
highlighted throughout the students’ responses. The overarching exploration was about how mentoring can help students feel a sense of belonging, feel less isolated and receive guidance to navigate a large and complex system.

While there are several contributing factors to how well students achieve success, Tinto (1975) noted persistence as a function of the quality of a student's interactions with the academic and social systems of the college, asserting two primary factors. As Tinto discussed in his literature, one consideration is related to a student’s personal characteristics and the second is the nature of the student's interaction with the college. If a student is trying to navigate a complex social system, such as a college or university, and is introverted, mentors may be helpful in developing relationships. In fact, Lawrence (2015) examined introverted and extroverted learners. He stated that verbal participation in classrooms does not come as naturally for an introvert, which one can infer might also be the case when interacting with staff in University Offices. A culturally relevant mentoring program that encourages mentors to help students build helpful relationships with professors, staff, and other students can be beneficial.

Throughout my career, I have encouraged mentors to help foster relationships with University Offices that will not only help students survive college, but to thrive in their environment. For example, when students need to engage and interact with departments that may have hours that compete with students’ class schedules or after the student has departed campus, this may require a helping hand such as an introduction to help facilitate a meeting during the hours that work well for the student. Such relationships may help ensure interaction and perhaps the start of an ongoing relationship that can help students navigate their experience for the duration of their time in college.
If Black and Brown students are first-generation students, they often face additional challenges in higher education. Minicozzi and Roda (2020) underscored this point. They stated:

To fully transition and overcome freshmen year challenges, the findings illustrate that students need to possess an understanding of the institution's cultural context and social structures, or rather, the hidden curriculum. Students who can readily adapt and acclimate to the norms and expectations of the institution will meet with greater success (p. 44).

For example, learning non-cognitive skills is crucial for negotiating the college transition process (Duffy & Sedlacek, 2007; Farrington, et al., 2012). Mentors can assist in teaching and helping to enhance these soft skills which include communication, time management, and problem-solving skills (Zhang, 2022), which are critical for addressing the ongoing barriers to persisting in college and earning a degree.

Institutions must be intentional about their support-to-support academic success, retention, and persistence toward graduation. To address the rigor of college academics, it is no surprise that there is a correlation between a student attending a low-performing school and how well they persist in college. Researchers have found a direct correlation between the socioeconomic status of the student population and the schools’ performance on standardized tests (Reville et al., 2005). All too often, these environments serve primarily or exclusively students of color and are routinely identified as underperforming compared with wealthier (and more White) suburban communities (Romo, 2018). One can infer that attending low-performing high schools can translate to the college experience of being academically underprepared, with scarce or no access to resources and a lack of social capital to navigate such a massive system. Therefore, it is vital for culturally relevant mentoring programs to set high expectations for
students’ academic achievement and help guide them and intervene when additional resources and they need support for success.

**Statement of the Problem**

Increasingly, more historically underrepresented groups enroll in higher learning institutions (Tawa et al., 2016). Demographics of postsecondary students continue to shift, and the nation’s colleges and universities continue to enroll more significant numbers of students who do not meet the profile of traditional college students entering college directly from high school (Romo, 2018). “Student Bridge” stated that more nontraditional students are in our universities than ever. Despite that, many universities are still designed for students coming straight out of high school, progressing straight to a four-year university. Student Bridge added that colleges must change to address their ever-changing needs due to an increasingly diverse population and cited that only 58% of students today identify as White or Caucasian. In comparison, demographics for other students are 17% Hispanic, 7% Asian/Pacific Islander, 3% are biracial, and 1% are American Indian or Alaska Native. Minority students make up a total of 42% of college students today. Colleges must continue to change to work to help these students succeed.

These changing college student demographics necessitate a shift to culturally relevant educational practices to meet Black and Brown college students’ needs.

**Purpose and Research Questions**

Despite the increase in enrollment numbers for Black and Brown students, there is a significant disconnect in success and persistence toward graduation associated with K-12 preparedness and access to resources. Gershfeld (2014) stated that are different reasons for establishing mentoring programs. He noted that while the purpose may vary, they generally aim to strengthen student engagement and relationship building, improve academic performance and
college retention, and to assist with career planning. What emerges from the literature are not only gaps in a standard and consistent definition of mentoring but also research that explores how culturally relevant mentors of Black and Brown students and other underrepresented groups might contribute to helping students navigate an extensive structural system that is inherently unequal. Therefore, the purpose of this narrative case study aimed to explore and understand the experiences and perspectives of Black and Brown alumni who participated in mentoring, and the impact they believe that experience had on their retention and persistence.

The following research questions helped guide the research. The overarching research question is:

What does it mean for Black and Brown students to experience culturally responsive mentoring in college? The following related questions helped to shape my research design:

1) In what ways did a formal mentoring program at Lindenstar University (pseudonym) help Black and Brown student graduates navigate the culture and climate of college to support and promote student success and persistence?

2) What guidance, if any, did mentors provide about the college completion gap for Black and Brown students to help them develop critical consciousness and challenge the status quo?

The following section describes the research methodology of the study. Here I illustrate the design and methods, my role as the researcher and the population and sample, and the underpinnings of the analysis.

**Methodology**

The procedures and design of the dissertation were conducive to gaining the best insight into the lived experience of the participants. The following section will delve into the research methodology of the study. I reviewed each of the critical elements of this study, its design and
methods, population and sample technique, the inclusion criteria for the participants, data analysis and procedures, followed by trustworthiness and ethical issues. The procedures highlighted in this section will be conducive to honest reflection of the collegiate mentoring experience through a semi-structured individual interview process.

**Philosophical Assumptions and Worldview**

The transformative worldview and lens that I bring to my research aligns with a qualitative research method because I sought the holistic experience of Black and Brown students in their college careers. Students may face long-standing inequities inherently embedded within educational systems. Mertens (2010) stated that a transformative worldview confronts social oppression at various levels as it occurs. In essence, a substantial point of my study is that it closely connects reforms that may change the lives of the participants and the transformation that mentoring programs can make. Specifically, as Mertens (2010) pointed out, the social issues of empowerment, inequality, oppression, and alienation closely connect to a sense of belonging. I believe these are crucial components of what my research will contribute to the conversation about the value of culturally relevant mentoring. Transformative research uses a program theory of beliefs about how a program works and why the problems of oppression, domination, and power relationships exist. I am interested in uplifting the voices of students who have typically not felt a sense of belonging and feel they have not felt heard or seen.

The transformative approach amplifies the lives and lives experiences of individuals (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) and intersects with the world of politics, which has the ability to impact change for people within society and those within it. I have dedicated my life’s work to actionable change toward eradicating injustice and inequalities of educational systems. My positionality and intersecting identities as an African American woman, parent, educator, researcher, and social scientist fuel my passion for this study. My keen interest in qualitative
research closely aligns with the transformative worldview because of the values highlighted by this approach, as well as the constructivist view, largely based on the participants’ knowledge and experience. Each perspective values open-ended questions and relies on the participants’ views of their situation.

**Design and Methods**

I selected a qualitative narrative case study research approach to understand how mentoring programs support the retention and persistence toward graduation of Black and Brown students. I believe a case study is appropriate for this topic. Merriam (2009) stated that a case study is an in-depth description and analysis of a system study. This process is most important to my research to facilitate our understanding of a larger societal issue related to underlying barriers toward education due to systemic racial and unjust societal issues within education.

**Role of the Researcher**

My role in this study is my perspective and positionality to bring to the forefront. With comprehensive experience in educational spaces as an African American woman and mentoring leader, I have designed, implemented, and conducted programs and training across the New York metropolitan and Long Island areas. As an educator who has worked in the non-profit sector to support enrichment programs, I have also developed small learning communities and fostered relationships with K-12 schools and higher education institutions to support underserved youth. With over 20 years of experience in urban settings, primarily serving underrepresented communities in the roles I describe above, and proficient facilitator skills, I bring my wealth of knowledge to this work.

The positionality and roles held within my career may present a biased approach to this work. Therefore, I was intentional in my work toward combating this positional bias. I strategically employed member checking and peer editing for this study to provide the
opportunity for participants to review and approve what I have gleaned from their explanations of their experiences.

Beyond accuracy, I desired to give participants more of a voice and sense of agency in their contributions to this study. Carlson (2010) stated that member checking is also a “way of finding out whether the data analysis is congruent with the participants’ experiences,” cited in Curtin and Fossey, 2007. I adhered to Creswell (2009), who emphasized that member checking should be “polished” interpreted pieces such as themes and patterns emerging from the data rather than the actual transcripts. I shared themes with my participants to ensure accuracy (p. 191).

With an insider perspective holding the roles that I occupy as a leader in the diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging space and as the inaugural director of an award-winning mentoring program, I have observed how mentoring relationships, resources, and access can change the trajectory of a students’ path. As an educator, university administrator, and parent, who fully supports the advancement of equity, inclusion, and antiracism work in educational spaces, I used this lens to ensure comfort for the interview experience for students. I also obtained permission to gather insight from graduates of an evidence-based mentoring program for this study. Relying on my unique experience as one who “understands group dynamics and has skills in understanding and working with people” (Monette et al., 2013, p.189), I believe that my role in the research was valued by the participants, creating a professional and comfortable environment for my participants to answer questions openly and honestly.

As an outsider, while the alumni participants knew me as the director of the program, there are aspects of their world and lives that I did not know since I was not their assigned mentor, nor did I participate as a student mentee while I was an undergraduate student in college.
I remained open to hearing their authentic experiences as Black and Brown students with intersecting identities who had positive and negative experiences with their mentors.

**Population and Sample**

The setting of this study is a predominantly White institution (PWI) in suburban Long Island. I interviewed 20 Black and Brown alumni in individual interviews about their mentors. All 20 students fit the criteria of identifying as Black and Brown alumni who participated in the Lindenstar mentoring program. Students all graduated from a structured mentoring program between 2016 and 2023, and their ages ranged from 18 – 50.

Taking into consideration the research question and its goals, I used purposive sampling, “a deliberate process of selecting respondents based on their ability to provide the needed information” (Padgett, 2017, p. 68), leaning toward a smaller sample size for depth, not to exceed 20 participants.

**Data Collection Procedures**

Prior to establishing the interviews, the development of a semi-structured interview guide helped to “outline the main topics of inquiry and the order” (Monette et al., 2013, p. 188), which is important to help facilitate the conversation and avoid potential pitfalls and limitations in the group. Developing the interview guide, followed by obtaining consent for the participants were key steps in this process. The consent outlined audio recording of the interviews. One interviewer was sufficient for the interviews, with me serving as principal investigator and interviewer. It is worth noting that the second IRB letter of approval is not included within this manuscript to maintain the confidentiality of the participants.

The first strategy for this procedure was to review the list of previous mentoring program participants. Individualized outreach was made to a list of 49 alumni of the Lindenstar University mentoring program by colleagues in my cohort, using a detailed script that I prepared. Outreach
by my colleagues was a critical step to avoid any sense of coercion based on my relationship with the participants. The outreach letter explained the purpose of the narrative case study, requested an interview and an invitation to participate in a focus group. I interviewed Alumni over four months based on the following inclusion criteria: Black and Brown alumni who were participants of the mentoring program between the years of 2016 - 2023.

I asked, were the alumni to participate with the understanding that both the interview and focus group were voluntary processes and that they may withdraw participation at any time. Secondly, participants were required to have participated for a minimum of one year in the mentoring program to get a sense of their experiences. The interviews did not exceed 90 minutes. Thirdly, participants were between the ages of 18-50. I conducted 19 interviews and recorded them via Zoom, and one interview was conducted by phone, also recorded with participant permission and transcribed and coded within 48 hours of the interview. I took copious notes throughout each interview to assist my recollection of the interview and notable themes that arose, remaining reflective throughout the process.

The interview protocol (see Appendix B) covered the following topics to answer the research questions, navigating the culture and climate, culturally relevant programs, and culturally relevant mentors.

**Data Analysis Procedures and Trustworthiness**

I transcribed the audio-recorded interviews within 48 hours of completing the interview. Early on, in the first few interviews emerged themes based on the CRT and CRP frameworks (1994), including “socioeconomic status,” “first-generation,” “support,” “relationships,” “critical consciousness,” and “success.” As I organized the transcribed interviews, I remained open to the development of new themes. Padgett (2017) posited that
researchers should carry out all studies fairly and ethically to represent the participant experience most closely to ensure trustworthiness.

Trustworthiness remained at the forefront of this research from the beginning and throughout my research. Guba and Lincoln (1981) emphasized it is critical to rely on credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability to ensure rigor for each concept of trustworthiness. I employed validity strategies to enhance trustworthiness and used both peer debriefing and support as strategies.

Peer debriefing and consistent support from my dissertation chairperson and committee was a valuable way to ensure the rigor of qualitative research, keeping like-minded individuals close to receiving feedback and insight (Padgett, 2017). Aligned with the values of qualitative research, I offered member checking to participants and repeated and clarified points throughout the interview. In addition, I offered each participant the opportunity to share additional information at the end of each interview. Recognizing that each of these strategies may affect credibility, the benefits outweigh the drawbacks, “…peer support is an invaluable addition to the repertoire of rigor enhancement” (Padgett, 2017, p. 218). I viewed member checking as part of the participants’ full experience to engage them on an ongoing basis.

As mentioned, data analysis was continuous throughout the data collection as well as the process of taking copious and descriptive field notes. I relied heavily on the notes to remind me of crucial areas to highlight, underscore and return to for the compilation of this work. Listening to audio replay of each interview which I conducted over Zoom for 19 participants and one over the phone, I analyzed the interviews for common themes, which began to emerge fairly quickly. To help me stay organized, I developed two tables. Table 4.1 (in the next chapter) provided pseudonyms for each participant, year of graduation from the mentoring program and their
current work, student status, and experiences. To help keep me organized, the second table, not included here, had themes and illustrative quotes to underscore the points raised by each participant.

To ensure validity, I worked in close consultation with my chairperson and cohort to review the data using the peer debriefing process. Guba and Lincoln (1981) defined peer debriefing “as a process of exposing oneself to a disinterested peer in a manner paralleling an analytical session and for the purpose of exploring aspects of the inquiry that might otherwise remain only implicit within the inquirer's mind” (p. 308). I received helpful feedback on all of the work presented, and primarily for Chapter Four and Chapter Five, to help illuminate critical points.

**Anticipated Ethical Issues**

As the researcher, I kept ethical responsibility at the forefront of my work to ensure the participants were aware of potential risks. Adherence to the goal of informed consent is to gain participation that is truly informed. “Telling potential participants about all aspects of the research” (Monette et al., 2014, p. 54) was critical. Recognizing that trust is a significant ethical factor for the entire research process when working with human subjects, ethics remained at the forefront of the considerations and the experience for all participants. After receiving approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) (see Appendix A) and informed consent to protect the research participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), it was imperative to be sensitive to the concerns and experiences of the Black and Brown population.

At the beginning and throughout the study, participants were reminded of the voluntary nature of their time to participate in the interview. Acknowledging the inherent power dynamics and relationships between myself and the subjects of the study, the peer review process helped avoid leading questions. I explained to the alumni that they would contribute to future
research and that their voices were an effective use of participation. I also reiterated that I intended to share the outcomes of the research once the study was complete. The benefits shared with the participants was the notion of “paying it forward” for students who will “walk in their shoes” as future students. The purpose and intent of the study aligned to the explanation of the challenges that Black and Brown students face within higher education.

Limitations

Acknowledging limitations in advance helped me to combat ethical issues. I predicted that the development of my questions from the onset of the formulation of my questions might present as biased due to my insider perspective as an African American, my passion to further explore inequities within educational settings and based on my career experience. The formulation of the interview questions, as well as the interpretation of the answers to the questions, required bracketing.

One helpful method to combat this was to use bracketing; to write memos and to journal throughout the overall data collection and analysis (Tufford & Newman, 2012), which I did within 24-48 hours of each interview, to examine and reflect on engagement with the data (Cutcliffe, 2003). Not only was this a helpful reflective approach, but I centered and appreciated Glaser’s (1998) perspective of memoing as a way to give a researcher freedom, as opposed to one of constraint, to help me foreground my preconceptions. This helped me frame and keep the importance of objectivity and the forefront while helping me to discover themes that might impact my ability to listen and provide clarity.

Additionally, I understood that the relationships I hold with the former students, now alumni, might impact their desire to answer as openly as they would like, feeling the desire to give positive and affirming responses only. Existing relationships may have led to my reliance on memory and self-reported data of the experiences with the students. For example, connected
to these relationships is the reliance on memory. As University of California Libraries (USC) pointed out, this is the remembrance or not remembering experiences that occurred. These relationships may also lead to attribution, which, as USC Libraries stated, is ascribing positive events and outcomes to one's own agency. Conversely, negative events and outcomes are due to external forces. For example, I was mindful of attributing their success in college solely to their participation in the mentoring program given my extensive work and research in this area, later prompted me to think of a different group to interview.

Due to the purposive sampling, selection bias was considered a limitation since my study only included students who had some academic success. Student mentees were naturally motivated and inclined to participate in the program at the time of their participation in the study. Therefore, the first tenant of CRP, high expectations for academic achievement, was not a factor. This inspires future research which will be focused on students of color who have lower GPAs. Targeted strategies for recruiting this group of students will be implemented into the mentorship program to include streamlining the application process to prevent any barriers with GPA status.

Summary

The purpose and significance of this study is to contribute to the research about the value of mentoring and disconnect in retention and graduation for Black and Brown students in a university setting just outside of the New York metropolitan area. Research illuminates that while students of color are enrolling at remarkable rates, they do not persist toward graduation and are not retained at the same rates as their White peers. The study explored the experiences of Black and Brown students who have graduated after being part of structured mentoring programs and how it may have helped them overcome the historical inequities that have traditionally served as barriers to student success.
The purpose of qualitative research, which I chose as the method to conduct this study, was to provide an in-depth description of the participants’ experiences. Qualitative research, for which the researcher uses descriptive words to describe the participants' social experiences and situations for better understanding (Beaudry & Miller, 2016), permits the researcher to examine the questions presented and to make meaning of the experiences. After exploring many designs, including a mixed methods approach, I felt that it was essential to obtain quantifiable data from the participants’ authentic narrative accounts, utilizing my research, prior experience as a broadcast journalist and interviewer background skills. Therefore, I selected a qualitative research design and narrative case study.

I contacted a total of 49 alumni for this narrative case study with initial outreach made by colleagues and peers in the program on my behalf. The Lindenstar University Institutional Review Board (IRB) required that someone other than myself conduct the outreach due to my role as the inaugural Program Director of the mentoring program to avoid any sense of coercion. The initial process for outreach included an outreach letter from me, sent by my colleagues and peers in the program on my behalf. Although there were no declined invitations from prospective participants, 27 did not respond, which may have been due to only having and sending correspondence to their school email addresses which they no longer check regularly. For two invited participants, their schedules simply did not accommodate an interview, which presented the opportunity to interview 20 participants. Due to purposive sampling and targeted outreach, there were no gatekeepers.
Chapter Four: Findings

In this chapter, I present the findings of my dissertation results for the narrative case study of how Black and Brown alumni in a mentoring program were able to better understand and navigate the college experience with the support of a mentor. This chapter provides answers to my research questions, and I share the data gleaned from the interviews. While I am deeply connected to this work for my career in K-12 and higher education, I attempted to remain current with my understanding of this work by analyzing the trends and scholarship related to the support of students using mentoring as a vehicle. I wanted to explore this research more closely to share how alumni experienced a mentoring program during their undergraduate or graduate careers.

Through one-on-one interviews, I explored each participant’s viewpoint and perceived experiences in the Lindenstar University mentoring program. I then viewed their responses as a whole to identify themes among them, analyzing the responses using a culturally responsive approach and a critical race theory (CRT) lens. The interviews were conducted via Zoom and transcribed manually from the audio-recorded interview, which did not last longer than 90 minutes. In this chapter, I present the individual and collective responses to demonstrate how the alumni perceived their experiences about navigating an institution of higher learning. I added the race of the mentor to provide context for the interview responses and compare White mentors and mentors of color. An overview below is of participant experiences and offers a glimpse of their engagement with their assigned mentors and community.

At the time of Marlo’s interview, a discussion about the importance of students pursuing STEM benefiting from the structured support of Mentoring was prominent, partially due to the underrepresentation of peers, faculty, and staff. This sentiment also arose in Misha’s interview.
Misha, a biology major, expressed each of her new experiences as unique, and were amplified as a STEM major.

Misha stated that the mentoring program gave her the anchoring she needed to navigate her college experience.

My undergraduate experience was completely new to me. I was new to Lindenstar University, I was new to being out of New York City, I was new to being in a science-heavy program, I was new to Long Island, I don’t think I had ever been to Long Island before I (was) accepted (to) Lindenstar University. So, everything was really new, and it took me a long time to completely adjust. It was just such a different environment. So, when I was partnered with the mentoring program, it was the first time I felt kind of anchored to Lindenstar in terms of having someone…I think our first couple of conversations was talking about, well, what am I supposed to do now that I am here? While Misha’s mother did have some higher education experience in Haiti, Misha did not have the full context of her mother’s experience in an academic setting. She stated: “Anchoring myself to the place…was important, I didn't know what to say or not to say to anyone.” As a commuter student, Misha stayed connected to former teachers in Brooklyn, and she would ask them to explain the college world while sharing her daily experiences on campus. Eventually, she found other Mentors throughout the university to help nurture her interests as a thinker, a scholar, and interests. For example, involvement on the Debate team sparked her interest in policy. Other mentors in the program, her academic advisor, and other people from other units of the university helped Misha to navigate a large university system. All of them provided specific areas of support that she needed.
In addition to her professional work and graduate studies, Misha volunteers with iMentor and strongly encourages students to explore but, more importantly, to have a grasp on where they are “spatially” in terms of the environment, the commute, and the right fit.

During Alexis’ sophomore year, when she was not feeling confident and felt unsure about changing her academic major, she credited her mentor with helping her figure out what she should choose as a major. Her mentor provided a reassuring voice, Alexis stated:

She [mentor] just affirmed and continued to affirm that I could trust myself and continue to make decisions along that path, and that was really helpful because then I just felt more confident to fully engage with my classes to take certain internships and to just explore different avenues within that field that I probably wouldn't have done if I didn't have that confidence or feel that affirmation.”

When asked about the importance of culturally responsive mentoring for Black and Brown students to help students navigate the college environment, Alexis stated:

Culturally responsive mentoring is crucial. What that means for me, in my own definition, is that the mentor is able to, even if they are not of the same cultural background as the person they are mentoring, they are able to put themselves in a compassionate and really eye to eye level with their mentee to understand the factors in their life that contribute to different feelings that they might have on campus, especially, particularly, if they are at a campus that is a predominantly White institution. And different feelings that may come up for them when it comes to their family dynamics and how their family feels about their pursuing college, and just all of the different barriers that we kind of face in terms of that…another example is being the first and or only Black or Brown person in a workplace, and some of those nuances and inner dialogue
that comes to into play when we realize those things. So having someone who is culturally responsive involves someone who is willing to have those conversations and is willing to really again, just have that compassionate eye to eye level with a Mentee, and to really allow them to navigate those things in a way where we don’t have to explain so many things to someone who isn’t willing to understand if that makes sense.”  

Notably, Alexis and her mentor work closely today on a podcast that features impactful women leaders, discussions about life, family, and any obstacles they have overcome. The mentor credits the launch of this award-winning podcast to Alexis’ vision. She contributed her communication skills, talent, and ideas to the design of the podcast series. Alexis is instrumental in helping to select and develop questions for guests.

Among the studies explored, I reviewed the phenomena of natural mentors, those who share similarities and are more familiar with the youth’s culture and background, such as the same ethnicity and gender; they may have a better understanding of the support needed. An analysis of natural mentors explored the concept of mentors who are more familiar with the youth’s culture and background, such as the same ethnicity and gender, may better understand the support needed, providing more appropriate guidance (Whitney et al., 2011).

**Outliers with their experiences**

Most participants found their experience helpful and used it as a guidepost for their success. However, two participants, Sarah and Sheila desired more from their mentors. As one participant, Sarah, progressed from one year to the next in college, her needs began to change as a student, and it became even more challenging to relate to her mentor. Sarah was in her words, “a first-generation student, a person closer and there was so much distance in age, with almost no similarities to each other” that it was difficult to be fully transparent about her needs. Sarah stated, “Her experience was so incredibly vastly different from my own, so I think I would have
probably enjoyed it a little more if I was able to be more authentic and that authenticity would have been more organic if I had a mentor who was more culturally aligned with me.”

Sarah felt that opening up to a BIPOC mentor would have been easier and perhaps more suitable for her needs as someone with unique needs entering a new environment. She stated that she would have been more transparent, for example, about using school software for assignments or asking questions that would support her well-being.

Sheila expressed similar sentiments to Sarah. Despite Sheila's mentor being a BIPOC woman, Sheila’s mentor did not engage deeply with her about the issues surrounding current racial and political events, which were prevalent at the time of their participation in the program. Sarah and Sheila, due to their unique experiences and lack of connection to their mentors, are considered outliers in this study. Based on the overwhelming differences in their interactions and encounters with their mentors, Sarah with a White mentor and Sheila with a BIPOC Mentor, it appears that a mentor's cultural competency, regardless of their race, was a significant benefit and a value that supported student success.

**Mentoring program Description, Pairing Process and Training**

Prospective student mentees and mentors voluntarily opt-in to join the program, at any point during their academic career, regardless of tenure status or time of service as faculty or staff members. Prospective participants receive instructions to complete an application and participate in an interview process which helps to determine potential matches based on mutual hobbies and interests. The student mentees typically opted to join the program in their junior year due to their changing needs, career interests and trajectories.

As revealed throughout the interviews, when student mentees joined the program in
their first year, it helped ensure a smoother transition for their college experience. On average, there are about five touch points and intentional outreach efforts to students by the program director before they decide to join the program. The outreach efforts include but are not limited to first-year orientation events for new and incoming students followed by at least one, one-on-one meeting, and a presentation by the director at a student club or organization.

When prospective mentors and student mentees submit an application, they are alerted of the available times they can attend a one-time required orientation and training session, which centers cultural responsiveness valuing one's lived experiences and identity. Both mentors and student mentees attend training and orientation together which helps them better understand their roles and responsibilities. Throughout their tenure in the program, all program participants are invited to attend a refresher training session to review any components of the training that they would like to explore further. The training covers effective communication skills, and addresses implicit bias, perceptions, and assumptions that may hinder impactful mentoring relationships.

For this study’s sample population, mentors did not serve multiple student mentees. Culturally responsive training and orientation for Program participants is an essential component of this work coupled with the mentors’ desire to research and to be intentional about their learning more about the concepts of diversity and inclusion, particularly antiracist practices in higher education. In some of the circumstances highlighted below, student mentees revealed that mentors who were willing to engage in difficult conversations about current events that impacted campus life, helped the student mentees feel a greater sense of connection and openness to communicate.
Mentors nor student mentees receive a stipend for their roles. The program guidelines, as established by the program director, require mentors and mentees to meet a minimum of four hours per month in person. The program permits supplemental communication via phone or text message. Outreach and marketing for the program occurs using different vehicles for communication, including but not limited to meetings with student clubs and organizations, notification to the leadership of each of the schools and announcements through school publications.

An infographic sheet, which surveyed seven graduating seniors developed by Lindenstar University’s data assessment unit in 2017, compiled feedback in a post-evaluation of their experience of the Program which revealed the following:

- 100% strongly agreed that “My mentor demonstrated genuine interest/concern toward me.”
- 100% strongly agreed that “My mentor made me aware of academic resources on campus.”
- 86% responded “yes” to “Did your mentor help you to obtain a job?”

The assessment also revealed the following:

- Most participants joined the program in their junior year but wished they had known about the program much earlier in their college careers.
- Students in the mentoring program had higher cumulative GPAs compared to students in the same race/ethnic groups.
- The cumulative GPA of students in the mentoring program is higher compared to all other undergraduates.
While students in the mentoring program are self-selected and highly motivated, it is worth noting that their academic performance was better compared to other students in the same academic year.

The outcomes of the post-evaluation of the graduates demonstrate the value the participants felt they experienced, which has helped with the marketing of the program, garnered a prestigious academic award that monitors the support for students and has led to prospective donors and additional resources and funding for the program. Since this data was compiled in 2017, this current research will offer more current data and fill in gaps in research.

At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic during the 2020-2022 academic years, the program moved programming events and activities to virtual programming. Meetings among program participants and specialized workshops such as time management skills, navigating the Covid-19 pandemic and celebrations for National Mentoring Month, a campaign to highlight mentoring relationships across the United States, all shifted from in-person to virtual meetings.

**Participating Alumnae**

The participants in this narrative case study consisted of 20 participants, who are alumni of Lindenstar University, and graduated between the years of 2016 and 2023. They all attended the suburban university, and I recruited them for this study based on their participation as a student mentee in the mentoring program. I conducted interviews using Zoom for 19 of the participants. One participant needed to conduct their interview by phone. The interviews took place throughout April 2023 to July of 2023. Each interview ranged from 90 minutes to two hours, depending on the length of the answers and any follow-up probing questions. See Table 4.1 for a snapshot of each participant’s demographic profile using pseudonyms, their graduation
year, current occupation, and their mentor’s race and ethnicity. The table is followed by a summary of other relevant background characteristics.

**Table 4.1: Participants Profile**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Alumni</th>
<th>Ethnicity/Race</th>
<th>Graduation Year</th>
<th>Employment Status/ Graduate School Status</th>
<th>Mentor’s Ethnicity/Race</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Jada</td>
<td>African American/ Black</td>
<td>2023</td>
<td>Pursuing Master’s Business Administration</td>
<td>African American/ Black</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Vivian</td>
<td>African American/ Black</td>
<td>2022</td>
<td>Graduate student working on campus as student worker</td>
<td>African American/ Black</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Clara</td>
<td>South Asian</td>
<td>2022</td>
<td>Completing master’s degree</td>
<td>Middle Eastern</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Sarah</td>
<td>South Asian</td>
<td>2022</td>
<td>Licensed Master Social Worker Psychotherapist</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Sheila</td>
<td>African American/ Black</td>
<td>2021</td>
<td>Traveling domestically and abroad until employment</td>
<td>Latinx</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Omar</td>
<td>African American/ Black</td>
<td>2020</td>
<td>Traveling registered Nurse</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Lena</td>
<td>African American/ Black</td>
<td>2020</td>
<td>Communication Specialist Virtual Assistant Digital content creator</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Alexis</td>
<td>African American/ Black</td>
<td>2020</td>
<td>Freelance online content Creator / virtual producer</td>
<td>African American/ Black</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
 disc, 2011, Coordinator Environmental Science Master’s degree student, African American/Black 

12. Carrie | *South Asian | 2012, Senior Auditing, Middle Eastern 


14. Paula | South Asian | 2017, Behavioral Therapist, White 

15. Sasha | African American/Black | 2017, Associate Prostate and Cancer Support Center, Latinx 


17. Lala | African American/Black | 2017, Social Worker, African American/Black 


20. Felicia | *African American/Black | 2016, Tenure track university Professor administrator, African American/Black 

*Denotes international student  
**Participated in the mentoring program as a Graduate student  
As shown in Table 1, participants included the following demographics:
14 Black/African American alumni (70%) and,  
4 South Asian alumni (20%), and  
2 Latinx/Afro Latinx alumni (10%)

Summary of Table

As reflected in Table 1, there were a total of 20 participants, listed by year of graduation. Nine alumni had the same race mentors, 11 did not, which was a representative sample, focused on a specific population, people, and situations, which provide specific information that is “information rich” (Rapley, 2014, p. 3). Participants were equally represented in this study, a notable connection due to the availability of mentors of color at a PWI, which did not have a large pool of prospective Black and Brown faculty and staff mentors from which to choose at the time of the student mentees participation in the program. Pairs were made primarily based on similar interests, hobbies, and areas that the student mentee expressed a desire to enhance, such as leadership, communication skills, and time management.

Their interests varied from the desire to experience different cuisines, exposure to the fine arts, interest in sporting events, and being open to new experiences. For example, in the essay statement that students complete to assist with pairing, some students may have expressed interest in wanting to learn more about the importance of networking and building the confidence to do so. The design of the questions on the student mentee applications helped students share and to reflect deeply about their goals, what they wish to focus on, and areas to enhance during the mentoring relationships, such as some of the tools and skills listed above.

In-depth Participant Summaries

In this section, I include in-depth participant summaries to provide demographic and other contextual background information to illuminate the experiences of the alumni at Lindenstar University who participated in a mentoring program. While their individual
experiences and engagement with their assigned Mentors were unique, there were common threads that appeared in their collective responses related to the emerging themes of the value of mentoring at a predominantly White University (PWI), combating isolation and feeling a sense of belonging, social, personal, and emotional support, social capital, and career opportunities. I will discuss the unique experiences of each participant connected and related to the themes. There are descriptions longer than others to illuminate experiences related to the emerging themes. Each narrative, however, is equally important, uplifting the overall exploration of the value of mentoring. Using Table 4.1 as a guide, each participant is discussed in this section.

Jada is a Black woman who identifies herself as a Queer woman, joined the Program as a first-year student during the COVID-19 pandemic, and graduated in 2023 as a business major. She is currently pursuing a master’s degree in business administration degree at Lindenstar University. Jada’s mentor, a BIPOC man, and a pillar within the LGBTQ+IA community, both on and off campus, helped her develop her voice to speak up against microaggressions and discriminatory comments.

Vivian, an African American alumni, graduated in 2022, was a graduate student at the time of this study. She also worked as a work site monitor. She described her experience in the mentoring program as beneficial to her success as both a scholar and young woman. She described the reciprocal experience with her BIPOC Mentor who was also pursuing a degree during the time they were paired together in the Program. They were able to help one another through their academic careers. For Vivian, the encouragement from a BIPOC mentor to complete her education was most beneficial. Vivian shares that her mentor was more of a confidante and thought partner rather than helping her with the academic components of her education.
Clara, a South Asian woman completing her master’s degree at the time of this narrative case study, graduated in 2022 and identified herself as a first-generation student. She stated during her interview that the lessons offered by her BIPOC mentor were best recognized and better understood during her time as a graduate student at another PWI, an Ivy League institution. While some lessons were not as clear to her at the time of her undergraduate studies, many discussions about self-care, the importance of family, and how to address micro-aggressive behaviors began to make more sense during her graduate studies.

Sarah is also a South Asian woman who graduated in 2022 with a Social Work degree also earned a licensed master’s degree in social work in May 2023. Currently a psychotherapist, she described herself as doubly marginalized due to blindness and being a South Asian woman. Sarah stated that she would have benefited more from the support of a mentor who was a person of color due to shared experiences and a desire to feel a greater sense of belonging. She shared that although her mentor was instrumental in helping her get to know different people and resources on campus as a very thoughtful mentor, she was unable to fully connect with her because of their different lived experiences.

Sheila is a Black woman who graduated in 2021 and is currently exploring career opportunities. She has traveled both domestically and abroad as she decides the next steps in her career. She stated that her BIPOC mentor did not address some of the salient issues that impacted her as a student of color at PWI. Sheila was keenly aware of the impactful relationships that her peers in the mentoring program had with their mentors and noted that she did not have the same connections or closeness to her mentor as her peers.

Omar, a Black student of Caribbean descent, is currently a traveling nurse who graduated in 2020. His mentor, a White Biology professor, did not help him academically; rather, his
guidance on how to approach a specific assignment was quite helpful for Omar. Similar to the examples that surfaced in other interviews, Omar learned how to view assignments with a new and different lens.

Lena, a Black woman, is now a digital communication specialist and content creator and graduated in 2020. A notable part of Lena’s interview was an area that emerged as a theme was the value placed on mentorship at a PWI. Lena stated that she greatly valued how well her mentor, a White woman, listened to and valued her experiences, which was a critical part of building their trusting relationship. While Lena’s mentor did not have the lived experience of a Black woman, she understood the importance of and demonstrated active listening, serving in the role of an ally, a non-minority individual who chooses to support underrepresented groups while working to end discrimination and prejudice (Salter & Migliaccio, 2019; Snyder et al., 2019), which is a critical factor directly connected to student success.

Alexis, an African American woman, currently a communications specialist and freelance virtual content creator graduated in 2020. During her interview, she reminisced about the goals with her BIPOC mentor that were “co-created.” She spoke particularly about how her mentor helped to combat “inner dialogue,” which could have hindered her thinking about persistence toward graduation. The mentor who demonstrated authentic allyship was able to interpret and help to center her “messy” brain, while also guiding her about the importance of establishing important boundaries, and conflict resolution with peers.

Michael, a third-year law school student, graduated in 2019 from Linderstar University and majored in political science. He likened his mentoring experience and relationship with his white mentor to an artists’ canvas. When asked about the specific areas that his mentor helped him with, Michael responded that he “gave me confidence to be human.”
Gina, a 2018 graduate, is a Black woman of Haitian descent who earned a Social Work degree and currently works as a social work consultant. Gina was encouraged to join the mentoring program by another department on campus when they learned of her desire to transfer out of the university. Gina explained that her mentor was a White woman who “helped me figure myself out as a maturing Black woman even though she was a White woman. She [the mentor] was able to help me understand things about myself that I didn’t talk to too many people about,” to be the best version of herself. It is important to note here that Gina’s mentor, as Alexis’ mentor did, acknowledged from the onset of the relationship that their positionality as White women who could not fully understand the breadth of being a BIPOC person. However, they relied on the required culturally responsive training for the program, remaining open and responsive to conversations many would not have willingly approached. Gina credits the mentoring program for retaining her at the university.

Misha, a Black woman also of Haitian descent, majored in biology and graduated in 2018. She is currently pursuing a master’s degree in environmental science and policy and works for several environmental agencies. In Misha’s interview, she discussed feelings of everything being new to her, especially the new weight of being one of the only students of color pursuing Science Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM). She reflected on her experiences in high school and, in some ways, thought that the excellent academic standing she held would shield her from some of the microaggressions she experienced.

Carrie, a female international student from India, graduated in 2018 and majored in accounting. She spoke about the critical role her Mentors played in how she developed social capital. She currently works in finance and auditing and has started her own organization dedicated to mentoring. Her goal is to give back to others what she felt she gained from the
mentoring program in the way of support, guidance and a listening ear. Carrie became emotional during the interview when she reflected on leaving everything behind at home to obtain her education in the United States. Her assigned mentor, along with a faculty member and administrator, were her guideposts during her college tenure and became family for her.

Janice who graduated in 2018 self-identifies as an Afro-Latina woman. She majored in psychology. Her mentor, a White woman, was instrumental in shaping her current career and pursuit to help others learn behaviors and develop healthy patterns in relationships. It is important to note that Janice did not believe she could have an authentic connection with a White woman with whom she did not have a rapport. She reminded me during the interview that she repeatedly questioned the choice of the pairing. She then vividly recalled the moment that she had a change of heart, when her mentor explained the concept of Whiteness. Carter (2007) describes Whiteness as a hegemonic system that perpetuates certain dominant ideologies about who receives power and privilege. Whiteness maintains itself in cultures through power dynamics within language, religion, class, race relations, sexual orientation, and more. (Carter, 2007).

Carter (2007) stated that it is vital to engage in opportunities to have difficult dialogues today's college campuses as the world in which we live is becoming increasingly diverse and suggests that student affairs practitioners create opportunities for facilitated dialogues that help students deal with issues of privilege, diversity, and social justice (Watt, 2007).

Paula, a South Asian woman who graduated in 2017, majored in business management and is now a behavioral therapist. She vividly recalled instances when her peers were vocal about their surprise at how “progressive” she was as an Indian woman, among other micro-aggressive experiences that she encountered. Her White mentor was able to help her think more deeply
about her reactions to such statements and helped to keep her prioritize her work and responses to such experiences.

Sasha is a Black woman who majored in biology and graduated in 2017. Sasha is a project associate working in the healthcare industry to support cancer research. In Sasha’s volunteer time, she works with a Divine Nine sorority on their mentorship initiative. Divine Nine organizations are a collective of historically Black sororities and fraternities committed to education, service, traditions, and values that gained prominence during the African American Civil Rights Movement and still has a significant impact on the success and mobility of Black communities (Clark, 2023). Sasha’s mentor was a Latinx staff member on campus, and as people of color, Sasha shared that they were able to connect on common experiences on each of their journeys but still learned nuances about their existence in life and as people of color on the same campus. Sasha shared that she and her mentor helped each other become more culturally competent by learning more about each other’s culture and lived experiences.

Lala graduated in 2017 and is now a social worker in Brooklyn, New York. She was paired with a BIPOC Mentor who helped her understand and learn the differences of the types of non-profit and public sector career paths she was interested in. Her mentor was a social worker, as well as a staff member and Adjunct Faculty member who gave her helpful insider perspectives about the distinctions in those industries.

Bill, a Black alumni who graduated in 2016, earned his master’s degree in 2023 from Lindenstar University. He identified as a nontraditional student because he was above the age of 24, and had work and family responsibilities which required additional support along the college journey (McWhirter, 2022).
Marlo, now a Doctor of Optometry, was a graduate student at the time of her participation in the mentoring program. She graduated in 2016, her mentor was Black mentor of Caribbean descent. Marlo’s reflection as a woman in STEM brought back memories of the importance of representation and the discipline of the sciences. She joined the mentoring program to learn lessons she felt she did not receive as an undergraduate student. At the time of Marlo’s interview, a discussion about the importance of students pursuing STEM benefiting from more support in Mentoring was prominent, partially due to the underrepresentation of both peers and faculty and staff.

Felicia, a Black woman, was an international student from Jamaica, West Indies, at the time of her participation in the mentoring program. She graduated in 2016, obtained a PhD in 2023, and is now a university administrator on a tenure track. Felicia’s BIPOC mentor was a confidante who spent time discussing shared experiences, distinctions among Caribbean and Black women, and a helpful approach to interacting with a professor.

**Main Themes**

This section will highlight themes from the interviews and narratives shared by each participant. The theme that emerged from interviews with the alumni was the value of culturally relevant mentoring at PWI. The subthemes of this overarching theme are cultural competency and critical consciousness.

**Value of Mentoring at a Predominantly White University (PWI)**

A primary theme that emerged from the interview data is the significant value that participants placed on the benefits of mentoring at what they described as a Predominately White Institution (PWI). A PWI is a term used to describe institutions of higher learning in which White students account for 50% or greater of the student enrollment. Each of the alumni of color was a academically high-achieving student and pleased with their grades upon entry into
the mentoring program. Therefore, student mentees did not need academic support from their mentors, which is the first tenet of CRP, rather they described how their mentors assisted them with cultural competence and critical consciousness. I conceptualize this type of mentoring as culturally responsive as the mentors provided the students with strategies to combat feelings of isolation and microaggressions, lack of clarity for their next steps and a thought partner to help them think through prominent issues, some of which were unique to PWI’s.

In the sections below, I describe the cultural competence skills that White and BIPOC mentors helped students develop, including helping them navigate the services and programs that the college offered and feeling a greater sense of belonging and connection to the larger community. Mentors also helped students develop critical consciousness when experiencing racial inequities and micro aggressive behaviors on campus.

**Cultural Competence**

The cultural competence aspect of culturally relevant mentorship helped students navigate a PWI environment. Both White mentors and BIPOC mentors provided the mentees with information, skills, encouragement, and advice. International students stated that their mentors helped them understand cultural differences in the U.S. educational system. Additionally, BIPOC mentors were perceived to give students of color the additional value of role modeling. Mentors of color had firsthand experience navigating aspects of a PWI that they could model for the students.

Clara, a graduate student alumni with a BIPOC mentor, addressed the value of culturally responsive mentoring programs in PWI colleges and universities by stating:

I think assessing one’s needs in terms of the competency part of it (is important) because we don’t get our needs met, especially at a PWI. And so these programs exist for us to
graduate on time and make sure that we are doing okay, and I realize the benefit of it now. There is no program like that here – well, there is, but it's only geared toward undergrads, so there is very little support here for graduate students on this campus and so with that, I’m really grateful that it existed in the past [at Lindenstar University].

She continued by sharing her thoughts about the importance of representation of BIPOC Mentors:

> Basically, assessing one’s needs to make sure we are okay. People don’t know how to apply to jobs, people don’t know how to do Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FASFA); you know, we come from very under-resourced areas that just don’t know how to do it, and a person that we could see that looks like us, feels like us, that has done it is phenomenal and amazing.

As this quote illustrates, the value of having a same-race mentor gave mentees additional social-emotional benefits. For Clara, her BIPOC Mentor was a role model because of their current role as professor and mentor. In another example, Clara explained the benefits of how her mentor helped her to set boundaries because she observed her mentor do so and reiterated how the lessons and modeling from her mentor resonated deeply with her as a graduate student:

> I will give you a little bit about my mentoring experience. It was more about learning how to take a step back, learning how to set boundaries. If it wasn’t for this program, I would not have had a one-on-one about how to do that because my mentor taught me how to do that – she is phenomenal, and I wish I could be that way in that regard where family always takes a front seat. So, I am able to do that now. I had a family emergency, and I took two weeks off from school…I told my director, ‘I’m out, I’m still going to
graduate” and little things like that were really good because if did not have that, I would not be able to thrive where I’m at right now, for sure.

When describing any barriers toward graduation, Vivian explained that she had ups and downs throughout her undergraduate career related to finances associated with paying for her tuition. Her mentor, a Black woman, who also had a son in college at the time of her service as mentor, directed Vivian to resources that relieved the stress and helped her to take a “brain break” to process and understand the circumstances she faced.

In another example, Felicia, as mentioned above, credits her mentor, a Black woman, with aiding her understanding and navigation of the culture of a PWI by discussing the underpinnings of race within the United States. Felicia learned more about race relations in the United States and was inclined to learn more about the history of racism and segregation. She often considered how different her experience was in Jamaica, West Indies. During the interview, Felicia reminisced about how things were vastly different in the US than at home. She added:

At that time, this would be like 3 years or so or 3 ½ years, into my being in the U.S. as an international student when I joined the mentoring program, so there were still things I still didn't understand about the Black movement in the US because it was the same (for all of us) in my country. Where I’m from we don’t talk about being a Black woman all the time, but it’s different here, and I understand why now. I didn’t understand everything about the U.S. context…where I’m from, we don’t talk about being a Black woman, but now I understand.

Through authentic conversations and shared experiences with her BIPOC mentor, Felicia gained a clear understanding of the perspective, trials and tribulations experienced by an African
American woman who served as her mentor. Felicia’s research topic for her doctoral studies explored the identities and experiences of Black women in the diaspora within the academy. In part, she may have reinvigorated her interest and passion for this topic with the conversations and relationship with her mentor, her existing relationships. and impactful conversations with her peers about the concept of critical consciousness.

She added:

When it comes to culturally responsive mentoring, I am from Jamaica, a straightforward culture; we say it how it is. I tell you how I feel and I’m not going to beat around the bush to tell you what's really happening. Just give it to me straight.

Felicia explained how her mentor understood and fostered those ground rules about saying “it how it is” when they met and throughout their relationship. When discussing the importance of culturally responsive mentoring, Felicia reflected on the importance of understanding that different students need different approaches: “It's not a cookie cutter approach that you can take because some students will fall through the cracks if you take the approach…” She further explained that she needed someone willing to listen to what she had to say, who would talk to her with “an open heart, who could empathize and to give me advice.”

When asked about the importance of culturally responsive mentoring Omar stated:

Well, historically, I believe that Black and Brown students are usually at a disadvantage at first, being that many of our ancestors may not have even walked through that path. So, for first-generation students, mentorship is very important for them to have someone who has experienced that and to show them how to navigate higher education.

Omar and other alumni expressed the program provided three essential tools to help navigate a PWI.
A notable interview was with Bill, who shared his revelatory experiences with the concept of individualism versus positive group work dynamics in the classroom, which became competitive and felt isolating for him as a Black man from Trinidad and Tobago. His academic major was in sports management, which involved group work based on the curriculum. However, Bill felt that the group work was contrary to what he was observing in the classroom because his peers did not want to work with him. They became quite competitive when it was time to secure internships and work experiences. Bill’s mentor, a Black man, and others in the university with whom he developed relationships were able to help him deconstruct these experiences.

Pamela, a Black woman, currently working as an internet service agent for an insurance company, graduated in 2017. As a transfer student, Pamela credits her mentor for helping her embrace being neurodivergent. Pamela stated that her mentor, a White woman, helped her come out of her shell and to become less introverted, organized, and not so overwhelmed. Pamela joined the mentoring program in her senior year and wished she had known about the program earlier. She recalled that her senior thesis had to be submitted late due to health issues. After the thesis was submitted late upon prior approval from her professor, Pamela had not received any feedback from the professor. Her mentor became her advocate for helping her receive her grade and ultimately helped her get clarity about her graduation status. Even now, she shares with her mentor that she would not have graduated without the mentoring program.

Similarly, during Alexis’ sophomore year, when she was not feeling too confident and was unsure about changing her academic major, she credits her mentor, a White woman, with helping her figure out what her academic major should be changed to. Her mentor provided a reassuring voice, Alexis stated:
She (mentor) just affirmed and continued to affirm that I could trust myself and continue to make decisions along that path, and that was really helpful because then I just felt more confident to fully engage with my classes to take certain internships and to just explore different avenues within that field that I probably wouldn't have done if I didn't have that confidence or feel that affirmation.

Gina’s mentor, also a White woman, guided her through college as a Black woman on a predominately white campus. When asked about the college completion gap, Gina credits her mentor for encouraging her to attend graduate school. She stated that she would not have pursued graduate school so soon after completing her undergraduate degree if it were not for her mentor’s guidance. Like other participants, while Gina and her mentor did not explicitly discuss the definition of the college completion gap, they encouraged student mentees to keep moving ahead in their progress toward completion. Their mentors modeled persistence in their own pursuit of a higher education degree.

Another way that mentors helped students develop cultural competence of the college environment was through increasing their sense of belonging. Paula spoke directly to how her White mentor helped her feel a sense of belonging on campus. When asked if she felt like she belonged on campus and what would help students feel like they belonged, she stated:

I actually really enjoyed it when she [mentor] would include me in some of the events that were being held and asked me if I wanted to help out with those. For example, I helped with the Inauguration for the new president so that was really fun.

During the interview, Paula also spoke about her challenges as a commuter student that contributed to a decline in her grades at one point. Once she transitioned to residing on campus, as her mentor suggested, she began to see improvement in her grades.
For Omar, the connection to a mentor provided an opportunity to experience a different type of relationship dynamic, based on comfort and support. Omar reflected:

He really gave me the confidence to be human, I felt very emotionally healthy. My parents suffered a lot of abuse and other stuff in Guatemala, and my dad was one of four teens, so he wasn’t really like a child, one of many stories you’ll hear from first-generation kids. When I got him as my mentor, I felt very relaxed, and he made me feel that there wasn’t any pressure. The ability to kind of talk it out…he really only gave me a few pieces of advice, and I’ve held them close to me. He was more like a painter on canvas and let me fill it in.”

**Critical Consciousness**

Critical consciousness, a crucial aspect of culturally responsive mentorship, emerged as a valuable tool to help Student Mentees recognize inequities and challenge the status quo when experiencing or combating microaggressions. Students who were paired with White mentors shared that they asked questions, actively listened to students who faced obstacles during their college experience, and many times used their White privilege and access to help students. According to students, areas that stood out for student mentees assigned to White mentors was when mentors were willing to openly have difficult conversations about race, identity, and current social justice events, an aspect of culturally responsive mentoring that Student Mentees most appreciated. BIPOC Mentors were an added benefit as role models who demonstrated resilience and success in academia. BIPOC mentors provided students with strategies to help them deal with microaggressions and to remember to take time for self-care.
Critical consciousness was amplified for Jada by being paired with a BIPOC Mentor dedicated to advocacy and social justice, who works in political science and is passionate about history. Jada explained:

I will just emphasize ‘unapologetic’. That was the big one. Being myself but being so unapologetically, this is who I am, and if you don’t like it, that’s just me. That is how I show up. This is how I talk. This is what I do. This is me. These are my mannerisms. That's me. And I am unapologetic about it and will not change my core essence to make you comfortable.

Jada could be her “unapologetic” true self when discussing topics with her BIPOC mentor and learned that she could be that way with anyone on campus. When asked what it means for student mentees to experience culturally responsive mentoring, Jada stated:

Well, inherently, as we are aware, navigating any environment as some form of either racial or ethnic or some form of minority it’s different and you need help, especially when most of the people around you do not align with the experiences you’ve had. They can’t relate to you and sometimes they don’t want to relate to you, and that can be very isolating and very lonely. And especially considering my major which is also predominantly White men, it’s awkward sometimes and…it’s very isolating is the main word that I will use. And so having someone [my mentor] who can better understand you, your life experiences and understands who you are at your truest self, at your core, is so welcoming and inviting. And it makes you want to stay at the university; it makes you feel like you belong and those are very key things that make any part of your experience more memorable whether it’s your social life or your academics, just feeling that sense of belonging is so key and having someone that has a likeness to me is very pivotal for that.
When asked about microaggressive experiences, she reflected on the time that she was mistaken for another Black student while at an award ceremony by a White student who was in graduate school. The White student called Jada by the wrong name and seemed to attempt to compliment her on the number of prestigious awards. Despite the accolades just bestowed upon her by the award ceremony hosts, the graduate student insisted that she was a student who had taken a nap in class. Jada addressed the confused graduate student, but it did not help him acknowledge who he thought she was. He insisted that the hair color of the student he was referring to and Jada’s were the same.

Being paired with her mentor helped to change her responses, using a more direct response when someone may have unknowingly committed a microaggression. Jada, who would typically not have addressed it all, felt proud of herself for using the tools that her mentor gave her to address these matters. Having the confidence to address it directly instead of just “taking it and eating it and smiling and nodding,” was a benefit that Jada used to reflect on the experience. She stated that she would have usually gone home and questioned what just occurred and would have rehearsed what she wished she would have said due to not wanting to cause a scene or cause a “fuss” at the time of the encounter. Being paired with her mentor helped her feel comfortable and at peace with her responses.

Sasha, a Black student, experienced microaggressive behaviors that she could discuss with her Latina mentor. In this quote, Sasha described how her mentor offered strategies about those matters, any personal concerns such as healthy eating habits, and resources available to support her academic journey. “She (my mentor) was really good at teaching me that your plan is not always going to be how you get to your destination, so you have to not be so stuck on what
you wanted to do.” She reminisced on the experience of changing her academic major to biology and the concerns about the possibility of not graduating on time.

An example shared by Janice was her experience with her White mentor, who began to use her privilege and leverage as a White immigrant woman by mentioning Janice’s name in academic and professional spaces for opportunities. Her mentor elevated Janice’s experiences, skills, and talents and provided access to countless scholarships and help with each application, including tailored letters of recommendations, and grant funding to support her academic journey. Janice stated that her mentor regularly “name-dropped” her name, in spaces where opportunities were present. Janice reflected:

I think about all of the spaces that my name has been mentioned and brought up by my mentor - the weight of her sign off, her presentations, that is something that we don’t have access to. The moment I got my mentor, doors started swinging open.

An incredible part of Janice’s story was her sharing her White mentor’s intentional centering of how her identity as a White woman was present in their relationship and the decoding of “whiteness,”; what it meant within the society, and how it manifests in different ways. Janice stated:

One of the first things that she showed me was the ways in which White supremacy culture manifests in the workspace. And then she said now take the word ‘workplace’ away from it (the document) and know that it is happening absolutely everywhere…and I’ll check it in with myself - (and ask) am I leaning too far into professionalism and why - what’s showing up there? Now I know that I am competent. Now I am performing to whose standards? Now I look back and this white woman just decoded Whiteness to me and did it so willingly. This is how White supremacy culture shows up in a whole bunch
of various things. It is embedded in so much in this country. If you don’t start asking
questions about the table, who built the table, and why it’s in this room…you have to.
and you must know that your identity is organic.

Another impactful aspect of Janice’s relationship was to help Janice destigmatize the
implications of how she learned and did things differently. Due to her mentor’s encouragement
to think about exploring how she learned, Janice finally investigated this for herself, at her pace,
and received a diagnosis for Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity (ADHD) and dyslexia well after
college, at age 24. My mentor told me “Just because it is different doesn’t mean that it’s wrong.”

Janice further elaborated:

My mentor does not identify with my racial identity, but as a White woman, although she
does have an immigrant background, and so do I, which is one of the connections that we
shared; she’s White presenting and passing, so she got access to so many more resources
where she noticed that the applicants who were winning scholarships were a whole lot
less qualified than me. The only difference was that they had people boxing for them who
looked like her; she did the fighting for me. She made sure that my name was in spaces to
help me fund my education.

Her mentor’s advocacy helped her secure funding and included the opportunity to save
enough money to move onto campus. This move changed Janice’s ability to become more
engaged as a former commuter student who was a remarkable, engaged, and active student
leader.

Janice’s mentor also prioritized the importance of discussing self-care. Janice was an
active student leader in college, and her mentor gave key recommendations for how to balance
self-care while also taking care of the community. During their frequent book exchanges,
Janice’s mentor introduced her to work that informed and inspired her current work as a community educator and trainer for racial justice at her agencies:

- It revolutionized the way I think of creating change, and where change sparks and how it flows and how energy flows between (it) and how connections and communities are formed… and how to take care of self. When you care so much about other folks, you tend to forget to refill your cup, and my mentor was there to make sure that I was taking care of myself, even if it meant taking a break.

When asked about what it means for Black and Brown students to experience culturally responsive mentoring in college to help navigate the college environment, Janice became emotional as she stated:

- It means so much… something that I appreciate about the approach and the experience the mentoring program provided was that - and this is in its culturally responsive approach - I never once ever felt like I was clay to be molded. I felt like I was just appreciated and cared for, there is no metaphor to be attached to it. And I was hesitant at the very beginning…and I’m so glad that we did. I’m getting teary eyed. I never ever, in my mentor’s hand, felt like clay, like an object, like a goal, a check-off list; it always felt intentional, and it felt good.

Similar to Janice, when asked about the importance of culturally responsive mentoring for Black and Brown students to help students navigate the college environment, Alexis stated about her White mentor that:

- Even if they are not of the same cultural background as the person they are mentoring - they are able to put themselves in a compassionate and really eye-to-eye level with their Mentee to understand the factors in their life that contribute to different feelings that they
might have on campus, especially, particularly, if they are at a campus that is a predominantly white institution. And different feelings that may come up for them when it comes to their family dynamics and how their family feels about their pursuing college, and just all of the different barriers that we kind of face in terms of that. Another example is being the first and or only Black or Brown person in a workplace, and some of those nuances and inner dialogue that comes to into play when we realize those things.”

In another example, Pamela, a neurodivergent student, discussed the consciousness, awareness, and acceptance of herself that her mentor helped her to achieve. Pamela stated:

I don’t think I’d be as comfortable expressing myself as a neurodivergent person had I not had the mentoring program. I think that there are a lot of common misconceptions that we are not really able to dissect fully in society in general and those play out in the way we interact with others, but being in the mentoring program and having my mentor specifically was a lucky break for me. It was something that made it easier for me to accept as a part of myself that was not always easily understood.

She added that the connection made with her mentor is stronger than any of the connections she made with her peers during her undergraduate career because of this comfort level. Pamela explained that since discussion about neurodiversity do not occur as often as she would like within the Black and Brown community, being able to have discussions about this and mental health was a powerful and helpful tool to help her “combat experience gaps” and other challenges.

Essentially, acknowledging the unique cultural differences that exist among individual pairs helped them start from a place of awareness, honesty, and transparency. An approach by view this is by scholar, educator, and author, Bettina Love, who discussed the
importance of mattering and being seen in educational spaces.

As mentioned in Chapter 3, there is a one-time, two-hour training required for all prospective mentors and student mentees who apply to join the program. During the program orientation and training, it is stated that a deficit view is not the lens through which the program was developed. It was made clear that the program’s design was to enhance the skills that student mentees bring with them to college, not to “fix” any of their characteristics. Using a strength-based model geared towards assisting youth achieve their full potential and aiding them in achieving future success (MacIntosh et al., 2020) is the goal, ultimately leading to persistence toward graduation. The focus is on helping student mentees develop assets they need for long-term success.

Many of the interviews revealed the benefit of advanced culturally responsive training that mentors received prior to being paired with a student mentee. Mentors were able to employ the skills obtained in their training and refresher sessions. When responding to the question of what it means for Black and Brown students to experience culturally responsive mentoring in college and what that has to do with helping one navigate the environment, Paula stated:

It is not ignoring the importance of culture and the differences of the cultures. She [her mentor] listened and heard me out instead of just giving advice right away and asked how “I can help you?” It was one of the things I appreciated most about my mentor. She would listen and hear me out before just giving her advice and would always ask, “How I can help you?”

Overall, mentors were able to help students avoid feeling as if a situation was a crisis and were able to address concerns when they wanted to leave the university, specifically, in Gina’s case. Mentors provided a sense of calm and served as think partners. There was academic
support but a balanced approach to process, complete, troubleshoot, and navigate the situation calmly. Eighteen of the 20 alumni experienced microaggressions in college, with one alumni stating that he was unaware if he had but likely did not realize it, and one alumni stated that she did not experience microaggressions. All alumni desired more campus events to help develop more connections on campus as a result of being paired with their mentor. Gina stated that it would have been good to have “stronger connections with people and build bonds like on a retreat, to build more of a sisterhood, brotherhood, and community.”

As noted among the main findings from Chapter Four, 18 out of 20 alumni had a rewarding and valuable experience. However, as highlighted in Sarah and Sheila's specific cases, they clearly desired more of a direct and culturally responsive experience from their mentoring relationships. I noted that alumni did not resonate with the word ‘tools’ when asked about a sense of belonging. “What tools did your mentor provide to help you feel a sense of belonging?” The responses aligned with Alexis’s; there were no specific tools, but rather how her mentor interacted with her, and other students created a sense of belonging. Alexis stated: “The way my mentor existed created that (sense of belonging).” Alexis elaborated by sharing that the mentoring program created a sense of community and encouraged them to be more involved on campus.

Gina shared that one thing that arose was an understanding and demystifying that mentoring was not for students who were not doing well, which led to a discussion about how Black and Brown youth and college students seek support. This was an added value when paired with a BIPOC mentor. Based on Alexis’ observance of the program operations, she gave the program a rating of 4.6 instead of a 5 because she wished more resources allocated to the program, such a bigger department, with more staff, and more opportunities for mentors and
mentees to get together. The program almost felt like a hidden gem, she said. In one instance shared by Gina, she felt that the mentoring program made her feel that she was part of the “in crowd” because she felt previously alienated as a Black student.

In Chapter Five, I discuss my overall conclusions drawn from this narrative case study, implications for future research, recommendations, and conclusions.
Chapter Five: Conclusion

The purpose of this narrative case study was to explore the value of mentoring and to capture the voices of Black and Brown alumni who participated in a mentoring program between the years 2016 - 2023. In this study, I explored the unique challenges faced by Black and Brown alumni and a body of literature and frameworks which helped to analyze this conversation. I explored literature that highlights the significant college completion gaps for undergraduate students of color. When pursuing persistence to graduation and retention, mentoring can serve as a vehicle of support among other academic services.

In this chapter, I give an overview of the study, its findings, and the implications of the study for future research, its anticipated contribution to literature for culturally responsive mentoring in higher education and recommendations for practice. From each interview, overwhelmingly, students felt that implementing a culturally responsive program should be intuitive and intentional for colleges and universities. This research offers considerations for an official definition of culturally responsive mentoring. Additionally, having their alumni voices amplified in this work might be the impetus for the way other institutions consider intentional changes to close the achievement and opportunity gaps among students.

Summary of the Study

In Chapter One, I shared my positionality as an African American woman, educator, mentoring, and social justice leader who is passionate about lifting student voices regarding the value of mentoring, the desire to learn more about how to support Black and Brown students persist toward graduation and how to create a sense of belonging.

Chapter Two explored the value of mentoring programs and the potential link between student success programs as a vehicle and solution toward closing the college completion gap for Black, Brown, and traditionally underrepresented students in colleges and universities. I
introduced the theoretical framework of critical race theory (CRT) and social integration (Tinto, 1975) to inform this research study. I discussed how each theory brings value to the discussion of student success. The relevant data explored from a comprehensive literature review shares evidence that suggests that mentoring for college students helps to improve retention and helps create a sense of belonging.

In Chapter Three, I described the research methodology used for this qualitative research study to examine the experiences and value that Black and Brown alumni of the Lindenstar University mentoring program place on a culturally relevant mentoring program during their college experience. I reinforced that a culturally relevant mentoring program provides students with relationship-building skills and critical consciousness to help them see inequities on campus (e.g., the hidden curriculum) My positionality was also described in the chapter to underscore the rationale and direction of the research. My lens as an African American educator, leader, and parent of school-aged children drives my interest and passion for in-depth research in this area.

Chapter Four presented and delved into my findings, the overarching themes as well as surprising findings.

**Discussion of Findings**

The findings of this study were specific to the Lindenstar University alumni who participated in a mentoring program. Although there is a pre- and post-assessment administered each year to highlight the benefits of the mentoring program, the last compiled data by the assessment unit of Linderstar were highlighted in 2017 from a post-graduation survey evaluation. Therefore, part of the rationale for this in-depth research study of the program is to provide insight from alumni on how their experiences with a mentor shaped their college experience.
Findings

The findings in this study suggest that engagement with a mentor, particularly in the first year of a Black and Brown student at a PWI can enhance their experience, graduation trajectory, and how view themselves in the world as underrepresented groups. Many of the alumni became emotional when speaking about the power of their mentoring relationships and felt that it was quite therapeutic to discuss how their mentors consistently showed up for them. In my role as the researcher, I found it cathartic to hear their stories and became emotional at the end of two interviews hearing about micro aggressive experiences. I was not only reminded of my experiences with microaggressions but equally more deeply connected to my purpose and life’s work.

This overall question and related questions helped to guide my research:
What does it mean for Black and Brown students to experience culturally responsive mentoring in college?

The following related questions will help shape my research design:
1) In what ways did a formal mentoring program at Lindenstar University (pseudonym) help Black and Brown student graduates navigate the culture and climate of college to support and promote student success and persistence?

The mentoring program helped to foster a strong sense of belonging, support to combat microaggressions, a supportive listening ear, a shoulder to lean on, a confidence booster, and thought partner in mentors. Instead of academic support, mentors pointed students in the right direction for resources, access to campus departments and connections to networks within the larger Lindenstar community.

2) What guidance, if any, did mentors provide about the college completion gap for Black and Brown students to help them develop critical consciousness and challenge the status quo?
Overall, mentors did not explicitly discuss the completion gap for Black and Brown students. Rather BIPOC mentors modeled behavior that encouraged students to complete their degrees. White mentors strongly recommended graduate school and to attend shortly after undergraduate school. They discussed the social mobility and social capital connected to quality education. Students became acutely aware of how people viewed them in society, particularly as it relates to the history of the United States and its inequitable educational system.

**Surprising Findings**

A surprising finding is that despite having experienced microaggressions throughout their undergraduate experience, students chose to pursue graduate education at another PWI or returned to Lindenstar University to earn their graduate degrees. All alumni credited the support of their mentors in helping them process and identify strategies to overcome these challenges. Another finding that came to the forefront was students’ belief that their academic abilities and accomplishments as high-achieving students would somehow prevent or shield them from microaggressive encounters, particularly in STEM majors. In fact, prior to college, many alumni had not thought too much about their race or ethnicity.

To underscore this point, when discussing microaggressive experiences, Jada stated, “Ignorance really is bliss.” Coming into college at the height of a racial and viral pandemic, she realized that it was somewhat of a ‘privilege’ to go through life, pushing through with her head down in the books as a high academic achiever. Many alumni had an awakening of how “they show up in the world” during their college years and processed this with their mentors. Race relations and societal issues that had not been discussed in great depth with peers or family members despite being Black and Brown students in the United States became a focal point of their reality. Suddenly, Jada stated, “being Black was shoved in my face in 2020. “I just
navigated life blind.” However, coming into college after or in 2020, many became more aware of the injustices happening in the world for the first time.

Students pursuing STEM and Business professions, as highlighted by Sasha, Misha, Marlo, Jada and Paula, had an experience that helped them reflect more deeply on the importance of a mentor. Darling (2021) pointed out that race is an important defining social identity, but always experienced in tandem and intersecting with gender identity, sexual orientation, age, class, ability/disability, and educational status. Darling (2021) posited that for BIPOC, the intersection of race with gender identity and sexual orientation produces interactions with many private individuals and public institutions that very often diminish the likelihood that they will experience equality of opportunity and access to a range of civil rights and social privileges.

CRT’s tenet on intersectionality is most evident in Sarah and Pamela’s stories of their intersecting identities with racism and ableism. In Sarah’s circumstance, she described herself as doubly marginalized due to her blindness and being a Black and Brown student. In Pamela’s experience, she decided to investigate the potential for being an atypical learner at her mentor’s suggestion. Although it was after graduation, it benefited Pamela to explore this suggestion, eventually leading to an official diagnosis, which helped her to understand some of the challenges she experienced in the classroom setting. Therefore, future research using disability studies in critical race theory in education (DisCrit) theory will be applied and explicitly addressed in future training about the intersections of race and neurodiversity. Future research will also include a broader discussion of the soft skills and resilience that student mentees acquired from participating in the mentoring program.
Despite the region Black and Brown students were from, whether from the New York Metropolitan, Long Island area or as international students, their ethnicity and identities became amplified and more visible to them in college, particularly during the heightened racial, politically charged, social climate where they attended school. Despite their awareness and, as implied, surface-level view and understanding of historical inequities, these issues were not at the forefront of their minds before college. As Jada mentioned, she had the “privilege” of going through life with “blinders on” about the racial and social justice matters of the world.

**Recommendations for Practice**

In this section, I suggest several recommendations for practice as reflected in the interview data with Black and Brown student alumni of a culturally responsive mentoring program.

**Mentor Training is Required Every Step of the Way**

Colleges should design training for mentors before matching them with students, and then continue checking in with both mentors and mentees throughout the relationship. Focus on effective communication, including active listening, and the need for a mutually agreed upon method of communication. Meeting a minimum of four hours per month is a good goal. Discussing how to best coordinate these meetings should be addressed during training to avoid pitfalls due to scheduling issues. Training should also foster introspection. Ask, “Why are you choosing to serve as a mentor or to become a student mentee?”

**Trust is Key**

We focus so much on communication because it is essential to trust—which is key to any successful pairing. When trust is established between pairs, it is important to continue to “show up” for the student mentee for the duration of the program. It is crucial to be keenly aware that if
communication is not consistent, student mentees might hesitate to reach out to the mentor with a concern that they are a “bother” to the mentor, which can impact the progress that pairs have begun to make. These are critical areas for exploration during training.

**Preparing Culturally Responsive Mentors**

Not all pairs will resemble each other in their history or identities, so having genuine conversations about what makes them different requires the support of a skilled facilitator and trainer. Training to be culturally responsive requires an openness about one’s bias, experiences, and perceptions. Culturally responsive mentoring helps us ask questions we do not know the answers to about racial and social justice issues, which have always existed yet become more visible in recent years. Mentors can serve better and help to meet students’ needs with the training that equips them to have difficult conversations, helping them to “get comfortable with the uncomfortable.” This can be significant to students as they adjust to college life and send the message that “I see you; I hear you,” ensuring that we put active listening and responsiveness into practice.

Training also helps would-be mentors understand that they might bring a deficit view to their work. For example, not all BIPOC students are from low-income backgrounds: Listening and learning from what students choose to share with you about their lived experiences is essential. This understanding will help guide what resources mentors direct them to. If students are from low-income backgrounds, it could be appropriate for a mentor to initiate financial literacy discussions (including responsibilities for loans) and connect their mentee to experts in this area from the financial services office of an institution.
Show Students Possibilities

For many students, networking, career exploration, job shadowing, and placement are significant reasons to join a mentoring program. They also provide opportunities for growth and self-discovery. However, these opportunities often only happen if a faculty or staff mentor is willing to serve as a bridge between students and key connections across the institution and beyond.

Partnerships with internal and external partners are equally important to helping students enter the job market to pursue their careers. The mentoring program should encourage and lead these efforts by sharing opportunities for pairs to participate together based on the expressed interests of the student mentee.

Help Pairs Stay Connected

Encouraging pairs to meet outside of any prescribed meeting times for the program is critical and should be reiterated throughout the program. Amid a global pandemic, which prevented in-person meetings, creative and innovative ways to meet virtually became a necessity—and many pairs are better off having added video chats or texts to their communication plan. A call or email between established times with a warm hello proves helpful addressing feelings of isolation.

Create a Culture of Mentoring within the School

Hopefully, by now it is clear that mentoring programs do not thrive on their own. If a college wants the benefits of a mentoring program, its leaders must believe that all students have the ability to succeed when given access to the right tools. Moreover, they have to their commitment up with funding, including for staff, who can ensure that mentors receive training and support to help students find those tools (West, 2023).
Recommendations for Future Research and Program Enhancement

Sheila, a student who was an outlier with her experience, recommended more communal experiences for added value and benefit for other Black and Brown students. Sheila would have liked more engagement and the feeling of community with other Program participants for deeper connections to her peers, who shared lessons from their mentors. She stated: “My mentor was helpful in seeing different perspectives and gave me insight and strategies to help me meet my goals.” While this was the case, the mentor “kept everything in a broad scope” only.

Implications for Future Research

The implications for future research include an exploration of reciprocity among mentoring pairs connected to the intrinsic desire to help and invest in a student’s future. Secondarily, an inquiry and analysis of the mindset of the student mentees’ belief in their ability to succeed based on their foundational educational experiences. I would be interested in learning about their view of their long-term success in college and beyond in a more academically diverse sample. For this sample, students were already high achieving academically at the time of their participation in the program and all believed in their academic abilities to accomplish their academic goals despite some personal or financial obstacles they faced. The determination, resilience, and belief in their own ability to succeed was a critical part of the story’s alumni shared.

Another consideration for future research is an analysis and discussion about the representation of Black and Brown male participation in a university mentoring program and even a comparison of the benefits of their participation in a program at a historically Black college or university (HSBU). During Sasha’s interview, she highlighted that all students benefit from mentoring, but at a PWI for White students, they experience a full immersion in natural
connections. Additionally, a discussion most occur about psychological safety of students connected to mentoring at a PWI.

Another consideration, which is useful for future research, is to obtain the viewpoints and perspectives of the mentors who participate in a mentoring program, what tools, and strategies they find helpful to support their service as mentors. Finally, in alignment with considering the demographics of who serves in the capacity of a mentor is to address and dispel the myth that White mentors cannot be effective in their mentorship of students of color. This narrative case study revealed that regardless of race, the mentors were successful at helping students understand Whiteness and privilege in a PWI setting. In several examples, students appreciated and valued the experience with a White mentor who acknowledged their role, positionality, and societal benefits. In Janice’s example, her mentor consistently raised, with her permission, opportunities that would offer her opportunities to advance her academic and career interests.

Janice’s mentor enhanced her social capital within the mentor’s professional networks and consistently alerted her about grant and scholarship opportunities where the names of students of color were considered at lower rate than White students, reflective of the larger systemic issues prevalent at a PWI connected to representation. Janice also credited the unwavering support of her mentor with helping her save up enough money from her awards to relocate to the residence halls, removing the barriers of her being a commuter student. As an active and fully engaged student leader, doing this work as a commuter was a challenge. Moving onto campus eliminated this barrier.

**Nationwide Climate: The Impact on School and Mentoring Relationships**

While the participants in this study who graduated prior to 2020 did not experience the COVID-19 pandemic, they experienced another type of crisis, the racial, political, and
nationwide unrest, as the world grappled with the murder of George Floyd, an unarmed Black man, by a former Minneapolis, Minnesota police Officer and other Black and Brown people. This brought to the forefront the long-standing societal issues that have plagued our nation, exacerbated by events such as the 2016 election of the 45th President of the United States, Donald Trump. Johnson-Agbakwu et al. (2020) noted that these crises were not unrelated but rather a reflection of a syndemic, taking place simultaneously, that took an extreme toll on particular racial groups due to unchecked marginalization and ensuing disparities across multiple sectors of society.

Protests and movements in reaction to the tragic murder of George Floyd occurred across the United States and abroad, as well as college campuses. Due to the world's political and social climate and nationwide unrest, discussions about these issues entered College classrooms. Mentors actively listen and unpack many of the students’ experiences and reactions. Paula, a 2017 graduate, spoke about this discomfort when responding to the question of how culturally responsive mentoring in college might help one navigate the overall college experience. Paula spoke directly to this matter by stating:

I think, especially for the school that we went to, it was important. At some point, the climate got a little hostile - the political climate got a little hostile. I think it’s helpful to have someone help you navigate times of tension, which is really tough to do at times. It was so helpful to feel like someone was on your side to hear you out and listen to you and help you feel comfortable in the hostility and time of tension. I feel like it's really helpful to feel like someone is on your side.

With the 2023 Supreme Court decision to end Affirmative Action, it will be more challenging to measure the success and retention rates of Black and Brown students, and to see
how institutions are supporting them and how this will impact retention rates compared to enrollment rates.

Conclusion

Chapter Five discussed the purpose of the narrative case study and emphasized some of the salient issues facing Black and Brown students at a PWI as revealed in the meaningful interviews with participants. I discussed the findings and implications for future research and offered practical recommendations as a guide for universities seeking to implement a structured and evidence-based program with a strength-based approach. Through this in-depth study, ongoing discussion with student voices at the forefront, and intentional steps by colleges and universities to create a culture of mentoring, each student can feel a sense of belonging, which will contribute to their success and ability to thrive.
References


Love, B. L. (2019). *We want to do more than survive: Abolitionist teaching and the pursuit of educational freedom.* Beacon press.


West, C. (2023, May 16) Creating a Culture of Mentoring on Campus, Faculty Focus. Retrieved from https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/academic-leadership/creating-a-culture-of-mentoring-on-campus/


Appendix A: Molloy University IRB Approval

DATE: February 14, 2023
TO: Chotsani Williams West
FROM: Molloy University IRB
PROJECT TITLE: [2014951-1] Mentoring to Thrive: The Role of Mentorship to Navigate, Empower and Level the Playing Field for Black and Brown Students in Higher Education
REFERENCE #: New Project
ACTION: DETERMINATION OF EXEMPT STATUS
DECISION DATE: February 14, 2023
REVIEW CATEGORY: Exemption category #2

Thank you for your submission of New Project materials for this project. The Molloy University IRB has determined this project is EXEMPT FROM IRB REVIEW according to federal regulations. However, exempt research activities are subject to the same human subject protections and ethical standards as outlined in the Belmont Report.

You may proceed with this project.

This acknowledgement expires within three years unless there is a change to the protocol.

Though this protocol does not require annual IRB review, the IRB requires an annual report of your exempt protocol (Exempt Protocol Annual Report Form) which is available on the IRB webpage.

If there is a proposed change to the protocol, it is the responsibility of the Principal Investigator to inform the Molloy University IRB of any requested changes before implementation. A change in the research may change the project from EXEMPT status and requires prior communication with the IRB.

We will retain a copy of this correspondence within our records.

If you have any questions, please contact Patricia Eckardt at 516-323-3711 or peckart@mollo.com. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence with this committee.

Sincerely,

Patricia Eckardt, Ph.D., RN, FAAN
Chair, Molloy University Institutional Review Board

This letter has been issued in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within Molloy University IRB's records.
Appendix B: Interview Protocol Outline

Thank you so much for taking the time to meet with me today!

As you know, I would like to speak with you about the value of mentoring. In particular, I would like to learn about your experience and the value you placed on your time as a Student Mentee, now an alumna, of the Lindenstar University Mentoring Program. Lindenstar University is the pseudonym that we will use throughout our interview. I look forward to understanding how experiences with your mentors shaped your navigation of an institution of higher learning and the impact it may have helped you navigate and stay at the University, ultimately leading toward graduation.

The interview should take about 90 minutes. I will need to take notes during the session and with your permission, I will also be audio taping and video the session to ensure accuracy.

All responses will be kept confidential to ensure that any information I include in the report does not identify you as a participant. It is important to know that you do not have to speak about anything you may feel uncomfortable about. You may also feel free to end the interview at any time. Do you have any questions about what I explained? (Pause for 5 seconds) Are you willing to participate in this interview?

Great, thank you! Let’s begin.

**Interview Questions - Individual Interview Questions**

1. Please state your name, current occupation, and year of graduation from the Mentoring Program.

2. What specific areas did your mentor help you complete in your undergraduate or graduate education?
   Probe: Were there any areas that you needed more help in than others?

3. Did you ever experience any barriers to graduation? If so, how did your mentor help you?

4. Can you think of a time when your mentor helped you with a difficult course or assignment?
   Probe: How so, please describe.

**Related Questions**

1. How did you hear about the mentoring program?
   Probe: Did someone recommend you for the program?

**Focus Group Questions**

Culturally Responsive Mentoring
1. What does it mean for Black and Brown students to experience culturally responsive mentoring in college?  
Probe: What does this have to do with helping one navigate the environment?

2. What guidance, if any, did mentors provide about the college completion gap for Black and Brown students to help them develop critical consciousness and challenge the status quo?

**Hidden Curriculum**

3. What knowledge did mentors share about the soft skills and hidden curriculum needed to help to overcome challenges and barriers to graduation?  
Probe: Were there any specific challenges with soft skills that you encountered?

4. What tools did mentors provide students to feel a sense of belonging on campus?

**Navigating the Culture and Climate**

5. In what ways did a formal mentoring program at Lindenstar University (pseudonym) help Black and Brown student graduates navigate the culture and climate of college to support and promote student success and persistence?

6. How did your experience in the Mentoring Program help you navigate the college experience?  
Probe: professors, university offices, extracurriculars, advice about time management, career planning…

7. How did your participation in the Mentoring Program encourage your social engagement and involvement in campus activities?   
Probe:

**Culturally Relevant Program**

8. From a scale of 1-5, how would you rate your overall experience with the Mentoring Program and why?

9. In what ways do you think mentoring would benefit other Black and Brown students in colleges and universities?  
Probe: Do you think programs should be available in all schools?

10. How did the mentoring program help you with academic achievement?  
Probe: Did you learn about academic resources available at the university from your mentor?

11. How did the mentoring program help you with cultural competence?  
Probe: If so, in what ways

12. How did the mentoring program help you with critical consciousness?  
Probe: Do you know what the college completion gap is? Explain.

13. As a student mentee, what were the most important goals that you established with your
mentor?
Probe: Did you feel that they were achievable with the guidance of a mentor?

14. How was your college experience prior to joining the Mentoring Program

15. What specific areas did your mentor help you complete your undergraduate education?
Probe: Did you ever experience any barriers to graduation? If so, how did your mentor help you?

16. Can you think of a time when your mentor helped you with a difficult course or assignment? Describe.

17. Did you ever experience microaggressions or discrimination at college?
Probe: If yes, what happened and how did you handle it? Did your mentor help you?

18. In what ways did your mentor teach you about the unspoken rules in college?
Probe: Were you able to better understand how college worked after they taught them?

19. If you were asked to be a college mentor today, what would you do the same or different than your mentor, and why?

20. What things could make the mentorship program better for helping Black and Brown students thrive and persist in college?
Probe: Did you feel like you belonged on campus? Why or why not? What would help students feel like they belonged?

21. How did your participation in the Mentoring Program encourage your social engagement and involvement?

I’ll be analyzing the information you as well as others provided to complete my dissertation shortly. As you know, we are currently in the interview phase, but here is the schedule that I anticipate for the rest of this process.

**Schedule**

- January 2023 - February 2023: Interviews and focus groups scheduled.
- March 2023 – May 2023: Data collection
- June 2023: Transcription and data analysis through Dedoose
- July - August 2023: Compilation and write-up of findings / conclusions and implications
- September 2023: Dissertation Defense

Thank you again for your time!