

# Cultural Identity's Role in Effective Mentoring for Black Male College Students

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Be B.O.L.D., Inc. Mentoring

Mentorship is essential for student success, especially for African American male students who face systemic barriers in higher education. Representation in mentorship fosters cultural affirmation, resilience, and academic success. Research highlights that culturally attuned mentorship, particularly at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), enhances belonging and counters negative stereotypes, which underscores the vital role of representation in effective mentorship. This study explores how mentorship supports Black male students' cultural identity and self-worth, ultimately influencing academic outcomes. This study is framed through social exchange theory and self-determination theory. Social exchange theory suggests individuals engage in relationships like mentorship to maximize benefits while minimizing costs. Self-determination theory emphasizes motivation, proposing that students who are intrinsically driven will seek opportunities for success. Together, these theories provide a framework for understanding mentorship's role in academic achievement. The study examines participants' lived experiences through in-depth semi-structured interviews. The study explored African American male undergraduates' experiences with mentoring and analyzed its impact on academic persistence. Key themes emerged: mentorship as academic guidance and accountability, mentorship as emotional and social support, and mentorship enhancing institutional engagement. Findings indicated that mentoring significantly improved persistence, motivation, and campus integration. Participants emphasized the importance of relatable mentors and mental health support. The research highlights the role of mentorship in academic success and retention, emphasizing participant perspectives, researcher reflexivity, and thick description. Findings contribute to the literature on mentoring's effectiveness in higher education.

*Keywords:* Mentoring, cultural identity, African American, retention, HBCU

## Introduction

Mentorship is a crucial support mechanism for African American male students in higher education, particularly as they navigate systemic barriers such as racial bias and underrepresentation. At Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), culturally responsive mentoring affirms identity, fosters resilience, and enhances students' sense of belonging, key factors in motivation, persistence, and academic success (Williams West, 2023). This study investigates how mentorship impacts the cultural identity and academic outcomes of African American male undergraduates at an HBCU. Guided by social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) and self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), the research explores how students evaluate mentoring relationships and derive motivation from autonomy, competence, and connection.

## Literature Review

As Shandley (1989) defines, mentoring is a purposeful relationship where a more experienced individual introduces the mentee to a new environment and supports their development. Effective mentorship significantly supports student achievement, serving as a critical intervention for African American male students who continue to navigate deep-rooted structural inequities in higher education (Harper, 2015; Strayhorn, 2012), and barriers such as racial stereotyping, underrepresentation in faculty and leadership, and limited access to culturally affirming support systems (Palmer et al., 2010). LaVant et al. (1997) emphasize that effective mentoring is especially critical for African American male students navigating the complex terrain of higher education. For Black male college students, mentoring relationships, particularly those that affirm cultural

identity, can help counter the negative effects of systemic inequities, foster a sense of belonging, and increase retention and graduation rates. As a result, mentorship relationships, especially those that are culturally responsive, have been identified as key to improving academic persistence, self-worth, and resilience among this population.

### **Formal and Informal Mentoring**

Mentoring occurs in two primary forms: formal and informal. Formal mentoring programs are often initiated by institutions with structured pairing, scheduled activities, and targeted objectives. Palmer and Gasman (2008) describe formal mentoring as arising from specific needs, with success hinging on the alignment of institutional resources and individual student goals. Harper (2007) adds that structured mentoring fosters accountability and achievement, particularly when the programming is culturally responsive. These programs are effective tools for engaging African American male students through goal-oriented support systems. Informal mentoring, on the other hand, develops organically from shared interests or identities. Ensher and Murphy (1997) highlight how similarities in race and gender foster deeper and more meaningful mentor-mentee relationships.

### **Benefits of Mentoring**

Mentorship provides substantial academic, personal, and professional benefits for both mentees and mentors. According to Hezlett and Gibson (2005), mentoring is a reciprocal process in which mentors also grow through helping others. Mentorship fosters transformation, identity formation, and increased self-efficacy for students. Haggerty (2011) argues that while mentoring is not instinctual, it becomes effective when rooted in life experiences and intentional guidance.

The University of Michigan (2018) found that effective mentoring relationships encourage long-term engagement in academic fields, promote discipline, and often lead to illustrious careers. These relationships are most successful when both parties understand their shared responsibilities and engage in mutual accountability.

### **The Role of Representation in Mentorship**

When mentors and mentees share cultural backgrounds, the benefits of mentoring increase. Representation within mentoring relationships is especially significant for African American male students. When students see themselves reflected in their mentors, through shared racial, cultural, or experiential backgrounds, they experience a heightened sense of belonging, validation, and motivation (Strayhorn, 2018). This form of cultural affirmation contributes to both psychological well-being and academic persistence. Mentors who share or understand students lived experiences are better positioned to provide empathetic guidance and challenge prevailing stereotypes.

Historically Black Colleges and Universities

(HBCUs) have demonstrated the effectiveness of culturally attuned mentorship. Research shows that such institutions not only affirm cultural identity but also serve as protective spaces where Black male students can engage with role models who reflect their potential (Palmer et al., 2010). Culturally responsive mentoring at HBCUs strengthens students' sense of belonging and combats internalized and externalized negative narratives.

### **Mentoring as a Vehicle for Resilience and Persistence**

Effective mentorship can serve as a mechanism for building resilience, especially when mentors provide guidance that affirms the cultural experiences of Black male students (Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007). Mentorship has been linked to higher rates of retention, stronger academic performance, and greater post-graduate aspirations.

### **Mentorship at HBCUs**

Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) offer a unique institutional context where mentoring is often embedded within a culture of support and empowerment (Palmer & Young, 2008). Several studies have highlighted the strengths of HBCUs in providing identity-affirming mentoring that challenges structural inequities and prepares students for success in both academic and professional realms (Goings, 2016). This aligns with recent findings that suggest the presence of "flexible mentoring", non-traditional, dynamic relationships tailored to the evolving needs of students, can be especially impactful in HBCU settings.

## **Methods**

### **Qualitative Exploration of Mentorship Experiences**

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological approach that explored the lived experiences of ten African American male undergraduate students at an HBCU. Using semi-structured Zoom interviews, participants discussed their mentoring experiences and how these relationships influenced their academic persistence and personal development. Data were analyzed using ATLAS.ti ensure a systematic approach to coding, theming, and interpretation.

### **Interview Protocol**

According to McNamara (2009), a well-designed interview protocol enhances consistency while allowing participants the freedom to express their experiences fully. To ensure a balance between structure and flexibility, I adopted McNamara's (2009) eight pre-interview principles as a foundational guide. All interviews were

conducted virtually in quiet, private settings to ensure comfort and limit distractions. Participants were informed that the purpose was to explore their lived experiences with mentorship and academic success at the HBCU. Confidentiality was maintained using pseudonyms, and data was securely stored. Interviews followed a semi-structured format with open-ended questions and lasted 45–60 minutes.

I provided contact information for follow-up and encouraged participants to ask questions. All sessions were audio-recorded and transcribed to ensure accuracy and reduce bias through Zoom.

I also adhered to Patton's (2002) principles for effective qualitative interviewing. Patton (2002) emphasizes that the essence of interviewing lies in understanding people's perceptions, feelings, and past experiences, aspects not readily observable.

Therefore, this study focused on eliciting personal insights into how mentorship influenced academic persistence and degree completion.

### **Stages of the Interview Process**

The interview process followed six structured stages aligned with qualitative research best practices:

#### ***Stage 1: Arrival.***

I built rapport and established a welcoming environment to foster openness and trust.

#### ***Stage 2: Introducing the Research.***

Participants received an overview of the study's purpose, were informed of confidentiality measures, and gave consent for audio recording. Informed consent procedures were reviewed before beginning the interview.

#### ***Stage 3: Starting the Interview.***

I introduced the semi-structured protocol, which included 16 open-ended questions designed to explore the participants' experiences with mentoring.

#### ***Stage 4: Facilitating the Interview.***

Interviews were conversational and flexible. I used probing and follow-up questions to explore emerging themes, including academic motivation, emotional support, and the relational dynamics of mentoring.

#### ***Stage 5: Closing the Interview.***

Participants were asked to share any final reflections. I expressed appreciation for their time and emphasized the importance of their contributions to the study.

Stage 6: After the Interview. Audio recordings were stopped, and I documented field notes and clarified next steps, including transcript review if requested.

### **Alignment with Research Questions and Theoretical Framework**

The interview questions were carefully developed to align with the study's research questions and the guiding theoretical frameworks: (1) Blau's (1964) social exchange theory. Questions explored how reciprocity and perceived benefits influenced the mentor-mentee relationship. (2) Deci and Ryan's (2000) Self-determination theory: Questions examined how mentorship supported autonomy, competence, and relatedness in the academic setting. All 16 open-ended questions were administered in the same order during each interview. Each participant shared narratives that revealed mentorship was not only academically beneficial but also critical to their social integration, identity development, and emotional resilience, all contributing to college persistence and degree attainment.

### **Findings**

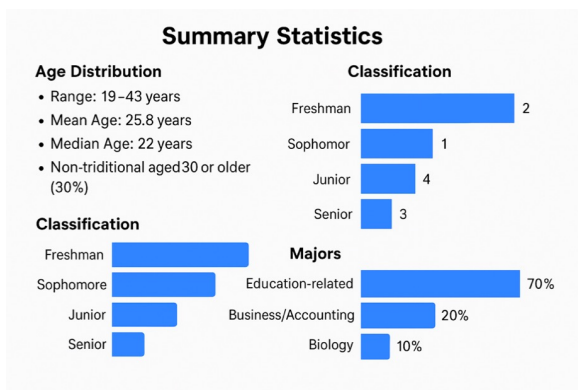
#### **Data Collection, Coding, and Thematic Development and Procedures**

Data for this qualitative study were collected over two months (April–May 2023) through audio-recorded Zoom interviews, conducted with participants' informed consent. Detailed notes complemented the recordings. Data were securely stored on a password-protected personal computer and managed using ATLAS.ti 23 software, with access limited solely to the researcher. The analysis involved systematic coding with ATLAS.ti 23, starting with open and axial coding of transcribed data. The researcher identified 269 significant statements related to the research questions. These were iteratively reviewed to identify patterns and grouped into 16 themes, such as Belongingness, Campus Engagement, Self-Efficacy, and Mental Health. The process linked themes to the study's theoretical framework (Social Exchange Theory and Self-Determination Theory). Coding reliability was improved through reflexive memoing, triangulation with researcher notes, and multiple transcript reviews.

#### **Descriptive Statistics Summary**

A total of ten African American male undergraduate students participated in this study. The participants were selected using a purposeful sampling approach to ensure variation in background, classification, and mentoring experience. Each participant was enrolled at an HBCU in the eastern region and had participated in the university's centralized mentoring program.

The summary statistics display demographic information gathered through email screening, including participants' age, major, and academic classification.



These descriptive statistics helped the researcher frame the analysis and interpretation of interview data within the appropriate developmental, academic, and life context of each participant. The findings support Self-determination and social exchange theories, linking student success to competence, autonomy, and reciprocal mentoring. Three key themes emerged from the data collected.

### ***Mentorship as Academic Guidance and Accountability***

Mentors played a crucial role in helping students maintain academic focus by supporting goal-setting, time management, and progress tracking. This fostered academic accountability and motivation, aligning with Self-Determination Theory's concept of competence, where mastery develops through supportive encouragement.

### ***Mentorship as Emotional and Social Support***

Mentors were seen as role models and trusted confidants who provided emotional affirmation during challenging times. This reflects Social Exchange Theory's emphasis on trust-based, reciprocal relationships that offer emotional rewards, which help improve retention and engagement.

### ***Mentorship Enhancing Institutional Engagement***

Mentor encouragement led participants to take on leadership roles and participate more in campus activities. This aligns with findings that increased student involvement and belonging significantly boost persistence and degree completion, especially for underrepresented students.

## **Discussion**

This phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of African American male undergraduates at an HBCU in the eastern U.S., focusing on how mentorship affected their academic progress and persistence. Through semi-structured interviews, participants described how campus mentoring influenced their education, social integration, and personal growth.

## **Alignment With Existing Literature**

The findings of this study are consistent with existing research on African American male success and mentorship at HBCUs. Studies by Freeman (1999) and Harris et al. (2015) highlight the importance of cultural alignment and identity affirmation in mentorship, elements echoed by participants who valued mentors with shared experiences. Additionally, Strayhorn (2018) emphasized the significance of meaningful connections with faculty and staff, a theme reinforced by participants who credited mentors with contributing to their academic, personal, and social development.

## **Limitations of the Study**

This study, while insightful, is not without limitations. The sample size was small, with only ten participants interviewed, which limits the generalizability of the findings across different institutions or student populations. Additionally, there is a possibility of self-selection bias, as participants were volunteers and may have been more likely to report positive mentoring experiences. Furthermore, the study was conducted at a single HBCU, meaning the findings may be influenced by the unique institutional culture and mentoring practices specific to that site.

## **Recommendations for Future Research**

To build on this research, future studies could take a more comprehensive and comparative approach by examining mentoring outcomes across different institutional contexts, such as Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs). This comparison could illuminate how institutional culture, resources, and student demographics influence the mentoring experience and its effectiveness. Additionally, incorporating the perspectives of mentors and administrators would offer a more holistic understanding of mentoring programs by highlighting challenges, best practices, and institutional supports from those implementing and overseeing these initiatives. Future research should also explore the long-term effects of mentoring beyond graduation to assess how sustained relationships and support systems impact career progression, graduate education, and personal development.

Lastly, integrating quantitative methods would allow researchers to statistically examine the relationship between mentoring and measurable academic outcomes, such as grade point average (GPA), retention rates, and graduation rates. This multidimensional approach would provide deeper insights into the role of mentoring in promoting student success.

## **Theoretical and Practical Implications**

This study enriches phenomenological research

by centering Black male students' lived experiences and urging institutions to align mentoring with their cultural values. While "culturally responsive mentoring" wasn't directly named, students described practices that affirmed identity and addressed challenges unique to Black men. These informal practices at HBCUs fostered belonging, motivation, and persistence. The study recommends formalizing such mentoring through cultural competency training, emotional and academic support, and structured programs. Institutions should also increase funding and design programs with input from students and mentors, prioritizing trust-based, culturally affirming relationships to improve outcomes for underrepresented students.

### Conclusion

This study confirms that culturally responsive mentorship is an effective strategy for promoting academic persistence, motivation, and retention among African American male undergraduates at HBCUs. The most impactful mentoring relationships were characterized by racial and cultural representation, consistent engagement, emotional support, and flexibility. These findings align with existing research emphasizing the importance of belonging (Strayhorn, 2012), meaningful campus relationships, and culturally affirming faculty interactions (Guiffrida, 2005).

Mentorship proved particularly influential during the undergraduate years, a formative period for identity development and academic motivation. Consistent with Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), effective mentorship supported students' autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Additionally, intentional mentor pairing, structured campus engagement, and mental health support were critical components.

When students felt seen and affirmed, they were better equipped to overcome systemic barriers and persist in their educational goals (Palmer et al., 2009). In essence, culturally attuned, consistent, and identity-affirming mentorship is most effective for African American male students navigating institutional challenges, especially during their early undergraduate years.

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