

# Transformative Mentorship in Doctoral Education: Supporting and Wellbeing and Growth

Lewis, H., Jr., Campbell, S.-A. T., & Altunel, V.

Louisiana State University

In an era characterized by increasingly complex global challenges, cultivating robust and responsive mentorship programs in universities has become essential. This paper introduces a transformative mentorship model aimed at enhancing doctoral students' wellbeing, academic resilience, and scholarly development. Traditional mentorship strategies have often prioritized academic productivity and research output over the holistic needs of students, inadvertently contributing to high attrition, burnout, and drop-out rates among doctoral populations. Many students, particularly those from underrepresented backgrounds, face isolation, unclear expectations, and limited access to culturally responsive support systems. The proposed model integrates relational, developmental, and critical mentoring approaches to create a supportive, equity-driven academic experience that values both personal growth and research excellence. Central to this model is Self-Determination Theory (SDT) by Deci and Ryan, which underscores the importance of meeting three basic psychological needs—autonomy, competence, and relatedness—for sustained motivation and wellbeing. Recent studies have shown that mentorship relationships satisfying these needs lead to enhanced research self-efficacy, improved work-life balance, and greater psychological wellbeing for doctoral students. These benefits are especially vital during the dissertation phase, where the transition to independent scholarship can intensify stress and disconnection. In addition to SDT, this model draws on Transformational Leadership Theory, which emphasizes inspiration, individualized consideration, and shared purpose. When mentors apply transformational leadership practices—such as fostering vision, modeling integrity, and empowering mentees—doctoral students report stronger academic identity, increased motivation, and higher persistence rates. Together, these frameworks provide a powerful foundation for reimagining mentorship as a multidimensional process that not only supports academic achievement but also nurtures human flourishing, equity, and leadership capacity within graduate education.

*Keywords:* Transformative mentorship, doctoral education, wellbeing, self-determination theory, transformational leadership.

## Introduction

Contemporary academic and social contexts are increasingly defined by a collective pursuit of belonging, identity affirmation, and meaningful connection. Within doctoral education, this cultural moment intersects significantly with students' development of self-efficacy, shaping their confidence, scholarly identity, and persistence.

Doctoral students often navigate competitive, opaque institutional cultures while managing personal, professional, and social challenges that impact their academic trajectories. In this context, transformative mentorship emerges as a critical relational practice, one that extends beyond transactional guidance to provide emotional, intellectual, and developmental support.

Mentorship, when approached intentionally, has been shown to facilitate effective program navigation, bolster student resilience, and enhance a range of professional outcomes (Katz et al., 2019). Moreover, it has long been recognized as

a foundational strategy for advancing academic success and promoting degree completion in doctoral education (Diaz, 2015; Liechty et al., 2009; Noonan et al., 2007). Drawing on Self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2012), this manuscript conceptualizes transformative mentorship as a process that satisfies the basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness which are key drivers of motivation and wellbeing. This positions mentorship as both a pedagogical and relational imperative in the development of resilient, self-efficacious doctoral scholars.

## Literature Review

### Doctoral Student Experiences and Challenges

Doctoral education is a profoundly transformative yet often isolating journey. Beyond intellectual demands, students navigate ambiguous expectations, disciplinary norms, and exclusionary institutional structures that foster

anxiety, self-doubt, and disconnection, particularly for those from historically marginalized groups who face systemic inequities and limited access to culturally responsive mentorship (Carpenter, 2015; Gildersleeve et al., 2011; Grant & Simmons, 2008). In such contexts, culturally responsive mentorship which acknowledges and affirms students' cultural identities, lived experiences, and sociopolitical realities becomes critical to countering academic alienation and exclusion (Griffin, 2020; Tinto, 1993). Common experiences include imposter syndrome, academic disidentification, and social isolation, which erode self-efficacy and contribute to high attrition rates (Ali & Kohun, 2006; Lovitts, 2001).

These challenges intensify during the dissertation phase as students transition into independent scholarship, often complicated by financial constraints and family obligations (Brill et al., 2014; Hadijoannou et al., 2007). Without a strong mentoring culture, students face these demands with limited guidance and affirmation, which further undermines persistence (Brill et al., 2014; Linden et al., 2013). Therefore, the quality of mentoring relationships is inextricably tied to students' motivation, sense of belonging, and academic confidence (Carpenter et al., 2015; Curtin, Stewart, & Ostrove, 2013; Williams, Thakore, & McGee, 2017).

### Transformative Mentorship in Context

Traditional doctoral mentorship typically focuses on hierarchical knowledge transfer and professional skill development. However, contemporary scholarship calls for a broader, relational understanding that addresses the

emotional, developmental, and sociocultural complexities of the doctoral journey (Barnes & Austin, 2009; Holley & Caldwell, 2012). Mentors serve not only as content experts but as guides who provide advocacy, emotional support, and cultural navigation essential for student success and identity formation (Levinson et al., 1978).

Mentoring practices often vary widely based on mentors' personal experiences and implicit assumptions, which can result in inconsistent support, particularly for underrepresented or non-traditional students who require intentional, identity-affirming guidance (Wilhemi, 2023; Mansson & Myers, 2012). Some students seek alternative mentors when initial relationships falter, potentially disrupting their academic progress.

Transformative mentorship responds by emphasizing reciprocal growth, critical reflection, and co-construction of meaning. It challenges hierarchical dynamics, fostering relational trust, shared vulnerability, and commitment to holistic development. This approach frames mentoring as an act of care and justice, aiming to cultivate resilient, self-aware, and socially conscious scholars prepared for leadership roles. Figure 1 illustrates the linear progression of transformative mentorship, beginning with faculty mentor strategies (input), progressing through transformational mentoring behaviors (process), leading to student psychological gains (output), and culminating in academic and professional outcomes (impact). It highlights the intentional, relational, and developmental nature of effective doctoral mentoring.

**Figure 1.**

*Transformative Mentorship Framework: From Faculty Strategies to Student Success*



### Conceptual Framework

Building upon the theoretical foundation outlined in the previous section, this study adopts a conceptual framework grounded in Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Deci & Ryan, 2012) and enriched by research on transformational mentorship. While SDT offers a lens to understand how mentoring relationships can support doctoral students' psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, the framework also considers how mentoring practices grounded

in transformational leadership principles such as individualized support, motivational encouragement, and ethical modeling shape students' developmental trajectories (Haider & Dasti, 2021;).

This framework acknowledges the complex and relational nature of doctoral education, where motivation and persistence are influenced not only by academic demands but also by the quality of mentoring support. Recent studies underscore the significance of aligning mentorship with

students' psychological needs to enhance research self-efficacy, academic engagement, and overall wellbeing (Neufeld et al., 2021). When mentors respond to these needs with intentionality, they help cultivate not just scholarly skillsets but also identity, confidence, and community.

While grounded in established theory, the current study adopts an exploratory qualitative design to examine how doctoral students experience and interpret transformative mentorship. Rather than beginning with a fixed hypothesis, the study seeks to surface how mentoring relationships actually unfold in real-world contexts, and how they contribute to students' personal and professional growth. The conceptual framework thus serves as both a foundation and a point of reflection allowing participants' voices and experiences to inform, extend, or even challenge theoretical assumptions. By integrating SDT and transformational mentorship into a flexible exploratory model, this study positions itself to uncover the nuanced ways in which mentorship contributes to doctoral student development. This approach centers participant experience while maintaining theoretical rigor, ultimately contributing to a richer understanding of mentorship's role in fostering motivation, resilience, and scholarly identity.

### **Methodology**

After receiving institutional approval, the study employed purposive sampling to recruit a maximum of 20 doctoral candidates enrolled at a Carnegie-classified R1 university. Purposive sampling was selected to ensure the inclusion of participants who had direct experience with faculty mentorship in a doctoral program. The intent was to capture in-depth, context-rich insights from individuals engaged in sustained mentoring relationships. Although additional students initially volunteered to participate, several were unable to follow through due to time constraints and academic obligations at the end of the semester. As a result, the final sample size was limited to five participants. While this limits generalizability, the sample is appropriate for qualitative inquiry, which prioritizes depth, nuance, and meaning-making over breadth or statistical representation. The cohort consisted of four (80%) females and one (20%) male; three (60%) participants identified as international students and one (20%) as local student. Participants' ages ranged from 30 to 50 years.

All participants in the study are not only enrolled as doctoral students but also held positions with the university as graduate assistant as a researcher or teacher assistant. Each participant was assigned both an academic advisor and a supervisor. In some cases, a single faculty member fulfilled both roles; in others, two separate faculty members were designated for advising and supervision. Data were generated through (a) a brief demographic survey and (b) in-depth, semi-structured interviews lasting 45–60 minutes. The interview protocol was designed to elicit participants' lived experiences

with mentorship, focusing on academic guidance, psychosocial support, identity development, and wellbeing. Interview questions were open-ended and exploratory, allowing participants to reflect freely on the nature and impact of their mentoring relationships. All interviews were audio-recorded on zoom with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) reflexive thematic procedure, the research team conducted inductive, iterative coding, comparing codes across transcripts and refining them into higher-order themes. These themes illuminate how transformative mentorship practices shape doctoral scholars' academic growth and holistic wellbeing. To ensure credibility and trustworthiness, the research team engaged in ongoing reflexivity throughout the research process. Positionality statements were shared among team members to acknowledge personal experiences with mentorship and potential biases. Memos and analytic notes were maintained during the coding process to document emerging interpretations and decisions. Regular peer debriefs helped the team challenge assumptions, verify interpretations, and remain attentive to participants' voices.

### **Findings**

The results of the interviews highlighted that all students have experienced some form of mentorship. All participants identify mentorship as an integral part of doctoral student success. Several themes emerged from the study.

### **Discussion**

#### **Support in Mentorship**

Mentor support was a dominant theme across all participants. They consistently described their mentors as accessible, caring, and responsive, often meeting weekly and maintaining ongoing communication. One participant shared "I feel confident asking him questions" while another said, "I think he generally cares about students." Additionally, one student garnered "I know that when there is a need, I can contact them...., the care and support I receive from my mentors is the most amazing thing that ever happened to me." This steady support fostered confidence and a sense of security in their academic journey.

#### **Resilience through Mentorship**

Mentorship also played a critical role in fostering resilience. Students reported that their mentors helped them persevere through challenges, celebrate successes, and provide constructive criticism vital for growth. As one participant stated, "Our relationship has affirmed my resilience by pushing me on days when I feel like I just want to give up." Another emphasized "I never knew that education was my calling, and I wouldn't probably have a voice or never knew what potential I had."

Others remarked "receiving constructive

feedback allowed them to reassess and improve their work.” These transformative experiences contributed to increased confidence in their research skills and scholarly identities.

### Trust in Mentoring Relationships

Another theme that emerged from participants’ narratives was the central role of trust in mentoring relationships. All five doctoral candidates emphasized that having a mentor they could trust was not only comforting but critical to their academic persistence and emotional wellbeing. One participant reflected on having confidence in the person he is going to—knowing he will get a good response and a thoughtful solution— which is rewarding. Overtime, this trust allowed participants to approach mentors with challenges, uncertainties, and aspirations without fear of judgment or dismissal. This theme held particular significance for international students, who often navigate additional cultural, linguistic, and institutional barriers. One participant stated “when I started my doctoral journey, I realized it’s a different world and culture from what I am used to.... English is not even my first language.” This aligns with the work of Allen and Eby (2007), who argue that trust is foundational in mentoring

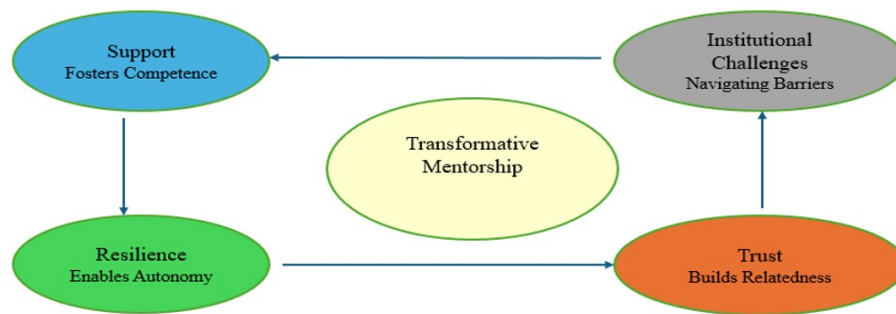
relationships because it promotes psychological safety and encourages help-seeking behavior

Similarly, Brill et al., (2014) emphasize that trust facilitates open communication and allows mentees to engage more fully in the mentoring process.

### Institutional Challenges

All participants reflected on several institutional challenges that hindered their progress. Most recalled struggling to navigate complex academic systems and course expectations independently during their first semester. One participant remarked “PhD programs are tough, and there are various challenges we are always trying to overcome, especially from the perspective of international students.” This sentiment is echoed by the other international participants who expressed a sense of disorientation and isolation upon entering their programs. However, participants unanimously credited mentorship as a key factor in helping them overcome these obstacles. These findings are consistent with the works of Carpenter et al. (2015) that with advice, guidance and friendship from mentors, students develop understanding of the purpose and the practice of research and professional identity.

**Figure 2.**  
*Thematic Cycle of Doctoral Mentorship*



This cyclical model (Figure 2) integrates the core themes of Support, Resilience, Trust, and Institutional Challenges, illustrating how each theme contributes to the satisfaction of SDT’s psychological needs. Trust builds relatedness, support fosters competence, and resilience enables autonomy—together forming a continuous cycle of growth, motivation, and scholarly persistence.

### Conclusion

These findings suggest that institutions should prioritize mentor training that emphasizes relationship-building, cultural responsiveness,

and the cultivation of trust—all of which align with the core psychological needs outlined in Self-determination theory (SDT): relatedness, competence, and autonomy. For doctoral students—particularly those from underrepresented or international backgrounds—trust in mentoring relationships can be a decisive factor in their sense of belonging and academic success. Another recommendation is to have a formal mentoring structure in school for students to enhance productivity and influence the way they fit into the academic community. Some students report the need to have more diverse advisors in their departments who can provide better relatable experiences, specifically for international students.

Formal mentoring structures can impact their journey successfully by providing consistency, accountability, and equitable access to support. Institutions with structured mentoring programs enable students to establish early connections with faculty who can guide their research, coursework, and career planning. As Tinto (1993) argues, integration into the academic community is a vital factor in student retention and success, and structured mentoring is a key mechanism for promoting that integration.

## References

- Ali, A., & Kohun, F. (2006). Dealing with social isolation to minimize doctoral attrition—A four stage framework. *International Journal of Doctoral Studies*, 1(1), 21-33.
- Barnes, B. J., & Austin, A. E. (2009). The role of doctoral advisors: A look at advising from the advisor's perspective. *Innovative Higher Education*, 33(5), 297-315.
- Brill, J. M., Balcanoff, K. K., Land, D., Gogarty, M. R., & Turner, M. M. (2014). Best practices in faculty mentoring: Perspectives from the academy. *Perspectives in Health Information Management*, 11(Spring), 1-16.
- Buell, C. (2004). Models of mentoring in communication. *Communication Education*, 53(1), 56-73.
- Carpenter, A. M., Makhadmeh, N., & Thornton, L. J. (2015). Mentoring in higher education: Exploring the experiences of faculty members in doctoral programs. *Journal of Faculty Development*, 29(3), 31-39.
- Curtin, N., Stewart, A. J., & Ostrove, J. M. (2013). Fostering academic self-concept: Advisor support and sense of belonging among international and domestic graduate students. *American Educational Research Journal*, 50(1), 108-137.
- Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (2000). The "what" and "why" of goal pursuits: Human needs and the self-determination of behavior. *Psychological Inquiry*, 11(4), 227-268. [https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327965PLI1104\\_01](https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327965PLI1104_01)
- Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (2012). Self-determination theory. In P. A. M. Van Lange, A. W. Kruglanski, & E. T. Higgins (Eds.), *Handbook of theories of social psychology*, 1, (416-436). SAGE Publications.
- Diaz, A. L. (2015). Mentoring for doctoral student success. *International Journal of Doctoral Studies*, 10, 323-332. <https://doi.org/10.28945/2291>
- Fisher, K. (2023). Reimagining mentorship for doctoral student success: The potential utility of transformational leadership practices. *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, 1-17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603124.2023.2193741>
- Gardner, S. K. (2009). The development of doctoral students: Phases of challenge and support (*ASHE Higher Education Report*, 34, (6). Jossey-Bass.
- Gildersleeve, R. E., Croom, N., & Vasquez, P. L. (2011). "Am I going crazy?!" A critical race analysis of doctoral education. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, 44(1), 93-114.
- Griffin, K. A. (2020). Mentoring underrepresented doctoral students: Strategies for supporting student success. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, 13(2), 101-114. <https://doi.org/10.1037/dhe0000136>.
- Golde, C. M. (2005). The role of the department and discipline in doctoral student attrition: Lessons from four departments. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 76(6), 669-700.
- Grant, C. M., & Simmons, J. C. (2008). Narratives on experiences of African-American women in the academy: Conceptualizing effective mentoring relationships of doctoral student and faculty. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 21(5), 501-517.
- Hadijoannou, X., Shelton, N. R., Fu, D., & Dhanaratigannon, J. A. (2007). The road to a doctoral degree: Co-travelers through a perilous passage. *College Student Journal*, 41(1), 160-177.
- Haider, S., & Dasti, R. (2021). Transformational leadership and academic motivation: A self-determination theory perspective. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 113(6), 1008-1020.
- Holley, K. A., & Caldwell, M. L. (2012). The challenges of designing and implementing a doctoral student mentoring program. *Innovative Higher Education*, 37(3), 243-253.
- Jameson, C. M., Torres, K. M., Goodin, J. B., & Mohammed, S. F. (2023). Online doctoral students' perception of autonomy support to progress in dissertation. *International Journal of Doctoral Studies*, 6(1).
- Katz, J., Dobush, R., Woods, C., & Veilleux, J. C. (2019). Mentoring graduate students: Ethical and practical considerations. *Training and Education in Professional Psychology*, 13(4), 292-298. <https://doi.org/10.1037/tep0000267>
- Ku, H. Y., Lahman, M. K., Yeh, H. T., & Cheng, Y. C. (2008). Into the academy: Preparing and mentoring international doctoral students. *Educational Technology Research and Development*, 56(3), 365-377.
- Levinson, D. J., Darrow, C. N., Levinson, M. H., & McKee, B. (1978). *The seasons of a man's life*. Ballantine Books.
- Liechty, J. M., Liao, M., & Schull, C. P. (2009). Facilitating dissertation completion and success among doctoral students in social

- work. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 45(3), 481–497. <https://doi.org/10.5175/JSWE.2009.200800091>
- Linden, J., Ohlin, M., & Brodin, E. M. (2013). Mentorship, supervision and learning in higher education. *International Journal of Evidence Based Coaching and Mentoring*, 11(1), 20–36.
- Lovitts, B. E. (2001). *Leaving the ivory tower: The causes and consequences of departure from doctoral study*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Lovitts, B. E. (2009). The transition to independent research: Who makes it, who doesn't, and why. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 79(3), 296–325.
- Mansson, D. H., & Myers, S. A. (2012). Using mentoring enactment theory to explore the doctoral student–advisor mentoring relationship. *Communication Education*, 61(4), 309–329.
- Noonan, M. J., Ballinger, R., & Black, R. (2007). Peer and faculty mentoring in doctoral education: Definitions, experiences, and expectations. *International Journal of Doctoral Studies*, 2, 65–76. <https://doi.org/10.28945/53>
- Sloan-Wilhelmi, L. (2023). More benefits than barriers: Multigenerational mentoring and the impact on career advancement and leadership development (Doctoral dissertation, North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University).
- Tinto, V. (1993). *Leaving college: Rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition* (2nd ed.). University of Chicago Press.
- Williams, M. (2020). Implicit biases and their impact on mentorship and career advancement in higher education. *Equity & Leadership Journal*, 19(2), 45–68.