

The Voices of Mentees: Holistic Critical Mentoring of McNair Scholars

Hunt, M.

University of Maryland - Baltimore County

This study investigates the reasons why McNair Scholars at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC) participate in mentoring and what they expect from these relationships. Drawing on experience and literature, this study refines a Holistic Critical Mentoring (HCM) framework that prioritizes the wellbeing, identity, and reciprocity of mentees. The research highlights the role of developmental networks in contributing to academic and psychosocial growth, ultimately identifying equitable and transformative mentoring practices in higher education. This research incorporates Critical Mentoring, Critical Race Theory, and Community Cultural Wealth to substantiate HCM, a framework emphasizing mentee voices, reciprocity, and identity-affirming development networks. HCM challenges dominant norms of professionalism and promotes collective mentoring rooted in shared lived experiences. It reframes mentoring as a reciprocal, culturally responsive network that nurtures the mentee's wellbeing across academic, emotional, spiritual, and social dimensions. Using qualitative descriptive methods, McNair Scholars at UMBC share their mentoring experiences via semi-structured interviews. Their narratives reveal how developmental networks function in practice, particularly for first-generation and underrepresented students. Grounded theory elements were used to refine the HCM, which centers power-flipped reciprocal and identity-affirming mentoring relationships that promote individual and institutional wellbeing. McNair Scholars describe mentoring as reciprocal, trust-based, and identity-affirming. They value mentors with shared experiences who offer encouragement and guidance toward academic and personal goals. These findings support HCM, which centers mentees' needs and lived experiences. HCM promotes networks of support that affirm wellbeing, challenge dominant norms, and prepare mentees for fulfilling careers. This framework informs the evaluation of mentor training and institutional efforts toward achieving equity and sustainable mentoring practices.

Keywords: Holistic, critical mentoring, McNair Scholars, reciprocal mentoring, equity in higher education

Introduction

Every day, McNair staff support first-generation Black, Brown, and Indigenous students in the UMBC McNair Scholars program. McNair Scholars are undergraduate students who are from underserved populations. They are first-generation college students from low-income households or members of underrepresented racial groups in graduate education. These students often struggle with the impostor phenomenon, questioning their role in academia, which is influenced by the culture within higher education (Parkman, 2016). We assist the scholars in gaining admission to graduate school, where they will ultimately earn their doctoral degrees within ten years of graduating from UMBC. The federally funded McNair program's ultimate goal is "to increase the attainment of Ph.D. degrees by students from underrepresented segments of society." (U.S. Department of Education, 2021).

This research reviews how mentoring can increase graduate school acceptance, retention, and degree attainment. Mentoring is a crucial component in providing scholars with the necessary skills and

support to achieve their educational and career objectives (Crisp et al., 2017; Dolan & Johnson, 2009)

I intentionally use the first person, as this qualitative research cannot be void of my experience, having served as both director and a prior participant in the UMBC McNair Scholars Program. Recognizing my positionality in this work, while honoring the voices of our students, matters more than trying to eliminate bias. As scholars such as Harding (1991), Solórzano and Yosso (2002), and D'Ignazio and Klein (2020) argue, bias is present at every level of data interpretation—from the framing of research questions to the analysis and presentation of findings—requiring reflexive and equity-based approaches to knowledge production.

During my tenure as program director, I noticed a lack of mentor training that promotes reciprocal learning. Too often, mentoring focuses on what the mentee gains from the relationship, overlooking the fact that mentees—particularly as adult learners—bring lived experiences that can also enrich the mentor's perspective. In line with Knowles' (1980)

principles of adult learning, and grounded in my own Holistic Critical Mentoring (HCM) framework, recognizing mentees as knowledge holders fosters mutual growth and shared accountability in mentoring relationships. Before proposing the most effective mentoring approach, it is essential to solicit input from current program scholars who serve as both mentees and mentors. I am compelled to examine the need for holistic critical mentoring (HCM) of historically excluded students (HES) within higher education because HES voices are often silenced as they are expected to perform or meet standards that were not created with their lived experiences in mind. HCM is a developmental network of power-dynamic-flipped, mentee-centered, reciprocal relationships that hold mentors and institutions accountable for changing structures to support mentees better.

Literature Review

Mentoring is a key system in higher education that provides underserved populations with the support they need to succeed within institutions (Thile & Matt, 1995; Wallace et al., 2000). There needs to be an intentional focus on mentoring competencies, where mentors can self-examine their effectiveness (Wyre et al., 2016). The mentees' desires and opinions should be part of the evaluation process. Weisten-Serdan (2017) suggests that critical mentoring emphasizes the need to understand the context of the youth mentees to support their needs effectively. Critical mentoring calls for the decolonization of youth-based traditional mentoring experiences by including them in all aspects of the mentoring process. Similar to critical mentoring, higher education mentoring practices have evolved toward asset-based and student-centered approaches, which reject deficit thinking and instead build on students' lived experiences (Yosso, 2005).

The Committee on Effective Mentoring in STEMM (2019) National Academy Report defines mentoring as "a professional, working alliance in which individuals work together over time to support the personal and professional growth, development, and success of the relational partners through the provision of career and psychosocial support." Although this definition is well-received and indicates some level of equality, concerns remain about who defines 'professional' and how the responsibility of mentoring and its outcomes is shared between the mentee and mentor, without necessitating changes in institutional structures. There must be a call for institutions and structures to change to meet the needs of mentees. Thus, there is a need for a Holistic Critical Mentoring (HCM) framework.

Based on my mentoring experiences and review of literature, HCM is defined as, a network of inclusive reciprocal relationships between mentees and mentors that centers the voices of mentees

and values their whole being." HCM is an ongoing process of learning from mentees' and mentors' collective lived experiences while challenging and disrupting White supremacy and racism exhibited within the White normative interpretations of professionalism. (Hunt, 2021)

To implement the Holistic Critical Mentoring (HCM) framework, I have outlined a set of guiding principles, tenets that emerged from both the literature and my lived experiences, as well as those of my students. These principles embody a commitment to culturally responsive, equity-focused, and reciprocal mentoring practices that support the whole student. They challenge dominant norms in higher education and promote relational and institutional change. Table 1 describes each tenet, including supporting literature that guides its development and use. We cannot continue creating programming to support mentoring on multiple levels without hearing the voices of mentees. They are vital to mentoring relationships and should not be viewed as consumers but rather as equal participants. A considerable amount of research has been conducted on the importance of mentoring on college campuses (Byars-Winston et al., 2015; Crisp et al., 2017; Jacobi, 1991; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2019)1991;

National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2019, but less attention has been given to the voices of the mentees. Further research is needed on mentees' perspectives of mentoring and the essential characteristics for their personal development. Effective holistic critical mentoring is a mutual relationship between the mentor and mentee, involving a reciprocal exchange. This qualitative study aims to explore why mentees engage in mentoring relationships and what they seek from their mentorships. Drawing on my lived experience and a literature review, I developed tenets that highlight the need for holistic critical mentoring. This study provides the necessary data to inform the framework more effectively.

Table 1
Tenets of Holistic Critical Mentoring (HCM)

Tenet	Description and Supporting Literature
Acknowledges that Race, Racism, and White Supremacy Impact Mentees, Programs, and Institutions	Critical Race Theory provides a lens to understand how systemic racism and white supremacy influence mentees and institutional structures (Bell, 1992; Ladson-Billings & Tate IV, 1995).
Centers the Voices and Experiences of the Mentee	Emphasizes that power lies in centering the scholar's lived experiences and community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005).
Supports the Holistic Needs of the Mentee	Recognizes the mentee's multifaceted needs—mental, physical, spiritual, financial, academic, and career—and demands resources to support those dimensions (Luedke et al., 2019).
Requires Reciprocity between the Mentee and the Mentor	Mentoring must be mutual, with both parties sharing, learning, and being held accountable. The mentee is not just a recipient, but a co-contributor (Ferguson, 2018).
Invites Culture and Lived Experience into the Relationship	Encourages mentors and mentees to bring their whole selves, including their cultural identities and experiences, into the mentoring relationship (Figueroa & Rodriguez, 2015).
Challenges White Normative Interpretations of “Professionalism”	Calls into question dominant cultural standards around appearance, behavior, and communication, promoting authenticity and resistance to assimilation (Frye et al., 2020).
Creates a Network of Mentoring Relationships	Rather than relying on a single mentor, there must be intentional cultivation of networks of mentoring relationships, ensuring students are supported across multiple domains and perspectives (Dobrow et al., 2012; Montgomery, 2017).
Recognizes the Mentee as a Budding Expert	Mentees are respected as knowledgeable contributors whose lived experience enriches academic and professional contexts, aligning with Knowles' (1980) theory of adult learning.
Transforms Institutions through Student-Centered Practices, Institutional Accountability, and Co-Conspiratory Leadership	Expects institutions to go beyond surface-level performative inclusion and work toward genuine, lasting, transformative structural changes that actively confront systemic oppression (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Love, 2019).

Method

According to Richards and Morse (2007), the purpose of qualitative research is to focus on the voices of scholars regarding their experiences with mentoring and “the meanings they put on it, and how they interpret what they experience” (p. 20). Through a qualitative descriptive methodological approach, the scholars were able to describe their mentoring experiences “at a surface or manifest level...in his or her own words” (Willis et al., 2016, p. 1193). This research employed semi-structured interviews to explore the perspectives of mentees on the mentoring experience.

Additionally, the research incorporated elements of grounded theory, as the data informed the HCM framework. While interviewing the students, I asked myself, “What’s going on here?” (Richards & Morse, 2007, p. 60), aiming to learn from the mentees how they define mentoring and

which elements are relevant to their mentoring relationships within the McNair Scholars Program.

Data Source

I employed purposive sampling to identify participants who were McNair scholars with experience in mentoring. Initially, I restricted the scope to those who self-identified as Black and first-generation. We define first-generation as students who have reported that neither of their parents, with whom they lived at the age of 18, had obtained a bachelor’s degree from any country. Although my research centers on the African worldview, I chose not to limit the interviews to Black participants, as I believe it is valuable to hear the perspectives of all scholars. As a researcher, I aimed to uncover elements of their experiences that related to the African worldview. Additionally, I had a limited sample size to work with (population

size - ~35 current McNair Scholars), so I needed to manage my time and resources thoughtfully. I also initially decided to focus on students who had

been in the program for at least a full year. When I began this research project, we were selecting and onboarding new scholars. It was essential for the scholars to feel safe and trust me in my role as both program director and researcher.

Table 2
Participants' Details

Chosen Pseudonym	Pronouns Used	First Gen	Race/Ethnicity	Years in Program
Amber	she/her/hers	Yes	Black	4
Jay	he/his/him	Yes	Nigerian American/ African American	3
Dario	he/him/his	No	Black	4
Lauren	she/her/hers	No	African, Ethiopian	3
Iqbal	he/his/him	Yes	Asian	2
Elise	she/her/hers	Yes	Chinese immigrant	1
Josh	he/his/him	No	African American	2
Subject 1	he/him/his	Yes	Hispanic	3
Jessica	she/her/hers	Yes	Black	1

Note: BOLD rows represent those used in this report. All data were self-reported by the participants.

Since I have direct access to our scholars' demographic and contact information, I emailed each participant individually, inviting them to join the study. I also ensured they understood they could decline without any repercussions and that this research supports the ongoing evaluation of the mentoring components of our program. I focused on recruiting seniors (aged 18 and older) who have been in the program for at least a year, as I will not easily be able to access them once they graduate. Additionally, they have been in the program long enough to gain insight into their current mentoring experiences with both formal and informal mentors.

The interviews were conducted via the Zoom platform and lasted between 40 and 50 minutes. Participants had the option to keep their cameras on during the interview. Initially, I considered asking them to display their videos; however, to prioritize participant-centered research, I decided to let them choose, although I showed my video as a model. While obtaining verbal consent, I reminded them that they could refuse to answer any question, pause, or stop the interview at any time without facing any negative consequences. I asked a series of questions, but focused on understanding the

value of mentoring to the scholars. I specifically emphasized positive mentoring relationships to avoid retraumatizing the scholars. For this study, I aimed to prevent them from reliving the pain of negative mentor-relationships, which many have found to be harmful.

Process of Analysis

After transcribing and reviewing each interview, I conducted a thematic analysis by examining the transcripts and constructing themes based on the participants' responses. I compared the interviews to identify commonalities in responses. Taking notes on themes helped synthesize the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018) and maintain a coding manual. I focused my review on the qualities that scholars attributed to effective mentoring relationships.

Role of Researcher

As the current director of the UMBC McNair Scholars program, it is inherent in my role to serve as a mentor to the scholars. My responsibility was, and remains, to simply probe, listen, and allow their stories to guide the interview. This was not a challenge, as we only had a short amount of time for each interview. Nevertheless, in preparation for the interviews, I practiced listening

without considering a rebuttal. My responsibility is to care for participants, to do no harm, “to safeguard participants and their data.” (Sutton & Austin, 2015, p. 227). Also, I ensured that as the researcher, I “acknowledge their [my] own power, engage in dialogues, and use theory to interpret or illuminate social action” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 137). My positionality as a Black, first-generation individual and director of the program provides me with valuable insights into the subject matter. Yet, I remained self-reflective to ensure that I was not leading the participants in a questioning line that hinders the centering of their voices and experiences. I also recognize the power dynamics as the participants are scholars in the program

I direct. I sent an initial email to the selected participants to ask them if they would participate. During our monthly group meetings, I explained to the McNair scholars that I might reach out to them to ask for volunteers for research interviews. The email then allowed selected participants to ask questions or decline without any pressure. In fact, I did have one scholar who never responded to my inquiry.

To enhance the transparency of the qualitative coding and strengthen analysis, Table 3 summarizes the major themes, representative codes, and their relevance to scholars’ degree progress and development

Table 3
Themes and Codes Identified in Interviews with McNair Scholars

Theme	Representative Codes	Description	Connection to Degree Progress / Impact
Reciprocal Trusting Relationships	Mutual exchange, authenticity, approachability, respect, two-way communication	Mentees value relationships where mentors are vulnerable, responsive, and learn from the mentee as well.	Encourages scholar agency and confidence; strengthens retention through mutual commitment.
Shared Experiences	Cultural understanding, relatable background, lived experience, first-gen understanding	Mentors who have navigated similar challenges (e.g., being first-gen or BIPOC) are perceived as more helpful and validating.	Supports persistence by normalizing struggle and showing successful pathways.
Encouragement and Support	Affirmation, motivation, guidance, belief in potential, reassurance	Mentors encourage mentees to believe in their capabilities, especially during moments of self-doubt or imposter syndrome.	Enhances academic performance, self-efficacy, and goal attainment.
Navigational Capital	Exposure to networks, opportunity sharing, insider knowledge	Mentors help scholars access professional opportunities and networks that they might not otherwise be aware of.	Provides access to research, internships, and graduate school opportunities—accelerating academic and professional pathways.
Holistic Development	Emotional support, spiritual validation, financial guidance, academic and social support	Mentoring addresses multiple aspects of mentees’ lives, not just academics—aligning with the HCM framework.	Supports whole-person growth, reducing burnout and dropout risk.
Resistance to Normative Professionalism	Challenging norms, authenticity in expression, cultural affirmation	Mentees value when mentors affirm their authentic selves—including language, dress, or behavior that resists dominant norms of “professionalism.”	Promotes a sense of belonging, affirming identity, and reducing internalized marginalization.

Results

Three key questions asked of all participating scholars were: (1) What does mentoring mean to you? (2) In which ways does mentoring matter? (3) When have you experienced having a great mentoring relationship? When discussing their opinions on mentoring, they were able to provide clear characteristics of mentoring. Amber, for example, explained that a mentor is “someone being present. And someone, who’s like, actively listening to me, whether, you know, I’m expressing concern or successes.”

Reciprocal Trusting Relationships

Throughout the conversations, the scholars provided substantial illustrations that support mentorship as reciprocal, trusting relationships with individuals who share similar experiences through encouragement and support. The scholars seek mentoring relationships that are two-way and less hierarchical in nature. They desire mentors who understand their needs while connecting personally with the scholars and being vulnerable in the relationship. Dario explains,

So I feel like both parties, the mentor, mentee, should show up as they are, but being able to, like, establish that relationship where reciprocity can coexist or be establish and then coexist in a way where I can learn from them, they can learn from me.

Dario views effective mentoring as a two-way experience where both the mentor and the mentee can gain insights from each other. Jay also shares how mentorship requires reciprocity. Jay says,

Definitely, I feel like it’s a good relationship to the point where... You both are human; you both have things going on. But like, if you ever need them, and you reach out to them, even though they might not get back to you immediately, they will still get back to you and still talk to you in general and try to understand what’s going on.

Jay respects his mentors’ roles but appreciates when they are not intimidating and value him as much as he values them.

Shared Experiences

Moreover, scholars value mentors who have had similar experiences to their own. In particular, scholars seek mentors who have traveled the path they are interested in pursuing. While describing the role of mentors, Jay shares that mentors,

Let you know that you’re not in it alone. Having someone that already went through it. They know, even though like, they haven’t

been, you know, in the same position, even for a while, they still know, like, it’s still a struggle. And they... understand that you’re not in it alone, you always have someone you can talk to, someone you can, you know, voice your frustration to sometimes.

Scholars appreciate it when mentors offer knowledge about the process and relationships with people to assist them in achieving their goals. Jay expresses appreciation when discussing how his mentor has opened doors for him. Jay states,

I feel mentoring becomes a point of connection. So kind of connects you to opportunities that are out there. A great example was my research mentor. There was one semester [he] was working on trying to connect with someone he knew from NASA to try to get like an internship [for me] with him and things like that.

Scholars recognize the importance of their mentors intentionally expanding the scholars’ networks. As a result, the scholars trust the mentors as experts in their fields due to their personal experiences and professional accomplishments. When talking about his relationship with his mentor, Dario shares, “[I] got a chance to experience what was it like to see an African American woman who is successful[ly] transitioning into even more success for herself.” When speaking of his mentor’s expertise, Dario states,

I would actually say, her structure and how she facilitated research being completed, just really gave a sense of urgency, [and] but priority to the work that we were doing, even though it was just basically having deadlines. But it was about understanding who she was and the work she had done, and how that would be, and how my work or my team’s work at that time would be a reflection of us with her. And so, again, I guess, kind of going back to like, community.

Encouragement and Support

Scholars appreciate the fact that great mentoring relationships center on encouragement and support for them. The scholars discuss the experience of navigating the internal (and sometimes external) feelings of not belonging, which stem from imposter syndrome, where the environments contribute to their sense of not belonging. When talking about her hopes and dreams, Amber shares,

I’m first-generation. There’s been plenty of times where you question your existence in the space... there’s definitely been times where I like, questioned my presence... I know everybody goes through that, you know, imposter syndrome.... the hardships

I've been through navigating my journey have definitely empowered me. And I want to be able to empower people through technology [and through] the technology that I create.

Furthermore, scholars view mentors as facilitators who encourage them to step out of their comfort zones, try new things, and excel in their areas of strength. Jay explains:

An example would be the first time I really presented research, I honestly didn't feel like doing it because I knew I had an accent. But when it comes to speaking in a large crowd, it tends to come out more. So one of my mentors encouraged me to do it... If I wanted to go for the PhD, I would have to be able to present. I have to get comfortable with it, and things like that. So my weakness in general was like me being afraid, my accent, and talking to a large crowd, but he also knew that I knew what I was doing. So, he gave me a bit of a push to go for it. He actually helped me with drafting my abstract and other things, and even submitted it.

Their mentors validate the scholars' abilities to achieve, even when the scholars are unsure of themselves. Amber also shared, "something that I value so much about mentorship or that I've seen through mentorship is... they see something in you that you don't see in yourself." What makes the scholars' mentorships different from any other relationship is that the relationships are centered on the mentees and ensure that their needs are being met.

Discussion

This study strongly supports the principles of Holistic Critical Mentoring (HCM), demonstrating how reciprocal, identity-affirming, and culturally responsive relationships contribute to the success of McNair Scholars. Scholars describe meaningful mentoring experiences as reciprocal and built on trust, confirming HCM's view of mentoring as a two-way, power-flipped relationship. Dario's focus on mutual learning aligns with Ferguson's (2018) claim that reciprocity sustains mentoring and calls for a redefinition beyond traditional hierarchies. Mentees value mentors who share their experiences, reflecting HCM's emphasis on cultural relevance and authenticity. Participants like Jay appreciate mentors who have "already been through it," indicating that understanding scholars' challenges fosters deeper support. This aligns with critical mentoring literature (Weiston-Serdan, 2017) and supports HCM's focus on culturally responsive and developmental networks.

Participants note that mentoring has aided their holistic development—both academically, emotionally, and socially. Amber's insight that mentors "see something in you that you don't see in yourself" highlights the transformative effect

of validation. These findings align with Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth framework, which centers on the mentees' voices and bolsters HCM's commitment to nurturing the whole student. Scholars value authentic mentors who challenge professional norms and expectations. Instead of enforcing rigid standards, mentors show vulnerability, aligning with HCM's aim to resist white normative standards in academia (Frye et al., 2020).

These participants showcase the effectiveness of the UMBC McNair Scholars Program's HCM implementation. For instance, 100% of the participants in this study graduated with their bachelor's degrees, 89% earned master's degrees, 55% are pursuing PhDs, and one has recently obtained their PhD. While the study provides valuable insights, its small, specific sample and intentional focus on positive experiences limit its generalizability. However, this is appropriate given that the purpose of the study was to center and elevate the voices of mentees, allowing them to define effective mentoring on their terms without retraumatization. The goal was not to make broad generalizations, but to gain a deeper understanding of how meaningful, reciprocal mentoring relationships are experienced and valued by those most impacted.

Future research should investigate the application of HCM in broader contexts and its long-term effects. Overall, this study demonstrates that HCM is a robust framework for improving mentoring practices in higher education. By prioritizing mentee voices and fostering reciprocal, identity-affirming networks, mentoring can be genuinely transformative.

Conclusion

Institutions of higher education often prioritize creating mentoring programs and recruiting mentors and mentees, and they consider assessment only after the program is established. This study suggests starting by understanding the needs of mentoring relationships, focusing on what mentees value in mentorship. The findings lay a foundation for recognizing the importance of a consistent and intentional mentoring framework. The study clarifies and refines several principles of holistic critical mentoring, including reciprocity between the mentee and mentor, centering on the mentee's voices and experiences, and inviting both parties to share their cultures and lived experiences within the mentoring relationship. I argue that these findings should be integrated into mentor training and evaluation processes for colleges and universities. The questions raised in this study should serve as discussion points for mentors and mentees during their initial meetings.

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