

# Community and Alumni in Academic Mentorship: Relational Expansion of the CAIT Model

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In 2022 the authors developed an inclusive model of higher education research mentorship, the Critical, Adaptive, Interdisciplinary, and Trauma-Informed (CAIT) model, aimed at intentionally centering research with, by, and for historically excluded minoritized students and at increasing overall student retention, belonging, and success. CAIT blurs traditional academic binaries and divisions to promote wellbeing for all, prioritizing community over hierarchy, holistic mentorship, interdisciplinarity, and reciprocity, with students as both mentees and mentors to one another. In the three years since the publication of the CAIT model, several cultural changes have affected higher education practices. With anti-DEI legislation and higher education and socioeconomic changes, students need academic mentors to go beyond the academy. In this conceptual paper, the authors present a relational expansion of their original faculty-student CAIT Model. Focused on contemporary student wellbeing through relationships and connections, the authors propose an evolved CAIT model, inviting alumni and community partners into a networked mentoring collective. They argue that the expanded CAIT model advances academic mentorship practices in four ways: (1) by allowing mentors to still continue to prioritize issues of belonging and inclusion through multiple types of dynamic connections; (2) by providing students with practical work and applied learning experiences, along with research; (3) by meeting community partners' needs with students at the forefront; and (4) by maintaining alumni involvement for social, emotional, and professional support. In sum, expanded decentering of hierarchy is wellbeing for all.

*Keywords:* CAIT model, community partners, academic mentorship, anti-DEI responses

## Introduction

### The CAIT Model

In 2022, the authors and their colleagues developed an inclusive model of higher education research mentorship, the Critical, Adaptive, Interdisciplinary, and Trauma-Informed (CAIT) model (Sayers et al., 2022). This model aimed to intentionally center research with, by, and for historically excluded minoritized students (HEMs) and to increase overall student retention, belonging, and success. CAIT blurs traditional academic binaries and divisions to promote wellbeing for all, prioritizing community over hierarchy, holistic mentorship, interdisciplinarity, and reciprocity, with students as both mentees and mentors to one another. Since its inception, the CAIT model resulted in 100% student success on quantitative measures and retention, including 100% graduation rates and future employment and/or future graduate program attendance, for all CAIT students; qualitative measures also supported success, with students increasing self-efficacy and self-esteem (Sayers et al., 2022).

### Literature Review

The CAIT model complemented other

mentorship traditions grounded in inclusion, equity, dynamicity, and the decentralization of power, and it continues to align with more recent research.

Mentorship researchers assert that the essential ingredient for a thriving, successful society is the collective diversity of thought, experience, and intersecting identities, coupled with a deep commitment to celebrating unique stories as fundamental to human intellectual, emotional, and interpersonal growth (Jackson, 2025; McGowan et al., 2025). Central to the CAIT model, the authors embed this commitment through the application of its four principles: criticality, adaptability, interdisciplinarity, and trauma-informed practice (Sayers et al., 2022).

### Shifting Political Environment

Despite the success of CAIT since 2022, and its alignment with other best practices in various mentorship programs, shifting political climates in US higher educational settings have challenged CAIT. More specifically, anti-Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives at state and federal levels have challenged mentorship for HEMs, while attacks on the credibility and viability of higher education in general have caused universities to

shift to a focus on job preparation. While Wisdom (2025) draws from changing workforce and employment dynamics to support her argument for adjusting higher education mentorship to the demands of more contemporary student graduates, other critiques are more sociopolitical in nature.

Conyers and Wright Fields (2025), for example, overview how anti-DEI moves are “administrative responses” to DEI initiatives that maintain existing power structures and continue inequities (p.2); Odeh and Meij (2025) address the complicated nature of anti-DEI legislation on mentorship, personal values, and professional ethics. At a local level, the authors have realized such effects; they have been required to alter language and content of CAIT that is explicitly related to critical theories and DEI, and they have lost financial support as a DEI mentorship initiative.

### Wellbeing and Belonging

While overt emphasis on HEM identities is attacked as DEI, researchers still underscore the importance of wellbeing and belonging for student success, especially for HEMs. Just existing as a HEM involves trauma; students who are not HEMs experience trauma, as well. Likewise, both critical theorists (Wieston-Serdan, 2017) and non-critical theoretical approaches emphasize the importance of community in mentorship; disrupting hierarchy in favor of community, as in peer-peer, near peer, and collective mentorship (Gilbert, 2024), for example, leads to greater success (Brunner, 2005; Poon et al., 2021). Zarin (2025) highlights the importance of peer and group connections in times of social and emotional challenges.

Creating safe learning environments is critically important to ensure that any student who has experienced trauma has a pathway to heal, recover, and thrive (Gilbert, 2024; Jackson, 2025; Pakhale, 2024; Poon et al., 2021). Centering collective growth requires the intentional use of mentoring strategies that foster meaningful connections and create a space where all individuals feel both connected to the community and independently valued (Brunner, 2025; Gilbert, 2024; Welch, 2024). Lindvig et al. (2025) outlined the importance of flexibility, adaptability, a synergistic framework,

and the need to address power dynamics in interdisciplinary initiatives in mentorship across disciplinary boundaries. In times of decreased attention to power dynamics and more limited definitions of identity and community, mentorship models must adapt ideas of community. Thus, while safety can exist within the mentorship community, mentors can also expand what is meant by “community.” This is what the authors propose in this project.

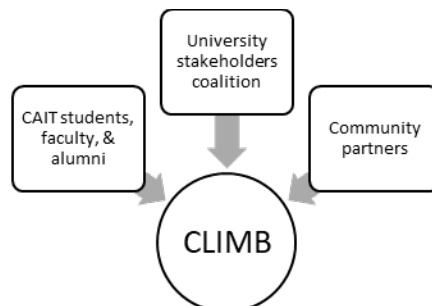
## Model

### Explanation of a Relational Expansion - CLIMB

The authors proposed a relational expansion of the original CAIT mentorship model to address these contemporary social, emotional, financial, and political issues affecting higher educational mentorship. Their goal was to maintain the strengths of interdisciplinarity, attention to interpersonal dynamics, and community building across levels of students and faculty, while addressing funding losses, statewide anti-DEI programmatic directives, and students’ wellbeing. They piloted this program in academic year (AY) 2024-2025; they outline the steps for building their relational network below.

To address funding losses while increasing their interdisciplinary focus, CAIT faculty first built a tripartite coalition, the Coalition for Leadership, Interdisciplinary Mentorship, and Belonging (CLIMB). They designed CLIMB into three subgroups and invited relevant parties to join CLIMB in one of these three areas: (1) CAIT collective, the original students and faculty, along with CAIT alumni, (2) the Coalition, university-based program leaders, offices, faculty, and staff interested in student mentorship and leadership, and (3) Community, local community partners. CLIMB met monthly throughout the AY, serving as a larger steering committee guided by members’ needs, while the CAIT collective met weekly for more micro-level mentorship, design, and implementation of CAIT initiatives. CAIT collective members also met individually with the university coalition and community partners. Figure 1 below displays the CLIMB structure. One ultimate goal of CLIMB was to become

**Figure 1.**  
*The Structure of CLIMB*



a mentoring hub for the university and local community.

### **The CAIT Collective**

In its seventh year, CAIT mentorship faced two primary challenges, as faculty could no longer overtly and intentionally foreground HEMs and could no longer fund HEMs due to cuts in state and federal support. The authors shifted focus to maintain integrity and initial emphasis as possible and to integrate findings from recent mentoring scholarship of best practices (Gilbert, 2024; Parkhale, 2024; Lindvig et al., 2025; Wisdom, 2025; Zarin, 2025). The authors could, therefore, still prioritize issues of power, identity, and group-based trust by involving alumni (all HEMs, themselves) into the collective and by partnering with university and community-based organizations with similar goals and initiatives. Additionally, by moving toward a mentorship hub model, in which they worked less on directly mentoring with CAIT and more on training others about CAIT, the authors could also directly attend to university-based strategic initiatives of applied learning, practical work experience, and community engagement for student success, wellbeing, and retention.

To that end, the authors, a leadership team of two faculty, (one from the College of Humanities, Social Sciences, and the Arts, and one from the College of Health and Human Services), led the CAIT Collective with one primary objective for student mentees: to design, implement, and deliver CAIT training materials and sessions within and across the university. Students from all educational levels would still work collectively within the CAIT structure but would also collaborate with one another to produce materials that they could use in their portfolios and job applications; students would collectively 'own' the materials they created. Establishing a mentorship hub also allowed for creative responses to funding shortages. Because they expanded to CLIMB, the authors could now take interns and Directed Independent

Study (DIS) students at both graduate and undergraduate levels to help with program design and implementation. In the absence of pay, students could earn formal recognition for their labor and gain applied learning skills to aid in future employment. In AY 2024-25, the authors supervised six graduate Macro-Social Work interns, four first- and second-year undergraduate student interns from three different colleges on a federal fellowship, and four undergraduate third- and fourth-year DIS students placed with CLIMB. These 14 students, along with five invited volunteer CAIT alumni, comprised the CAIT collective.

Finally, to create training materials, the authors drew from the non-hierarchical origins within CAIT. In addition to informal mentoring sessions for students and alumni to meet and build relationships with one another, students also served distinct roles. The graduate students designed instructional materials and assessments

for each area of the CAIT model, while the mentors, alumni, and upper-level undergraduate students supported the first- and second-year students on acclimating to the university and community. As the graduate students developed training materials, the first-year students served as pilot test students and provided feedback on the trainings, the alumni provided feedback, editing, and resources, and the DIS students assisted with document design, materials creation, and line editing. At the end of the year, the students and alumni involved presented their training and assessments to the formal CLIMB coalition.

### **University Coalition**

The university coalition members included faculty and staff representatives of university offices and programs, such as those in student advising, event programmers, and specialized undergraduate offices, like the Honor's College. Other faculty and staff affiliated with other mentoring programs also participated. These members of CLIMB offered various types of support and served as a steering committee for initiatives in AY 2024-25.

### **Community Partners**

Local community partners, including a regional nonprofit who mentors middle and high school students, a trauma-informed collective, and a trauma-informed yoga center also participated in CLIMB. Along with their steering committee capacity and input, community partners also requested specific services from CAIT students. The CAIT collective has been designing training materials for these partners, as well as assessment materials for their research. Additionally, some community partners have added internships for content creators and professional writers, in addition to their content-based interns, as a result of our CLIMB collective and partnership.

### **Iterative Future Program Development**

Beyond AY 2024-25, the authors have planned for the next few years of program expansion and integration of new students and alumni. They have intentionally designed a non-linear, iterative process of introducing new students, transitioning current students to program developers, and transitioning current students to alumni. In their first semester of the program, students focus on relationship building and acclimation to the university, while beginning training in their second semester. The students provide feedback to the instructors, while the instructors receive ongoing feedback from alumni and community and university members. In their second year, students shadow instructors and begin creating their own materials in years three and four; students also serve as community interns and instructors in those final years. As students become alumni, they increase community connections and internship potential, as well, by connecting students to the

alumni's place of employment.

## Results

The authors argue for several benefits of inclusive mentoring program expansion in shifting academic, financial, and socio-political landscapes in higher education. First, this expansion still attends to, and mitigates, power differentials and hierarchy in a time of attacks on DEI. Students of various backgrounds - undergraduates, graduates, and across all academic disciplines; first generation college students; non-traditional and military-affiliated students; HEMs; students across age and regional differences - connect intentionally with an interactive process of being a mentee, a mentor, a leader, a student, and a content creator throughout the process. Current students recruit, support, and mentor future students and continue the iterative continuous involvement of various cohorts based on year of entrance into CLIMB. The authors evolved the ways that they engaged with students, empowering the students to ultimately lead program development. Students maintain "ownership" of their materials; they create materials for their own professional development, including portfolios or job applications, and learn the skills related to applied learning experiences. Alumni also remain engaged as long-term members of the university community, as alumni perspectives are also centered in the model expansion. Alumni support current students, while current students value the contributions of alumni and the value that they add to the long-term success of the coalition. Interdisciplinary collaborations highlight the importance of various disciplines and skill sets, as business and health care students learn about the importance of document and content design, while social science students experience how quantitative assessments can inform successful practices. Finally, collaborations with community partners expand connections across the colleges and programs within the university, while supporting the local communities in the region.

The second result of this expansion is that serving in positions as interns and in DIS courses, while completing program development for the university and the community, provides students with practical experience beyond research alone. When students transition to alumni status, they have applied learning listed on their transcripts, and they also maintain the materials and skillsets that they have designed and acquired throughout CLIMB.

The third result of this expansion is to also better serve the needs of community partners. Community partners feel more supported by and connected to the university, with students who can serve organizations in various support capacity areas. Community partners gain volunteers, research assistants, interns, and/or trainers, while also preparing students for eventual workforce

participation.

Finally, including alumni for social, emotional, and professional support allows students extended mentorship from those who were previously trained in the CAIT model before anti-DEI legislation and/or are HEMs themselves. In this way, the expansion serves to foreground students' needs for community and belonging but also provides alumni with the opportunity for continued commitment and engagement with the university. Current students have representation of successful CAIT graduates in non-academic settings.

## Discussion

### Limitations and Future Research

The authors recognize that this is a pilot study and aim to gather more qualitative and quantitative data on the effectiveness of the CAIT model expansion. Moving forward, the researchers plan to implement assessment tools co-developed with the students to better evaluate the model and inform future practice. They also seek to integrate more of the university coalition into CLIMB work and expand the number of students served.

## Conclusion

The authors assert that expanding academic mentorship focused on inclusion, adaptability, interdisciplinarity, and a trauma-informed approach to include community and alumni, particularly serves undergraduate and graduate students, staff, faculty, community members, and alumni at the tertiary educational level. However, they argue that due to the nature and intentional design of the iterative process of introducing new students and transitioning current students to alumni, this practice benefits students, staff, faculty, and community partners across the lifespan, educational stages, and benefits age cohorts in uniquely special ways.

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