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Incorporating Community and Alumni as Responsiveness to External Challenges: Relational Expansion in CAIT Academic Mentorship for Increased Student Wellbeing

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While several mentorship programs centralize the importance of adaptivity within effective mentoring programs, few researchers have explored the role of adaptivity against outside forces when programs experience external pressures and challenges. Given the changing socio-political climate of higher education in the US, including reductions of academic job prospects, anti-DEI legislation targeting inclusive programming, and funding cuts, the authors offer an adaptive and responsive solution for maintaining an emphasis on student wellbeing. Based on their experiences in adapting their 2022 Critical, Adaptive, Interdisciplinary, and Trauma-Informed (CAIT) mentorship model, the authors argue for relational expansion – including alumni and community partners – into academic mentorship. While the original CAIT model intentionally centered research with, by, and for historically excluded minoritized (HEM) students, blurred traditional academic binaries and divisions, and fostered community over hierarchy to promote wellbeing for all, with anti-DEI legislation, the authors could no longer centralize HEMs and lost funding opportunities. As a result, the authors propose an evolved CAIT model that moves beyond the academy, inviting alumni and community partners into a networked mentoring collective. They first present their adapted mentorship model and their expansion into the Coalition for Leadership, Mentorship, and Interdisciplinary Belonging (CLIMB). They discuss how CLIMB addresses various contemporary concerns in academic mentorship. Finally, 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 though 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 – all of whom are former HEM students – for social, emotional, and professional support. In sum, the authors suggest contemporary student wellbeing through relationships and connections.

Keywords: CAIT model, alumni engagement, community partnership, academic mentorship, anti-DEI responses, student wellbeing, responsive mentoring practice

Introduction

A foundational tenet of many successful academic mentorship models, and the central principle of Adaptive Mentorship (Ralph & Walker, 2010; 2013), is adaptivity. Adaptivity in mentorship implies that there is not a single or fixed approach to effective mentoring, but that mentorship is a dynamic process informed by the personal, social, emotional, academic, and professional needs of the student; mentors "meet students where they are" with respect to students' eventual development and personal, professional, and academic goals (Ralph & Walker, 2010; 2013). While several scholars have explored the benefits and effects of adaptivity and Adaptive Mentorship principles within mentorship models and programs (Bangeni et al., 2023; Godden et al, 2014; Radharishkan et al., 2024; Ralph & Walker, 2010, 2013), few have addressed the need for adaptivity of models against external forces outside of programs', mentors' and mentees' control, including budget cuts, funding issues, staff and programmatic changes, shifting resources, and political limitations. In this paper, the authors present their adaptation strategies of including community and alumni to support student wellbeing when their mentorship model and program were threatened by both funding limitations and Anti-DEI legislation. Ultimately, the authors present, and argue for, relational expansion as a responsive strategy to outside modifications and reorganization of mentorship programs and models. More specifically, they outline how they expanded their Critical, Adaptive, Interdisciplinary, and Trauma-Informed (CAIT) model from its original student-peer-faculty collective to an even larger coalition by inviting alumni and community partners into the program and model. They ultimately argue that the expanded CAIT model advances academic mentorship practices for student wellbeing in four ways: (1) by allowing mentors to still continue to prioritize issues of belonging and inclusion though 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, they assert that continuing to decenter hierarchies and drawing on communal and collaborative experiences result in greater wellbeing for all involved.

Literature Review

History and Development of the Original 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 (Authors, 2022). As faculty from various disciplines and departments across the university, including Sociolinguistics, Social Work, Public Health, Women's and Gender Studies, and Nursing, who all belong to, research with and for, and centralize historically excluded minoritized (HEMs) in, their work, they created the CAIT mentorship model with HEM students and issues at its focus. The CAIT model intentionally centers research with, by, and for HEM students and aims to increase overall student retention, belonging, and success; it draws from various domains of scholarship for inspiration and for addressing the specific and various academic, social, and emotional needs of the students. At the authors' university, a Predominately White Institution (PWI) in the southeastern United States, the local HEM populations included racial and ethnic minority students, veteran and veteran-affiliated students, LGBTQIA+ students, disabled and/or neurodivergent students, and first-generation college students, amongst other populations.

To that end, the CAIT model incorporates scholarship from four domains: critical theoretical studies, Adaptive Mentorship, interdisciplinary mentorship, and trauma-informed mentoring approaches. Critical theoretical studies foreground issues of power, agency, voice, systemic oppression, and strength-based, rather than deficit-based, approaches, adapting elements of critical race theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023), queer theories (such as Butler, 2006), intersectional feminist theories (like Hill Collins, 2000 and Anzaldúa, 1987), tribal critical race theories (Brayboy, 2005), critical mentorship models (Longmire-Avital, 2020; Weiston-Serdan, 2017), and critical theories of disability (Mery Karlsson & Rydström, 2023, for example). Ralph and Walker's (2010; 2013) Adaptive Mentorship model also informed CAIT principles, including its emphasis on the mentor to adapt to their mentee's developmental stage, competence, and level of confidence. Interdisciplinary mentorship emphasizes the importance of cross-collaborative teams for increasing critical thinking, deeper understanding and learning, and holistic problem-solving (Hammersley et al., 2019) as "pathways of transformation" for students (Siebert et al., 2020, p. 771). Finally, more than 50 percent of college students, regardless of background, identities, and a pre-existing trauma narrative, are exposed to potentially traumatizing events in their first year of college (Galtzer-Levy et al., 2012); HEM students are at risk for trauma simply by being minoritized (Read et al., 2011). Because various sources of trauma may result in changes in behavior, executive function delays, slower processing speed, and a heightened flight/flight response,(Schaefer & Nooner, 2017), and because trauma affects so many university students, trauma-informed mentorship relies on principles such as safety, trustworthiness, transparency, peer support, collaboration and mutuality, empowerment, voice and choice, and recognition of cultural, historical, and gender issues (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014) to help foster both growth and resilience for students. The CAIT model prioritizes safety, choice, empowerment, peer support and various other types of collaboration, relationship building for trust and mutuality, agency and choice, and recognition of sociocultural and historic factors to attend to fostering resiliency for students as part of academic mentorship.

As a result of its theoretical and foundational origins, the CAIT model 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. CAIT also foregrounds recognition of students – and mentors – as holistic individuals within a larger community of both peer and specialist mentorship. Recognizing all mentees and mentors as people with academic, personal, social, emotional, professional, and spiritual needs is crucial to the CAIT model's impact on student wellbeing. In addition, the CAIT model values students' emotional, intellectual, and physical labor, as well as students' material and financial needs; as a result, mentees within the program received financial stipends for research mentorship, allowing the potential to focus on research over outside jobs as a source of income. 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 and wellbeing, with students increasing self-efficacy and self-esteem, increasing their belief in their research abilities, and lowering research insecurity and imposter syndrome (Authors, 2022).

Finally, the CAIT model complements other mentorship traditions grounded in inclusion, equity, dynamicity, and the decentralization of power, and it continues to align with more recent research finding on effective mentorship for shifting dynamics in higher education. Mentorship researchers who have recently examined anti-diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) legislative impacts on mentorship assert that despite DEI backlash, the essential ingredients for a thriving, successful society include 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 continue to embed this commitment through the application of its four principles: criticality, adaptability, interdisciplinarity, and trauma-informed practice (Authors, 2022).

Shifting Political Environment and Socio-Political Effects

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 some of the fundamental tenets of the CAIT model. More specifically, anti-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; for example, she cites the lesser availability of faculty jobs for graduate students upon graduation, which may lead graduates to enter non-academic careers and increase the gap between mentee and mentor experiences, as a factor to consider when implementing and reflecting upon current mentoring practices. Nabi et al.'s (2023) systematic literature review project echoed some of Wisdom's (2025) evaluations related to career preparation in academic context, as they recommended developing indicators related to emotion, such as career inspiration and passion, as impact indicators of mentorship models, as well as examining under-researched impact indicators related to non-traditional student careers, such as entrepreneurial positions, and those that may not directly seem relevant to the students' area of study.

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. Through their analysis, they found four themes outlining the effects of anti-DEI legislation: (1) the lack of conscious distinction in personal and professional values such that when values did not align with legislation people existed the university, (2) professional codes of ethics, based on belonging to a professional organization based on their academic research and scholarship held little effect in daily decision-making practices, (3) participants relied upon their administrative superiors and university accreditation bodies to influence their decisions, positioning both as the primary sources of ethical authority over other areas (such as professional organizations, for example), and (4) participants changed their practices, such as avoiding topics and/or self-censoring, due to fear of repercussions resulting from anti-DEI legislation, even when they knew they were not violating the law (Odeh & Meij, 2025).

At a local level, the authors have realized such effects. Echoing Odeh and Meij's (2025) participants, the authors have relied upon university and state administrators over their professional organizations for guidance in the administration of their mentorship model, as the codes of conduct exposed by all of their professional organizations violate anti-DEI initiatives and extol the effects of diversity, equity, and inclusion; they have also been required to alter language and content of CAIT trainings that are explicitly related to critical theories and DEI. Instead of overt self-censure, however, state legislative mandates, inspired by federal executive orders, forbade them from foregrounding their work as DEI or HEM-focused, so censure was imposed from above. Additionally, all student funding was cut except for one student assistant position, provided the position focused on mentorship and not on DEI. The original mentorship program also lost financial support as a DEI mentorship initiative. Finally, given that the CAIT model program was housed under the university's Center for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, with the forced closure of the DEI office, the CAIT model moved administrative homes on campus and was reduced from an inclusive mentorship model to one solely of mentorship.

Wellbeing and Belonging Still Matter

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.

CLIMB Model

Expansion of CAIT Model

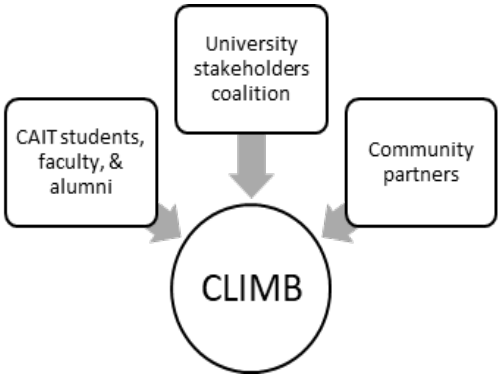
To address these contemporary social, emotional, financial, and political issues affecting higher educational mentorship, generally, and the challenges to the CAIT model, specifically, the authors returned to two fundamental building blocks of strong mentorship: adaptability and community. This time, however, they applied adaptability and Adaptive Mentorship (Ralph & Walker, 2010; 2013) principles to their program and model, as they extended community from the one they fostered in their CAIT program to a larger collective involving alumni, university partnerships, and community partners in different capacities than before. Their goal was to maintain the strengths of interdisciplinary, 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). As institutional focus repositioned away from DEI initiatives and intentional attention to HEM-related research, the authors remained dedicated to their original purpose – mentorship. Adapting – by shifting their focus from research mentorship for HEMs to more generalized student mentorship – they adopted a new goal: for CLIMB to become a mentoring hub for the university and local community. The authors envision developing a mentorship hub designed to train and connect mentors addressing concerns from Wisdom's (2025) work – that mentorship training is critical for those who mentor in higher education.

As a result, the authors designed CLIMB into three subgroups and invited relevant parties to join CLIMB in one of these three areas: (1) the 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.

Figure 1

The Structure of CLIMB



Responsive Adaptation 1 - 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 much as possible, and to address and integrate findings from recent mentoring scholarship of best practices (Gilbert, 2024; Parkhale, 2024; Lindvig et al., 2025; Wisdom, 2025; Zarin, 2025). While the authors could no longer intentionally address DEI-related concepts directly, they could still indirectly prioritize issues of power, identity, and group-based trust by involving alumni, who were not only alumni of the university, but CAIT research mentorship alumni, as well. Furthermore, all alumni are HEMs themselves, so their voices, successes, and experiences indirectly represent the fundamental issues relevant to current HEM students. Direct alumni invitation was one model adaptation.

Moving toward a mentorship hub model, rather than one focused on student involvement in re-

search, the authors also adapted their roles and relationships with students and alumni. 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. 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 Directed Independent Study (DIS) students placed with CLIMB. These 14 students, along with five invited volunteer CAIT alumni, comprised the CAIT collective.

As members of the CAIT collective, students had a new primary objective: to design, implement, and deliver mentorship training materials and sessions within and across the university. To the greatest extent as possible following legislative anti-DEI policies, students would deliver CAIT-based mentorship trainings or CAIT- adapted mentorship trainings, depending on the audience for the training: the former, for populations where CAIT does not violate policy, (such as requested trainings or trainings for organizations outside of the university), and the later for those situations and populations where direct DEI principles needed to be removed. Instead of direct research mentorship, CAIT mentors re framed roles to becoming interdisciplinary mentors of training designers, implementers, facilitators, materials production, and research for training development. Students from all educational levels – undergraduate, masters, and doctoral levels – would still work collectively within the CAIT structure but would also collaborate with one another to produce materials. Alumni would facilitate the process, serving as near-peer mentors and test audiences for all types of support.

Responsive Adaptation 2 – The University Stakeholders Coalition

As a second adaptation, the authors sought to expand relational networks to support students, while also indirectly addressing issues of potential relevance to HEM students, by partnering with university stakeholders across campus. They invited other mentorship programs and initiatives to join the coalition, as well as other offices and organizations directly and indirectly associated with mentoring in their programming. 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, including a national grant-funded Health Equity program, peer mentorship programs, and disciplinary-specific mentoring initiatives also participated. These members of CLIMB offered various types of support, drafted a values and objectives document for the unit, and served as a steering committee for initiatives in AY 2024-25. The University Stakeholders Coalition also advocated for CAIT students outside of our meetings and programming and connected non-CAIT students to CAIT students and vice versa.

Responsive Adaptation 3 - Community Partners

For a third adaptation, the authors invited various community partners to join the Coalition and CAIT students in a larger mentorship networked community. The authors already worked with community partners in both their pre-anti-DEI applied research projects and in their personal research and service as faculty members. However, they varied their approach with CLIMB. This time, the authors invited Community Partners in need of assistance with, or with interest in, mentorship and mentorship training, including those who mentor university students, peer mentor in their organizations, and/or provide mentorship to others. Several local community partners participated in CLIMB, including a reginal nonprofit who mentors middle and high school students, a trauma-informed resiliency collective who connects various local agencies interested in trauma-informed care and equity, a trauma-informed yoga center, and a local non-profit health associated. At times representatives of community organizations would be with the university coalition to serve along with them in steering committee capacity and input. However, community partners also requested specific services from CAIT students, such as delivering trainings, creating materials, and analyzing training assessment data. 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.

Structure of CLIMB

In order to address the foundational inclusive, adaptive, trauma-informed, and interdisciplinary emphasis of the CAIT model while developing a holistic approach to the social, emotional, personal, academic needs of diverse students, the authors designed an interactive model for mentorship training development and implementation that allowed for various types of expert-student, peer-peer, and peer-alumni mentorship, with roles based on years of involvement in the CAIT program. In their first year of the program, graduate social work interns research and design mentorship training materials, while in the second year they analyze training assessment data, apply assessment results to training changes, and work with community partner data collection, assessment, analysis and explanation. For all trainings and materials development, graduate students first pilot test with undergraduate CAIT students as their first audience. After undergraduate student feedback and adjustments, graduate students then pilot their trainings and materials with alumni. Graduate students receive ongoing feedback from, and reciprocal mentorship with, undergraduate students and alumni, while alumni still maintain voice and agency in university programming and undergraduate students indirectly learn about mentorship through formal training and multiple informal relationships.

Undergraduate (UG) students have a differnt mentoring path. In their first semester of the program, UG students focus on relationship building and acclimation to the university, while in their

second semester they begin attending mentorship training sessions and working in discussion groups to learn more about CAIT and effective mentorship principles. The UG students serve as test audiences for all training materials and sessions and provide feedback to the graduate student instructors. In their second year, UG students shadow graduate student instructors and begin creating their own materials; in years three and four, UG students also serve as community interns and instructors in those final years. UG students also work with assessment data and analysis throughout their program.

Responsiveness to External Challenges While Still Foregrounding Student Wellbeing

Establishing the coalition also allowed for creative responses to several external challenges. First, CLIMB allowed mentors to address funding shortages, budget cuts, and position changes within the university. 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.

CLIMB also allowed mentors to address socio-political concerns of job preparation, mentee-mentee career gap distinctions (as discussed in Wisdom, 2025), and attend to university-supported directives and policies. Students were no longer simply researching in preparation for an academic career. All research was now applied for training and materials development and applied community partner data assessments. CAIT mentors designed CLIMB such that students would collectively 'own' the materials they created, which they could use in their portfolios and job applications; any materials that they could not own, such as those that belonged to the community partners, still provided students with applied learning experiences in community organizations. The University Coalition also supported students in such work, as these stakeholders also represented alignment with general university-based strategic initiatives of applied learning, practical work experience, and community engagement for student success, wellbeing, and retention. Finally, in connection and collaboration with alumni also increased professional network contacts for students by connecting students indirectly to mentors within various places of employment.

To address a final challenge, CLIMB also allowed mentors to centralize student wellbeing in the various domains addressed directly by the CAIT model – particularly for HEM students – while still adhering to anti-DEI policies. While not centralizing diversity and equity overtly, students still received support and mentorship from HEM alumni. Likewise, CLIMB partnered with community-based organizations with similar goals and initiatives. Therefore, students still received informal and formal direct interaction with issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion, but outside of the university setting where such discussion may be forbidden and/or violate policy. The authors could also draw from, and replicate, the non-hierarchical origins of CAIT into CLIMB. 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. Several voices and perspectives influenced the mentorship training materials, and students practiced multiple skillsets from various disciplines in their collaboration with one another and with alumni.

Responsiveness for the Future of the Program

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.

Discussion

The authors propose that mentors in mentorship programs, which follow mentorship program models, proactively plan for adaptivity against forces, initiatives, changes, and challenges external to mentorship programs. They outline how centralizing student wellbeing is achieved through relational expansion, by connecting students to a collective network of concerned stakeholders. 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. 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 healthcare 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. Notably, these opportunities remain viable amid political restrictions: internships operate externally to the university and DIS courses fall under academic freedom for both faculty and students. Because students choose research topics, these experiences are not considered "compelled" under current policy definitions. When students transition to alumni status, they have at least one applied learning experience listed on their co-curricular transcripts, and they also maintain the materials and skill sets that they have designed and acquired throughout CLIMB.

The third result of this expansion is to also better serve the needs of community partners, many of whom also serve, support, educate about, and/or advocate for HEMs. Community organizations feel more supported by and connected to the university, as the students can serve the organizations with their own requests, such as mentorship trainings for their volunteers, or data analysis to help guide community partners' programming. Students who serve organizations in various ways through CLIMB also help increase the organization's support capacity. Community partners gain volunteers, research assistants, interns, and/or trainers, which prepares students for eventual workforce participation. Additionally, community partners can focus their often-limited resources elsewhere, as they now no longer must pay for such positions or such labor.

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. Students not only see HEM representation, but experience HEM success; they collaborate with former students who graduated and return to serve. 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, while alumni maintain voice, agency, and influence in the university.

Limitations and Future Research

As a conceptual foundation, this paper sets the stage for ongoing research on the effectiveness of the CAIT model and our relational expansion. The authors co-developed assessment tools with students and are collecting pilot data through ongoing trainings to evaluate the model and inform future practice. Future directions include expanding collaboration across the university coalition and increase student engagement with CLIMB.

Conclusion

The authors argue that mentors, mentorship programs, and those who design university-level academic mentorship models should incorporate adaptivity and the principles of Adaptive Mentorship (Ralph & Walker, 2010; 2013) not only within programs, but against external changes and challenges outside of programs and models. To this end, they propose relational expansion, or the incorporation of both alumni and community partners into academic mentorship, as a responsive and adaptive solution to various potential extenuating circumstances in higher education, including budget cuts, funding shortages and issues, limited resources, anti-DEI policies, and more. The authors assert that expanding academic mentorship focused on inclusion, adaptability, interdisciplinary, 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 cohorts in uniquely special ways.

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About the Authors

Addie Sayers, Ph.D. is an Associate Professor of Linguistics at the University of North Carolina Wilmington. Inspired by her first experiences as a teacher mentoring her middle and high school students and continuing as a veteran mentor to secondary teachers new to the profession, Dr. Sayers seeks to unite her personal experiences with her academic and scholarly work. Central to her work is the role of relationship building in mentoring experiences, where she focuses on issues of belonging, care, and reciprocity through a strength-based focus, while considering issues of power, identity, and community. As a result, she and her colleagues designed – and continue to research and evolve –a mentoring model integrating critically reflective, adaptive, trauma-informed, and interdisciplinary practices.

Kris L. Hohn, MSW, Ph.D. is an Associate Professor of Social Work at the University of North Carolina Wilmington. Her work focuses on mentoring as a relational practice that supports belonging, wellbeing, and growth across educational and community settings. She is interested in how mentoring relationships support identity development, meaning-making, and ethical practice, with particular attention to power, pacing, and care within the relationship. Dr. Hohn collaborates with students and community partners to develop, study, and refine mentoring trainings grounded in reflective, trauma-informed, adaptive, and interdisciplinary approaches. Across her work, she views mentorship as an ongoing relational process that supports learning, leadership, and sustained connection over time.