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**CREATING A CULTURE OF INFORMAL MENTORING AT COMMUNITY
COLLEGES: CONDITIONS THAT STRENGTHEN AND WEAKEN RELATIONSHIPS
AND STUDENTS' STRUCTURAL RESILIENCY**

by

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ABSTRACT

CREATING A CULTURE OF INFORMAL MENTORING AT COMMUNITY COLLEGES: CONDITIONS THAT STRENGTHEN AND WEAKEN RELATIONSHIPS AND STUDENTS' STRUCTURAL RESILIENCY

Sharon McMahon
Old Dominion University, 2020
Director: Dr. Christopher R. Glass

Informal mentoring relationships that develop out of frequent and meaningful interaction with faculty and staff are powerful tools that can help community college students persist and succeed in achieving not only their educational goals but their future economic mobility as well (Komosa-Hawkins, 2012; Phillippo, 2010; Zimmerman et al., 2002). Students are more likely to be successful when they can identify and interact with someone on campus who they relate to, can count on for support, and who affirms their sense of belonging (Rendón, 1994).

The purpose of this grounded theory study was to identify conditions conducive to the development of informal mentoring relationships between students and faculty and staff at community colleges. Interviews were conducted with 46 faculty, staff, and students at one large Hispanic-serving community college. While the researcher did identify conditions that help and hinder relationship building, the biggest takeaway from the study was a theory involving the role of informal mentoring relationships in students' structural resiliency. *Structural Resiliency Theory* asserts that the ability to overcome negative interpersonal interactions is reliant on three interdependent factors: (a) The breadth and depth of one's personal support system; (b) the collective level of positivity in one's previous interpersonal interactions; and (c) the combination of one's motivation, self-confidence, and perseverance. Informal mentors help community college students thrive in the face of adversity by strengthening their structural resiliency. An informal mentor can be a transformative presence in the life of a community college student.

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This dissertation is dedicated to my sons, Eugene and Sam, and my daughter, Kate. You inspire and motivate me every day. My experiences and insights from volunteering at your schools and in your classrooms throughout each of your unique educational journeys have led me to this day. Through you, I learned what works and what doesn't work in public education. I observed teachers who empowered students, as well as those who caused potentially irreparable harm. With each passing year, my vision for what public education could be and should be became more clear, and I became more resolute that some day I would dedicate myself to making that vision a reality. I believe in public education and the mission of community colleges, and I look forward to working with current and future educators to help ensure that every student finds their purpose, fulfills their potential, and achieves their dreams. So, thank you, Eugene, Sam, and Kate. I hope you find your purpose, fulfill your potential, and achieve your dreams. I believe in you!

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Success in community college for students who historically have been undersupported in higher education (Reisberg & Watson, 2010) is a public policy issue that encompasses not only future workforce needs, but also educational equity, fairness, and social justice (Heller, 2011). Although 80% of students who enroll at community colleges do so with the intention of transferring to a four-year university to earn a bachelor's degree, only 15% actually do so within six years (Community College Research Center [CCRC], 2020). For students of color who are overrepresented at community colleges in terms of enrollment and underrepresented in terms of program completion (Bailey, 2017), the percentage is even grimmer, with only 7% earning a bachelor's degree within 10 years (Lynch & Engle, 2009). This suggests that students at community colleges are not receiving the kinds of support they need to persist in achieving their educational goals, including having opportunities to interact with faculty and staff in ways that can lead to informal mentoring relationships (Bailey, 2017; Banks & Dohy, 2019). Informal mentoring relationships—loosely defined as supportive friendships that develop organically within the context of the institution—are powerful tools that can help students persist and succeed in achieving not only their educational goals but their future economic mobility as well (Komosa-Hawkins, 2012; Phillippo, 2010; Zimmerman et al., 2002).

Why Persistence to Degree Attainment Matters

In addition to having more job opportunities and economic mobility, community college students who persist to degree completion can expect to surpass those with less education on almost every indicator of job satisfaction and career success (Xu & Trimble, 2015). By 2026, it is projected that 68% of all jobs in the United States will require some form of postsecondary

education, 40% of these jobs requiring a bachelor's degree or higher (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics [U.S. BLS], 2019). A college graduate with a bachelor's degree can expect to have more disposable income and greater retirement security by earning, on average, \$17,500 more per year than a high school-only graduate, adding up to \$1 million over a lifetime (Pew Research Center, 2014). A student who completes an associate degree at a community college can expect to earn \$5,400 more per working year than a student who drops out of community college (Bailey & Belfield, 2015). In addition, having a postsecondary certificate is linked to higher earnings and an increased likelihood of a person being employed in a job related to their training and skills (Xu & Trimble, 2015).

The Community College Student

Students from groups that have been historically undersupported in higher education, including students of color, former foster youth, and formerly incarcerated students, are more likely to attend community colleges (Lynch & Engle, 2009; Rassen et al., 2010). They are often students who struggled or were overlooked in high school, and they may bring with them to higher education a history of disadvantages (Reisberg & Watson, 2010). Educational inequities for many of these students began early in the K-12 system due to a variety of reasons, including economic background, race/ethnicity, geographic location, or physical or learning differences (Reisberg & Watson, 2010). In addition, community college students rarely identify themselves exclusively as students. They are also parents, family providers, employees, and often a combination of all of these roles (Bailey et al., 2015). Finding balance while fulfilling the responsibilities of each of these roles requires that students have the ability to prioritize and manage competing demands on their time, energy, and resources. This can be overwhelming for even the most dedicated students (Hubbard, 2017).

Both academic and nonacademic factors affect community college students' ability to persist toward their educational goals (King, 2002). Students at community colleges do not go through a competitive admissions process and often arrive underprepared academically and with lower grade point averages than their university counterparts (Phillips, 2019). Nonacademic factors, like being a single parent with childcare responsibilities, being new to higher education without personal support, and being food and housing insecure can profoundly affect community college students' persistence (King, 2002). In a recent study by the Wisconsin HOPE Lab, 56% of students at 70 community colleges were found to be food insecure, 35% housing insecure, and 14% homeless (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2017).

The decision to drop out of college is more likely to be related to a student's family or socio-economic circumstances than their academic ability. The National Center for Education Statistics (2015) found that low-income students who were considered academically proficient in high school were less likely than their middle-income peers to complete a college degree. In fact, only 14% of low-income students received a bachelor's degree within eight years of graduating from high school, compared to 29% of middle-income students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015).

Students who have had past negative school experiences may be distrustful of faculty and staff and may intentionally avoid any kind of personal contact or institutional engagement while attending a community college. In one study, four in ten community college students said that by 12th grade they felt disengaged (Busteed, 2013). Students want to feel cared about, and faculty and staff at community colleges need to be proactive and demonstrate that they understand and care about the lives of their students (Phillips, 2019).

The Limitations of a Part-Time Faculty Workforce

The low completion rate for students is exacerbated by the fact that community colleges maintain a predominantly part-time faculty workforce. Although they may be excellent in the classroom, the working conditions of part-time faculty cause them to have fewer opportunities to engage with students outside the classroom, severely limiting their ability to contribute to the positive outcomes associated with student-faculty interaction (Center for Community College Student Engagement [CCCSE], 2014; Kezar & Maxey, 2014). Using part-time faculty who receive few benefits, if any, is the least expensive way for community colleges to deliver instruction to students (CCCSE, 2014). By over-relying on part-time faculty, college administrators disregard the growing body of evidence that mentoring relationships that develop out of frequent and meaningful student-faculty interaction contribute significantly to student persistence and retention and are vital to student success (Kezar & Maxey, 2014).

The practice of hiring part-time faculty began at many community colleges as a way to provide students with instruction from career professionals who had a particular expertise for a specific course and could bring current practical experience into the classroom (CCCSE, 2014). The practice expanded when colleges had periods of high enrollment and needed additional faculty. As public funding for community colleges declined, college leaders had to find ways to maintain access while reducing operating costs, and one of the easiest ways to accomplish this has been to increasingly rely on part-time faculty to provide instruction for students (CCCSE, 2014).

While there are still career professionals who choose to teach part time at community colleges, the majority of faculty who teach part time do so with the expectation that it will lead to a full-time faculty position (CCCSE, 2014). While waiting for an opportunity for a full-time

position, most part-time faculty teach courses at multiple colleges in order to piece together a full-time equivalent income. In many cases, these “freeway fliers,” as they are often referred, spend hours a day traveling between institutions and have to keep track of multiple colleges’ policies, academic calendars, and school e-mail accounts (CCCSE, 2014; Moltz, 2009). Part-time faculty at many community colleges are also not paid to hold office hours nor are they provided with office space for meeting with students outside of class (CCCSE, 2014).

A Part-Time Student Body

In addition to the high percentage of part-time faculty at community colleges—approximately 67% nationally (Hurlburt & McGarrah, 2016)—the students at community colleges are predominantly part-time as well, at 64% nationally (American Association of Community Colleges [AACC], 2020). The combination of a predominantly part-time faculty workforce and a predominantly part-time student body contributes significantly to fewer opportunities for student-faculty interaction, thus hindering student engagement and persistence, as well as the development of informal mentoring relationships. In addition, 43% of part-time students—who are historically less likely to succeed than their full-time peers—take evening classes which have a high probability of being taught by part-time faculty, further limiting opportunities for meaningful student-faculty interaction that can strengthen student engagement and persistence, particularly outside of class (Moltz, 2009). In fact, 42% of part-time faculty report never interacting with students outside the classroom, while only 15% of full-time faculty report a similar lack of interaction with students (Moltz, 2009).

The Importance of Comprehensive and Holistic Support

Student success at a college, in terms of program completion and degree attainment, depends on the support systems in place for students, and no support system is more important

than ongoing personalized comprehensive advising (Cuseo, 2003; Kuh, 1997; Pierce, 2016; Scrivener et al., 2012). Students who arrive at community colleges underprepared for college-level coursework can be as successful as their more academically prepared peers as long as they receive ongoing comprehensive support that addresses both their academic and nonacademic needs (CCCSE, 2018; Miller & Murray, 2005; Richardson, 2008; Scrivener et al., 2012). While addressing students' academic needs is important for student success, what research suggests is more important—and more closely linked to student engagement and persistence—is community college leaders actively addressing the social, emotional, behavioral, and physical needs of students (Banks & Dohy, 2018; Karp, 2016; Miller & Murray, 2005; Richardson, 2008). In fact, Tinto (2004) argued that any successful community college retention program has at the heart of it a successful and effective comprehensive advising program.

Limited Resources of Community Colleges

Due to reduced public funding, most community colleges do not have the financial resources to provide every student with ongoing comprehensive advising (CCCSE, 2018). High student-advisor ratios—often as high as 1,600 students to one advisor—severely limit students' ability to access the advising services that are available at most community colleges (Gallagher, 2010; Jenkins & Fink, 2016). In addition, time on campus for most students at community colleges is limited due to work and family obligations, making it difficult for them to meet face-to-face with advisors (Karp & Stacey, 2013). When students are able to make in-person appointments with advisors, they rarely see the same advisor twice (Karp & Stacey, 2013), and the appointment is typically spent discussing immediate practical matters and is more transactional than relational (King, 2002). Formal advisors are also expensive, and few, if any,

community colleges have an adequate number of advisors on staff to give every student the time, attention, and personal support they need to succeed (The Century Foundation, 2020).

Inadequate Formal Support Services

The brief and fragmented advising services at most community colleges are not only confusing and frustrating for students, but also insufficient in helping students overcome the challenges they face in college (Bailey, 2017; CCCSE, 2018; Karp & Stacey, 2013; Scrivener et al., 2012). Students are expected to recognize when they need help and be able to seek it out on their own (Jaggars et al., 2012; Margolin et al., 2013), and most colleges do not have mechanisms in place to closely monitor students' progress as they move through their programs (Bailey, 2017; Karp & Stacey, 2013). In addition, when students are not able to see and develop a relationship with one advisor, they may receive conflicting advice due to advisors' differing philosophies or understanding of program requirements. These inconsistencies can lead students to believe that a college's requirements and protocols are arbitrary and that advisors are unreliable (Karp & Stacey, 2013). Inadequate academic advising is considered the greatest hindrance to student retention at community colleges, while a caring attitude of faculty and staff is the strongest positive connection with student persistence (Beal & Noel, 1980; CCCSE, 2018; Lawton & Toner, 2020).

Student Success Defined

In order to understand how student-faculty interaction and informal mentoring relationships contribute to the engagement and persistence of students at community colleges, student success must first be defined. Frequently cited indicators of student success in higher education include: (a) *Student Retention (Persistence)*: First-time, first-year college students continuing to pursue their educational goals at the same school from one year to the next;

(b) *Educational Attainment*: Students completing their chosen programs and attaining a degree or certificate; and (c) *Holistic Personal Development*: While working toward their educational goals, students develop emotionally, socially, ethically, physically, and spiritually, as well as intellectually (Cuseo, 2007).

The Problem

The problem this study addresses is that students at community colleges are not receiving the kinds of support they need to persist in achieving their educational goals, including having opportunities to interact with faculty and staff in ways that can lead to beneficial informal mentoring relationships (Banks & Dohy, 2019). As previously stated, it is projected that by 2026, 68% of all jobs in the United States will require some form of postsecondary education, 40% of these jobs requiring a bachelor's degree or higher (U.S. BLS, 2019). Students who do not persist to degree completion can expect to have fewer job opportunities and less economic mobility than their degree-completing peers. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, 89% of low-income, first-generation students—who are often community college students—leave college without ever completing a degree (Engle & Tinto, 2008), resulting in the United States having the highest college dropout rate in the industrialized world (Symonds et al., 2011).

Students fail to persist at community colleges for a variety of reasons, many of which fall into three categories: (a) students having trouble navigating the college environment, (b) students having difficulty managing competing demands on their time and energy, and (c) students feeling like they do not belong in higher education (Alexitch, 2013; Bailey, 2017). In addition, students who struggle financially are nearly four times more likely than their higher income peers to drop out after only one year of college (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Even when students do persist through their first semester, they may not return for a second (Bevevino, 2016). Scott-

Clayton (2011) compared the typical community college intake process to navigating a shapeless river on a dark night where “many students make false starts, take wrong turns, and hit unexpected obstacles” (p.1).

Significance of the Problem

The significance of the problem is that there are immense costs associated with a high college drop-out rate, both in terms of human potential and financial loss (AACC, 2014). These losses impact not only individual students and their families through loss of employment and other economic opportunities but also the future prosperity of local communities and society at large. As it is widely believed that the jobs of the future will require college credentials (U.S. BLS, 2019), it is a national economic imperative that community college leaders find ways to provide all students with the support they need to persist in achieving their educational goals, including having opportunities to develop informal mentoring relationships with faculty and staff (AACC, 2014).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to identify conditions conducive to the development of informal mentoring relationships between students and faculty and staff at community colleges. These conditions were explored through the perspectives and lived experiences of community college faculty, staff, and students in order to develop a revelatory theory about informal mentoring relationships.

Research Question

The study was guided by the following research question: How do faculty, staff, and students describe the conditions, both positive and negative, that influence the development of informal mentoring relationships?

Significance of the Study

As funding for higher education decreases and students' need for holistic support rises, informal mentoring relationships with faculty and staff have the potential to significantly improve retention and the student experience at community colleges. There is overwhelming evidence that community college students benefit greatly from ongoing holistic, comprehensive, and personalized support, yet they do not receive it because institutions cannot afford an adequate number of advisors. Informal mentoring relationships between students and faculty and staff can fill that void and provide the support students need in a mutually rewarding way. By understanding what conditions help and hinder the development of informal mentoring relationships, community college leaders will be able to develop policies, practices, and professional development that will institutionalize conducive conditions for relationship building on their campuses. Students at community colleges are more likely to be successful when they can identify and interact with someone on campus who they relate to, affirms their sense of belonging, and who they can count on for ongoing support (Rendón 2011; 1994).

Theoretical Underpinnings of the Study

Building on the core tenets of Cuseo's (2007) *Seven Central Principles of Student Success* and Rendón's (1994) *Validation Theory*, the researcher sought to discover how students develop informal mentoring relationships with faculty and staff at community colleges. By understanding the conditions on community college campuses, both positive and negative, that influence the development of informal mentoring relationships, the researcher was able to construct a theory that confirmed and extended the work of Cuseo (2007) and Rendón (1994).

Seven Central Principles of Student Success

For this study, student success was viewed through the lens of Cuseo's (2007) *Seven Central Principles of Student Success*, which are research based, associated with positive student outcomes, and supported by empirical evidence: (a) *Personal Validation*: When students feel welcome, recognized as individuals, and that they matter to their institution, student success is more likely to be achieved (Cuseo, 2007). When asked what made students choose to stay at their colleges, the top response from retention personnel at 947 two-year and four-year colleges and universities was, "a caring faculty and staff" (Beal & Noel, 1980). (b) *Self-Efficacy*: When students are confident in their own capabilities and believe their individual efforts matter, student success is more likely to be achieved (Bandura, 1997). In fact, students' levels of optimism for success during their first semester in college is a more accurate predictor of their future college grades than their SAT scores or their high school grade-point average, according to a study involving 4,000 college freshmen (Snyder et al., 1991).

The third principle of student success is (c) *Sense of Purpose*: When students find meaning and purpose in their college experience and perceive personal relevance in what they are learning, student success is more likely to be achieved (Levitz & Noel, 1989). (d) *Active Involvement*: When students devote time and energy to their college experience, inside and outside the classroom, student success is more likely to be achieved (Astin, 1985). (e) *Social Integration*: When students develop interpersonal relationships with faculty, staff, and peers, student success is more likely to be achieved (Pascaella & Terenzini, 2005). Social integration is supported by the epistemological theory, social constructivism, which asserts that human thinking is influenced by social interaction and conversation (Vygotsky, 1978). (f) *Personal Reflection*: For successful learning to take place, both action and reflection are required. To

engage student attention, active involvement in the learning process is necessary, and to retain what is learned, students must be able to reflect on and relate new information to what they already know (Bligh, 2000). And last, (g) *Self-Awareness*: When students are aware of their own thought processes and learning styles and are able to adapt their learning strategies to the immediate task at hand, student success is more likely to be achieved (Pintrick, 1995).

Validation Theory

According to *Validation Theory* (Rendón, 1994), influencing students' academic success requires both external affirmation and internal acknowledgements of self-competence. For many low-income, first-generation college students, receiving external validation first increases their inner strength and self-confidence and contributes to self-acknowledgement of internal capabilities and potential. Although some students are able to overcome hardships and invalidating experiences on their own, other students, for a variety of reasons, may instead respond to negative experiences by giving up and dropping out of college. Along with the *Seven Central Principles of Student Success*, *Validation Theory* provides faculty and staff with a mentoring framework for working with students that is affirming, encourages a sense-of-belonging and self-worth, and helps students overcome past invalidating experiences (Rendón, 1994).

Research Design

In order to identify conditions conducive to the development of informal mentoring relationships between students and faculty and staff at community colleges, the researcher took a grounded theory approach to the study. Grounded theory is a structured, yet adaptable, methodology that is suitable when not much is known about a particular phenomenon (Leedy & Ormond, 2018). Rooted in sociology and described as the most influential of traditions in social

science research, the purpose of grounded theory is to fully explore participants' lived experiences and perspectives of the phenomenon in question in order to construct an explanatory data-driven theory (Hays & Singh, 2012; Patton, 2002; Tie et al., 2019).

Characteristics of Grounded Theory Research

Grounded theory research includes three main methodological approaches: traditional, also known as classic Glaserian grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967); evolved, also known as Straussian grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990); and constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006). While these three approaches have distinct differences, they all share five general characteristics: (a) collecting and analyzing data at the same time; (b) pursuing emerging themes; (c) identifying social processes; (d) using an inductive approach to explain and synthesize the identified social processes; and (e) creating a theoretical framework out of the categories encompassing the causes, conditions, and consequences of the identified social processes (Hays & Singh, 2012).

Rationale for Using Grounded Theory

Constructivist grounded theory aligns with the researcher's social constructivist worldview and is an appropriate methodology for this study. In social constructivism, the researcher seeks to understand how knowledge is constructed through social interactions, which are influenced by cultural, historical, and political events and processes. Social constructivists believe a phenomenon can only be truly understood within the social context of those who are experiencing it (Hays & Singh 2012). In constructivist grounded theory, the researcher, considered a co-creator of knowledge, shapes the research through interactions with participants and data (Charmaz, 2000, 2014). To ensure scientific rigor, the researcher designed the study to be trustworthy rather than focusing on reliability and validity (Hays & Singh, 2012).

In discussing social constructivism, Crotty (1998) identified five assumptions: (a) humans engage with their world and make sense of it based on their historical, cultural, and social perspectives; (b) meanings are constructed by human beings as they engage with the world they live in; (c) open-ended interview questions allow participants to share their views; (d) researchers can better understand the context or setting of participants by visiting the context or setting and gathering information personally; and (e) the basic generation of meaning is always social, arising in and out of interaction with a human community.

Overview of Methodology

For this grounded theory study, the researcher sought the perspectives and lived experiences of community college faculty, staff, and students. Semi-structured, in-depth phone interviews were conducted with faculty and staff who had self-reported having experience with informally mentoring students at either the site college or at another institution. After completing the interviews with faculty and staff, interviews were then conducted with the students who had been referred to the researcher by the faculty and staff participants. All interviews explored the conditions, both positive and negative, that influence the development of informal mentoring relationships. The researcher originally planned to conduct the interviews with faculty, staff, and students in person but was unable to because of restrictions related to COVID-19.

As concurrent data collection and analysis is a fundamental characteristic of grounded theory research design, the researcher collected, coded, and analyzed one set of data before gathering additional data, alternating data collection and analysis. The categories, themes, and sub-themes that emerged from each interview informed subsequent interviews, thus allowing the researcher to gain deeper insight and meaning from the data. The researcher continued gathering and analyzing data from interviews until the point of saturation, at which time no new themes

were occurring, and existing themes were consistently being repeated (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The categories, themes, and sub-themes that were relevant to the study were then further refined and analyzed.

Summary

This chapter provided an introduction to the study, an overview of the research design and methodology, the purpose and significance of the study, and the problem the study addressed. Also included in the chapter was a working definition of student success and the theoretical underpinnings of the study, *The Seven Central Principles of Student Success* (Cuseo, 2007) and *Validation Theory* (Rendón, 1994). The following chapter is a review of previous research on informal mentoring and related topics, including formal holistic student supports, student-faculty interaction, and rapport building and immediacy behaviors. The research methodology briefly outlined in this chapter is described in detail in Chapter Three.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The proper use of a literature review in grounded theory research is disputed among grounded theorists. In traditional Glaserian grounded theory, a review of literature prior to data collection and analysis is discouraged, as it is believed that data may be contaminated or compromised if the researcher is exposed to previous knowledge about the phenomenon being studied (Mills et al., 2006). By delaying or limiting a literature review, traditional grounded theorists believe the researcher will be less likely to begin the study with preconceived ideas that could influence data collection and analysis (Mills et al., 2006; Rieger, 2018). In contrast, evolved and constructivist grounded theorists advocate engaging proactively with the literature prior to and during data collection and analysis, believing that doing so helps to focus the researcher, inform the research question, and increase theoretical sensitivity (Mills et al., 2006; Rieger, 2018). Theoretical sensitivity refers to the researcher's insight and ability to discern what is meaningful and significant within the collected data and, therefore, relevant and important to include in the emerging theory (Tie et al., 2019).

Following the perspective of constructivist grounded theorists, this chapter examines the relevant literature around informal mentoring relationships between students and faculty and staff at community colleges. As informal mentoring is a form of holistic support, the researcher sought to understand how community colleges have (a) provided students with holistic support—both academic and nonacademic—and how that support has contributed to student engagement and persistence, (b) facilitated opportunities for student-faculty interaction that could lead to the development of informal mentoring relationships and how these interactions contributed to student engagement and persistence, (c) promoted rapport building efforts to help students feel comfortable approaching and interacting with faculty and staff, and (d) established conditions

conducive for students and faculty and staff to develop informal mentoring relationships. In order to gain understanding in these areas, the researcher included in the literature review previous research—both recent and seminal—in the following areas: (a) formal holistic student supports, (b) student-faculty interaction, (c) rapport building and immediacy behaviors, and (d) informal mentoring relationships.

The researcher continued to follow the constructivist grounded theory approach by engaging and reflecting upon the literature throughout the data collection and analysis process. This chapter concludes with a summary of the review and the identification of a gap in the existing literature. The design and methodology of this grounded theory study is presented in detail in the next chapter.

Formal Holistic Student Supports

As stated previously, students who arrive at community colleges underprepared for college-level coursework can be as successful as their more academically prepared peers as long as they receive ongoing comprehensive support that addresses both their academic and nonacademic needs (Carmack & Carmack, 2016; CCCSE, 2018; Miller & Murray, 2005; Richardson, 2008; Scrivener et al., 2012). While addressing students' academic needs is important for student success, what research suggests is more important—and more closely linked to engagement and persistence—is community college leaders actively addressing the social, emotional, behavioral, and physical needs of students (Banks & Dohy, 2018; Karp, 2016; Miller & Murray, 2005; Richardson, 2008).

While this study sought to understand how students receive holistic support, informally, through mentoring relationships with faculty and staff, this section of the literature review examines the formal holistic supports available to students at community colleges. The purpose

of reviewing previous research on formal holistic support efforts was to see (a) how they address students' academic and nonacademic needs, (b) how they contribute to student engagement and persistence, (c) how and where the efforts fall short, and (d) how the relational and holistic aspects of formal support mechanisms compare to those of informal mentoring relationships. By understanding how students receive and benefit from holistic support, the researcher will be able to construct a theory that reflects not only the perspectives of the current study's participants, but also the perspectives of other researchers. This follows the constructivist grounded theory approach whereby the researcher engages and reflects upon the literature throughout the data collection and analysis process.

A Case Management Approach

One of the most effective ways community college leaders can provide students with comprehensive and holistic support that addresses both their academic and nonacademic needs is to take a case management approach to academic advising (Pierce, 2016; Richardson, 2008; Scrivener et al., 2012). As previously stated, student success at a college, in terms of program completion and degree attainment, depends on the support systems in place for students, and no support mechanism is more important than ongoing and personalized comprehensive advising (Cuseo, 2003; Kuh, 1997; Pierce, 2016; Scrivener et al., 2012). In fact, Tinto (2004) argued that any successful community college retention program has at the heart of it a successful and effective advising program.

Case Management Defined

Case management can be defined as a client-centered strategy designed to improve the coordination and continuity of care for people with multiple needs (Moxley, 1989). The Case Management Society of America (2020) describes case management as a “collaborative process

of assessment, planning, facilitation and advocacy for options and services to meet an individual's needs through communication and available resources to promote quality cost-effective outcomes" (p.1). Universal functions related to case management include: (a) identifying and attracting clients; (b) intake and assessment; (c) developing a coordinated service plan; (d) advocating on behalf of the client; (e) implementing, monitoring, and continually evaluating the delivery of the service plan and adjusting when necessary; and (f) determining if projected outcomes are or are not being achieved (Smith, 1995). The philosophy of case management is that the optimal functioning for individuals is most efficiently and effectively achieved through an integrated delivery of comprehensive services that meet an individual's multiple needs through ongoing communication, advocacy, and integration of services (Case Management Society of America, 2020; Smith, 1995).

The Benefits of Case Management Advising

Research suggests that implementing case management strategies in community college advising programs can help increase the persistence, retention, and completion of students through a proactive, personalized, and strengths-based approach that emphasizes ongoing communication, collaboration, and accountability (Banks & Dohy, 2018; Cuseo, 2003; Pierce, 2016; Scrivener et al., 2012). A proactive case management approach to advising can mitigate many of the barriers to persistence students encounter during their educational journey (Museus & Quaye, 2009).

A case management approach to academic advising has the potential to engage and motivate students to continue progressing toward their educational goals by providing them with a one-on-one relationship with a case manager/advisor throughout their time at the college. (Anderson, 1997; Scrivener et al., 2012). In many cases, academic advising is an institution's

only formal structure that ensures students have one-on-one personal contact with a faculty member (Cuseo, 2003). In addition, good advisors can help facilitate strong student-faculty relationships because they know their student's strengths and interests and also their faculty colleagues' strengths and interests (Duberstein, 2009). By taking a case management approach to advising, community college leaders may be able to facilitate a more meaningful college experience for students as well as a more fulfilling work experience for advisors (Banks & Dohy, 2018; Pierce, 2016).

The Student-Advisor Relationship

Strong student-advisor relationships can facilitate not only students planning for and achieving their educational goals, but also the creation of plans for personal growth and long term self-fulfillment within their lives (CCCSE, 2018; Crookston, 1994; Cuseo, 2003). Research suggests that an effective advisor is (a) a humanizing representative of the college who interacts with students outside the classroom in an informal comfortable setting; (b) a mentor who listens, offers advice, and helps guide students through the college's policies and procedures; and (c) an educator who teaches students strategies for success and encourages problem solving, critical thinking, and decision making (CCCSE, 2018; Creamer & Scott, 2000; Cuseo, 2003).

An effective advising relationship facilitates growth in students' understanding of themselves both from their internal perspective and from the advisors' real-world external perspective (Creamer, 2000). Appleby (2001) described the relationship between advisor and student in this way: "This active, dynamic interchange that forms the essence of the developmental advising relationship produces trust, curiosity, enthusiastic participation, and a sincere desire to learn and grow" (p.4).

Proactive Support

Multiple studies have cited that the most effective advisors are ones who develop trust and build relationships with students and who are proactive in reaching out to students before they begin to struggle (Earl, 1988; Engle et al., 2006; Glennen, 1975; Hand & Payne, 2008; Heisserer & Parette, 2002; Torres et al., 2006; Vander Schee, 2007; Vasher, 2010). When advisors are relatable, available, supportive, and proactive, students feel cared about and are more likely to persist in achieving their educational goals (Engle et al., 2006; Hand & Payne, 2008; McClellan, 2014; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Torres et al., 2006).

Although students benefit greatly from proactive and comprehensive case management advising, few ever actually get to experience it, as most community colleges have limited resources and financial constraints that result in high student-advisor ratios—often as high as 1,600 students to one advisor (Gallagher, 2010; Jenkins & Fink, 2016). As stated previously, inadequate academic advising is considered the greatest hindrance to student retention at community colleges, while a caring attitude of faculty and staff is the strongest positive connection with student persistence (Beal & Noel, 1980; CCCSE, 2018; Lawton & Toner, 2020).

An Emphasis on Serving New Students

While some new students need intensive, one-on-one advising and support, others may need only minimal help, yet many community colleges focus their limited resources for comprehensive support services on new students only (Jaggars et al., 2012). Evidence strongly suggests that comprehensive support efforts, including advising, should be integrated and ongoing throughout a student's community college experience, as students' nonacademic needs do not go away after one semester (CCCSE, 2012; Rucks-Ahidiana & Erhardt, 2012). In

addition, the benefits that come with new student first-year support programs tend to dissipate after two or three semesters, reinforcing the importance of providing students with continuing guidance and support (CCCSE, 2018; Pierce, 2016).

Student-Faculty Interaction

Frequent student-faculty interaction, in and out of the classroom, is the most important factor in student motivation, persistence, and retention at an institution (Chickering & Gamson, 1995; Kuh & Hu, 2001; McGillin, 2000; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). In fact, frequent interaction with faculty related more strongly to student satisfaction and persistence than any other type of involvement or characteristic of the student or the institution (Astin, 1985; CCCSE, 2018; Chickering & Gamson, 1995; Delaney, 2008; Light, 2004; McClenney & Arnsperger, 2012; Phillippo, 2010; Phillips, 2019; Tinto, 1993). In addition, student-faculty interaction is strongly associated with multiple positive student outcomes, including academic achievement, critical thinking, and educational aspiration (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Tinto, 1993).

While the frequency of interaction with faculty does contribute significantly to the benefits associated with student-faculty interaction, the quality of the interaction matters as well (Kuh & Hu, 2001; Lundberg & Schreiner, 2004). Pascarella and Terenzini (1977) identified six reasons students seek interaction with faculty: (a) to get basic information and advice about their academic program, (b) to discuss matters related to their future career, (c) to help resolve a disturbing personal problem, (d) to discuss intellectual or course-related matters, (e) to discuss a campus issue or problem, and (f) to socialize informally.

Barriers to Student-Faculty Interaction

There are student, faculty, and institutional characteristics that can create barriers to student-faculty interaction on community college campuses (Cotten & Wilson, 2006). From the

student perspective, time on campus is often limited and they may not feel comfortable or confident initiating contact with faculty (Dulabaum, 2016; Lundberg & Schreiner, 2004; McClenney & Arnsperger, 2012). When students know they have a shared interest with a faculty or a staff member they are more likely to feel confident in initiating an interaction with them (Kuh & Hu, 2001; McClenney & Arnsperger, 2012). In addition, many students rarely see their faculty members on campus outside of class, and when they do, the faculty member often appears to be busy or in a rush, possibly giving the student the perception that they are not interested in interacting with them (Cuseo, 2007; Dulabaum, 2016; McClenney & Arnsperger, 2012).

From the faculty perspective, time constraints and a lack of institutional and departmental support for interacting with students outside of class are potential barriers to student-faculty interaction (Lundberg & Schreiner, 2004). Faculty who do interact with students on a regular basis tend to believe that doing so is an important part of their role as faculty. Despite not always feeling supported by their departments and institutions, faculty who are led by their personal values and beliefs about their roles as mentors are more likely to interact frequently with students (Cuseo, 2007; Lundberg & Schreiner, 2004).

The Case Against Large Classes

Institutionally, large classes are one of the biggest barriers to student-faculty interaction (Carbone & Greenberg, 1998; Cuseo, 2007). Although large, lecture-type classes are more often found in university settings, many community colleges have them as well. Just as budgetary constraints compel college leaders to rely on part-time faculty to provide inexpensive instruction to students, having large classes—often with hundreds of students—is another cost-cutting

strategy for many community colleges, despite numerous negative implications (Carbone & Greenberg, 1998; Cuseo, 2007).

Empirical evidence suggests there are eight detrimental consequences associated with large classes (Cuseo, 2007): (a) *Faculty rely on the lecture method of instruction*. In two national surveys, one with over 30,000 students from 60 colleges and one with almost 25,000 students from 110 colleges, active learning strategies that involve student-faculty interaction, like class discussions and group work, were found to be more positively associated with student satisfaction and positive learning outcomes than lecture-only classes (Keup & Sax, 2002). (b) *Large classes reduce students' active involvement in their learning*. In multiple studies, students cited the lack of opportunities for asking questions and participating in class discussions as the most dissatisfying aspect of large classes (Carbone & Greenberg, 1998; Feldman, 1984; Stone, 1970; Wulff et al., 1987). (c) *Large classes reduce the frequency and quality of instructor interaction with students*. In multiple studies, students and faculty both cited a lack of student-faculty interaction, in and out of the classroom, as the reason they were most dissatisfied with large classes (Carbone & Greenberg, 1998; Kuh et al., 1991). In fact, in very large classes it was not uncommon for a majority of students to go through an entire semester without ever interacting verbally or in writing with the instructor (Carbone & Greenberg, 1998; McClenney & Arnsperger, 2012).

The fourth detrimental consequence associated with large classes is (d) *Large classes reduce students' depth of thinking inside the classroom*. There is strong empirical evidence that students are more likely to develop critical thinking skills in small classes than in large classes (Carbone & Greenberg, 1998; McKeachie, 1980). (e) *Large classes limit the breadth and depth of course-related learning outside the classroom*. In multiple studies, faculty who depended on

the lecture method to teach large classes had educational objectives for their students that did not go much beyond simple knowledge acquisition, defined as the ability to retain and recall factual information about concepts, principles, and theories (Hoyt & Perera, 2000). In contrast, with small classes, faculty are able to involve and interact with students in active learning strategies like class discussions and group work, and they can have learning objectives that include critical thinking, communication skills, and lifelong learning (Hoyt & Perera, 2000). In addition, assignments and tests in large classes rarely involve student writing and, therefore, students are more likely to use surface learning strategies like memorization rather than deep-thinking strategies like comprehension when preparing for multiple-choice exams. This lessens the quality of students' studying and learning outside of class (Cuseo, 2007; Scouller, 1998).

The sixth detrimental consequence associated with large classes is (f) *Students' learning and grades are lower in large classes*. In multiple studies, students self-reported that class size affected their ability to learn (Carbone & Greenberg, 1998; Hoyt & Perera, 2000; Wulff et al., 1987). The reasons students cited for learning less in large classes include a tendency to lose attention easily, to become distracted by noise and conversation in the room, and to feel less motivated and accountable due to a lack of contact with the instructor (Carbone & Greenberg, 1998; McClenney & Arnsperger, 2012; Wulff et al., 1987). In terms of students' grades, large-scale studies in both the United States and the United Kingdom have found inverse relationships between class size and course grades. The percentage of A and B grades given out decreased as class enrollments increased (Franklin & Theall, 1991; Lindsay & Paton-Saltzberg, 1987).

The seventh detrimental consequence associated with large classes is (g) *Students report less course satisfaction in large classes*. In addition to small classes being preferred by both students and faculty, small classes have higher rates of attendance than large classes (Carbone &

Greenberg, 1998). Small classes also have fewer incidents of cheating than large classes (Carbone, 1999; Weimer, 1987). And last, (h) *Students give lower overall ratings for course instruction delivered in large classes*. As class size increased, students' ratings of courses and instructors decreased, suggesting that actual student learning may be affected by class size (Cohen, 1981; Weimer, 1987).

For community college students, one of the most important predictors of student success is frequent and high-quality interaction with faculty, in and out of the classroom (Kezar & Maxey, 2014; McClenny & Arnsperger, 2012). Not only does student-faculty interaction contribute to positive outcomes for students by way of increased engagement and persistence, completion rates, and degree attainment, it also contributes to better grades and test scores, the development of leadership and critical thinking skills, career and graduate school aspirations, and increased self-confidence and self-worth (Kezar & Maxey, 2014). As stated previously, frequent interaction with faculty relates more strongly to student satisfaction and persistence than any other type of involvement or characteristic of the student or the institution (Astin, 1985; CCCSE, 2018; Chickering & Gamson, 1995; Delaney, 2008; Light, 2004; McClenney & Arnsperger, 2012; Phillippo, 2010; Phillips, 2019; Tinto, 1993).

Rapport Building and Immediacy Behaviors

Multiple studies have found that students are more likely to interact with faculty and staff who they perceive to be approachable, caring, supportive, fair, and respectful (Benson et al., 2005; Pogue & AhYun, 2006; Richmond et al., 2006; Schaeffer et al., 2003; Stipek, 2006). For students who lack self-advocacy, having faculty who demonstrate caring behaviors was found to be critical to engagement and persistence (Komarraju, 2013). In addition, faculty who establish good rapport with their students are more likely to see increased motivation, attendance, and

attention in their classes, as well as experience better communication with students, in person and via e-mail (Benson et al., 2005), and have better learning outcomes (Wilson et al., 2010).

Instructor immediacy refers to students' perceptions of physical and psychological closeness to faculty and includes two types of communication: explicit, or verbal, which delivers the content of a message, and implicit, or nonverbal, which relays emotions and feelings (Butland & Beebe, 1992; Richmond et al., 2006; Witt et al., 2004). Immediacy as an educational construct was first defined by Mehrabian (1972) as a set of behaviors that "reduce distance, enhance closeness, reflect liking and affect, and increase sensory stimulations between communicators" (p.1). Mehrabian suggested that "people are drawn toward persons and things they like, evaluate highly, and prefer, and they avoid or move away from things they dislike, evaluate negatively, or do not prefer" (p.1).

Nonverbal Immediacy Behaviors

Nonverbal immediacy behaviors include faculty having a relaxed body posture, not having barriers between themselves and students, looking and smiling at students, using appropriate touch when interacting with students, and using facial expressions and gestures while talking with students (Arbaugh, 2001; Richmond et al., 2006). Nonverbal behaviors make up a large portion of interpersonal communication and have been found to have a notable effect on impressions, feelings, and attitudes toward others (Wilson et al., 2010). Faculty who exhibit positive body language and behavioral characteristics such as being considerate, understanding, approachable, fair, and reliable are described as being effective at building strong student-faculty rapport, in and out of the classroom (Wilson et al., 2010).

Verbal Immediacy Behaviors

Verbal immediacy behaviors include addressing students by name, using inclusive pronouns, having small talk with students, and using vocal variety, which refers to the tone, pitch, pace, and volume of one's voice. Verbal immediacy also includes giving feedback to students, asking for feedback from students, and faculty and staff using their own first names with students (Richmond et al., 2006). In fact, faculty and staff who allowed students to address them by their first names were perceived as warmer, more approachable, and more respected than faculty and staff who instructed students to address them by their formal titles and last names only (McDowell & Westman, 2005). For undersupported students who lack confidence and may experience anxiety over their academic performance in college, having instructors who are encouraging, know and use students' names, and who consistently display caring behaviors is critical to their persistence (Wilson et al., 2010).

Informal Mentoring Relationships

Making connections with faculty and staff are powerful motivators for students to persist and succeed in community college (Light, 2004; Phillips, 2019; Tinto, 1993). Opportunities for students to have informal conversations with faculty outside the classroom, not only about coursework and career aspirations, but also current events and personal problems, can help students integrate their personal and academic lives, increasing the likelihood they will persist in college (McClenney & Arnsperger, 2012; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1979; Phillippo, 2010; Rendón-Linares & Munoz, 2011). Informal interaction between students and faculty and staff have the potential to develop into informal mentoring relationships, allowing faculty and staff to provide ongoing academic, social, and personal support to students at community colleges (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1979; Phillippo, 2010). Five elements of an informal mentoring

relationship between a student and a faculty or staff member (campus mentor) include the campus mentor: (a) supporting the student's progress, (b) knowing and caring for the student, (c) promoting open communication with the student, (d) being a good listener, and (e) facilitating improvement in the student's academic performance (Shulkind & Foote, 2009).

Research suggests that there is a connection between emotion and cognition, which can explain the power of informal mentoring relationships on both students' improved engagement and academic performance (Beer et al., 2006). There is also evidence that the benefits of informal mentoring relationships between students and faculty and staff at community colleges extend beyond college and contribute to well-being in the workplace (Ray & Marken, 2014). In addition, the bond between an informal faculty or staff mentor and a student can mitigate external risk factors and improve the academic, social, and emotional abilities of the student (Komosa-Hawkins, 2012; Zimmerman et al., 2002).

Summary

Existing research has established that community college students succeed at higher rates when they receive ongoing holistic, comprehensive, and personalized support at their institutions. Numerous studies cite the benefits of using comprehensive, case management advising to holistically support students. As stated previously, formal advisors are expensive and few, if any, community colleges have an adequate number of advisors on staff to give every student the time, attention, and personal support they need to succeed (The Century Foundation, 2020). Having frequent opportunities for student-faculty interaction, in and out of the classroom, has been determined to be an important contributor to student engagement and persistence and a way to holistically support students (Kezar & Maxey, 2014; Light, 2004; Phillips, 2019).

The rapport building efforts and immediacy behaviors of faculty have been shown to play a significant role in student-faculty interaction, as students are more likely to reach out and engage with faculty who they feel comfortable with. Faculty who exhibit positive body language and behavioral characteristics such as being considerate, understanding, approachable, fair, and reliable are described as being effective at building strong student-faculty rapport, in and out of the classroom (Wilson et al., 2010). The existing literature suggests that informal mentoring relationships that develop out of frequent and meaningful interaction between students and faculty and staff are powerful tools that can help students persist and succeed at community colleges (Komosa-Hawkins, 2012; Phillippo, 2010; Zimmerman et al., 2002).

The Gap in the Literature

While many studies in this review did explore the benefits of mentoring relationships between students and faculty, few specifically focused on campus-wide informal mentoring between students and faculty and staff at community colleges. And while the studies in this review do illustrate, generally speaking, the benefits students receive from mentoring relationships with faculty, they do not explore staff, specifically, at community colleges as potential mentors. In addition, studies on mentoring at community colleges—formal and informal—tend to focus on “at-risk” students. And while, arguably, all students at community colleges are at risk, the researcher does see this as a gap in the existing literature that the current study fills.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this grounded theory study was to identify conditions conducive to the development of informal mentoring relationships between students and faculty and staff at community colleges. These conditions were explored through the perspectives and lived experiences of community college faculty, staff, and students in order to develop a revelatory theory about informal mentoring relationships. This chapter describes the research design and methodology used in the study, including the setting, population and sample, research question and instrument, and procedures for data collection and analysis. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the trustworthiness of the study and a summary.

Research Design

In order to identify conditions conducive to the development of informal mentoring relationships between students and faculty and staff at community colleges, the researcher took a grounded theory approach to the study. Grounded theory is a structured, yet adaptable, methodology that is suitable when not much is known about a particular phenomenon (Leedy & Ormond, 2018), which in this case was the development of informal mentoring relationships between students and faculty and staff at community colleges. The purpose of grounded theory is to fully explore participants' lived experiences and perspectives of the phenomenon in question in order to construct an explanatory data-driven theory (Hays & Singh, 2012; Patton, 2002; Tie et al., 2019).

As stated previously, five general characteristics of grounded theory research guided this study: (a) collecting and analyzing data at the same time; (b) pursuing emerging themes; (c) identifying social processes; (d) using an inductive approach to explain and synthesize the

identified social processes; and (e) creating a theoretical framework out of the categories encompassing the causes, conditions, and consequences of the identified social processes (Hays & Singh, 2012).

Research Question

The study was guided by the following research question: How do faculty, staff, and students describe the conditions, both positive and negative, that influence the development of informal mentoring relationships?

Setting

Participants for the study were recruited from a large, two-campus Hispanic-serving public community college in a metropolitan area of the Southwestern United States. This college was chosen by the researcher because the demographics of the student body are representative of the population of the region; in particular, 59% of students identify as Hispanic (AACC, 2020). The main campus of the college is located within a suburban upper-middle-class neighborhood with predominantly White homeowners. The smaller campus is located off a main thoroughfare in a low socio-economic area close to a city center. Residents near this campus are predominantly renters and people of color. Both campuses are easily accessible via the city transit system, and there is a free college shuttle bus that runs between the two campuses. Two-thirds of the faculty teach at the college part time, and 62% of students attend part time. Approximately 45% of students are first-generation college students, and 75% receive financial aid. Students of color make up 81% of the total student body (AACC, 2020).

Population and Sample

Participants for the study were recruited through an e-mail inquiry that was sent to all faculty and staff at the site college. The inquiry described the study and requested participants

who had experience with informally mentoring students either at the site college or at another institution. All faculty and staff who replied to the e-mail and met the criteria were interviewed for the study. At the end of each interview, the participants were asked for the referral of at least one student who they had developed a relationship with at the college. In consideration of the students' privacy, the participants contacted the students and received their permission prior to sharing their information with the researcher.

Rationale for Including Full-time Faculty

Full-time faculty at community colleges have the most time on campus to devote to the informal mentoring of students. At the site college, full-time faculty are contractually required to hold office hours, and they are assigned dedicated office space for meeting with students. Full-time faculty should also be knowledgeable of institutional policies and practices and be able to refer students to support services, on and off campus. Their perspectives and lived experiences of interacting with students, in and out of the classroom, provided valuable data to the study.

Rationale for Including Part-time Faculty

Although part-time faculty teach the majority of students at community colleges, their working conditions cause them to have very little time on campus outside of class to devote to the informal mentoring of students (CCCSE, 2014). When part-time faculty do meet with students outside of class, it is most likely on their own time. In addition, part-time faculty usually are not required to hold office hours nor are they provided with office space in which to meet with students, as was the case at the site college. As part-time faculty interact with the most students at community colleges—at least in the classroom—their perspectives and lived experiences were important to include in the study.

Rationale for Including Staff in the Study

Non-instructional frontline staff are often the first institutional personnel students encounter on community college campuses. How a student is treated, or perceives to be treated, by staff at Admissions and Records, Financial Aid, or even in the cafeteria, can positively or negatively affect their persistence (McClenney & Arnsperger, 2012). As frontline staff have more interaction with students than anyone else on campus, at least initially, they are integral to student success. They also have potential to be informal mentors and can be a good match for students who may be intimidated by faculty. It was essential, therefore, to include staff perspectives and lived experiences in this grounded theory study.

Research Instruments

Research instruments are tools developed and used by researchers to collect data while conducting research studies. Sources for data in a grounded theory study can include, but are not limited to, interviews, focus groups, questionnaires, surveys, transcripts, letters, government reports, and documents (Tie et al., 2019). In order for researchers to achieve their stated objectives, gathering enough data for substantive analyses is critical and requires the proper tools (Trigueros & Hidalgo Sandoval, 2017). The research instrument for this study was a semi-structured in-depth interview, which was administered to faculty, staff, and student participants.

Data Collection

Purposive sampling directed the initial collection of data for the study. The main goal of purposive sampling is to focus on particular characteristics of a population that are of interest to the researcher. The sample being studied is not necessarily representative of the population, but for researchers conducting qualitative or mixed methods studies, this is not considered a weakness (Tie et al., 2019). In purposive sampling, researchers purposely select participants and

data sources that they believe can best answer their research questions. Purposive sampling was followed by theoretical sampling, using the codes and categories developed from the first data set.

All interviews with faculty, staff, and students were conducted over the phone, recorded and transcribed. The researcher also kept notes for each interview. As concurrent data collection and analysis is a fundamental characteristic of grounded theory research design, the researcher collected, coded, and analyzed one set of data before gathering additional data, alternating data collection and analysis.

Data Analysis

As the study progressed, theoretical sampling helped the researcher connect and clarify concepts that came to light during data analysis. Along with constant comparative analysis, theoretical sampling increases the researcher's ability to draw insight and understanding from data analysis and helps direct the ongoing data collection. In constant comparative analysis, concepts and theoretically relevant categories are continually refined, a process that distinguishes grounded theory research from other methodologies that rely solely on descriptive analysis (Tie et al., 2019).

The first set of interviews were with faculty, both full- and part-time, and staff, followed by interviews with students who had been referred to the researcher by the faculty and staff participants. After preliminary open coding of the interview transcripts, axial coding was used to refine the categories identified during open coding. The researcher then used selective coding to organize and integrate the identified and refined categories and themes surrounding informal mentoring.

The researcher continued theoretical sampling and constant comparative analysis by gathering and analyzing data from interviews until the point of saturation, at which time no new themes were occurring in the data, and existing themes within the data were being consistently repeated (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This allowed the researcher to, ultimately, develop a revelatory theory about informal mentoring relationships, more specifically, the role of these beneficial relationships in students' structural resiliency, which is discussed in detail in Chapter Five.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness in grounded theory research includes credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Shenton, 2004). For this study, the researcher ensured credibility by having prolonged engagement with interview participants and by collecting data until saturation. For transferability and dependability, the researcher documented in detail the research design, data collection and analysis procedures, findings, and emerging theory. For confirmability, the researcher clearly described the interpretation and how the conclusions from the findings had been reached, showing that they were clearly derived from the data.

Summary

This chapter described the research design and methodology, as well as the setting, population, and sample used in the study. The researcher gave rationales for including full-time and part-time faculty and staff in the study and described the process for recruiting participants at the site college, along with the referral process for getting student participants. A detailed description of the procedures for data collection and analysis were provided, and the trustworthiness of the study was addressed. The following chapter includes data collection and analysis, as well as the findings of the study.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

The purpose of this grounded theory study was to identify conditions conducive to the development of informal mentoring relationships between students and faculty and staff at community colleges. This chapter describes the data collection process, including the sample and research question, the procedure for data analysis, and the findings of the study.

Sample

Participants for the study were recruited through an e-mail inquiry that was sent to all faculty and staff at a large, two-campus Hispanic-serving public community college in a metropolitan area of the Southwestern United States. The inquiry described the study and requested participants who had experience with informally mentoring students either at the site college or at another institution. All faculty and staff who replied to the e-mail and met the criteria were interviewed for the study. At the end of each interview, the participants were asked to refer at least one student who they had developed a relationship with at the college. To ensure the students' privacy, the participants contacted the students and received their permission prior to sharing their information with the researcher. Ultimately, the final sample consisted of 46 participants: 26 full- and part-time faculty and staff and 20 students, as seen in Table 1.

Table 1.

Data Collection Sample and Procedure

Participant	Phase One Interviews	Phase Two Interviews
Full-Time Faculty	10	
Part-Time Faculty	6	
Staff	10	
Students		20

Data Collection

The study was guided by the following research question: How do faculty, staff, and students describe the conditions, both positive and negative, that influence the development of informal mentoring relationships?

All interviews were conducted over the phone and recorded by the researcher. They followed a semi-structured format with open-ended questions. Emerging categories, themes, and sub-themes guided the interviews. Each participant presented an insightful perspective along with a rich and varied lived experience around building relationships and informal mentoring. Data gathered from each phase one interview informed subsequent interviews, and the collected categories, themes, and sub-themes at the end of phase one informed the interviews in phase two. Notes were taken during the interviews, and each recording was transcribed for further in-depth analysis.

Data Analysis

As concurrent data collection and analysis is a fundamental characteristic of grounded theory research, data from phase one interviews were collected, coded, and analyzed before moving to phase two. Constant comparative analysis was used to continually refine the emerging categories, themes, and sub-themes from the data. After preliminary open coding of phase one interview transcripts, axial coding was used to group and further refine the categories, themes, and sub-themes identified during open coding.

Phase two interviews were then conducted using the insights drawn from the data analysis from phase one. Constant comparative analysis and open and axial coding were again used to analyze phase two interview transcripts. Data continued to be collected and analyzed until the point of saturation, at which time no new themes were occurring in the data and existing

themes were consistently being repeated (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The identified and refined categories, themes, and sub-themes around relationships building and informal mentoring from both sets of data were then organized and integrated using selective coding.

Three main categories emerged from the interviews with faculty, staff, and students regarding the conditions, both positive and negative, that influence the development of informal mentoring relationships. They are faculty and staff behaviors, classroom experiences, and campus culture. The positive conditions within the categories are rapport building and proactive behaviors, relationship building, and a community-oriented campus culture. The negative conditions within the categories are dismissive and impersonal behaviors, educational traumas, and an “old school” Darwinian campus culture, as seen in Table 2.

Table 2.

Categories of Informal Mentoring Conditions

	Positive Conditions	Negative Conditions
Faculty & Staff Behaviors	Rapport building behaviors Proactive behaviors	Dismissive behaviors Impersonal behaviors
Classroom Experiences	Relationship building	Educational traumas
Campus Culture	Community-Oriented	“Old School” Darwinian

Positive Faculty & Staff Behaviors

Rapport Building Behaviors

The foundation of a mutually rewarding informal mentoring relationship starts with rapport. Simply defined, rapport is a connection between two people that develops out of a combination of positive behaviors that are practiced consistently on a regular basis (Benson et al., 2005). Rapport can happen instantly between two people or develop slowly over time. Either way, it should never be ignored. The existence and quality of any relationship depends on the

attention paid to rapport building, a fact that emerged early in the interviews for the study.

Faculty and staff had a lot to say about the traits and behaviors that they believe contribute to building rapport with students. In their interviews, students confirmed the effectiveness of many of these traits and behaviors and added a few of their own. All names used are pseudonyms.

Blaire, a 30-year-old returning student, said this about rapport building: “You have to create rapport so people will trust you.”

Four categories of effective rapport building behaviors emerged from the interviews with faculty, staff, and students: (a) set a positive and inviting tone, (b) get personal and know students’ names, (c) demonstrate authenticity and caring, and (d) be a cheerleader: support and encourage students.

Set a Positive and Inviting Tone

Building rapport with students starts with setting a positive and inviting tone for every interaction in every setting, whether at admissions and records, in an academic counseling appointment, or in the classroom. Behaviors that contribute to setting a positive and inviting tone that were frequently brought up in the interviews with faculty, staff, and students include smiling, making eye contact, being kind, being friendly, and being informal. One staff member noted, “Simple things are important, looking students in the eye, asking them how their day is going. Just being available to students is huge, really.” One full-time faculty thinks informality, in particular, is important for setting a positive and inviting tone. “I’m extremely informal in the classroom. I think that helps students feel comfortable talking with me. And I let students use my first name; I always have. All of my favorite professors were on a first name basis in college.”

Being approachable, easy to talk to, and relational with students are essential for building rapport and promoting informal mentoring relationships, according to faculty and staff. After

reflecting back on her career, one full-time faculty noted, “Once I made that change to being more relational with students, teaching became much more enjoyable.” For students, a faculty’s sense of humor contributes to setting a positive and inviting tone in the classroom. Vince, a 22-year-old performing arts major, had this to say about humor in the classroom:

Class is much more enjoyable when the professor has a sense of humor. That’s what made it initially easy for me to start talking to Professor Shelby, and then we kind of just connected. I felt like I could ask him anything at any time, and I knew he’d always respond in an in-depth way. He definitely pushed me to go outside my comfort zone.

Be Welcoming

Setting a positive and inviting tone includes being welcoming, especially at the beginning of each semester. One full-time faculty noted, “Before class starts, I send welcome e-mails. I think that’s really important and shouldn’t be overlooked. Welcome e-mails set a positive and inviting tone for students.” Aden, a 25-year-old first-generation college student, recalled how one professor created a welcoming environment:

I once had a professor who would arrive early to class and have music playing as students arrived. It was always jazz, and at the beginning of class, he would speak in the microphone like he was a smooth jazz DJ. That really lightened the mood and helped create a welcoming environment. It was definitely nicer than walking into a blank dead-silent classroom with the teacher standing at the front waiting for everyone. It also gave students an insight into the professor as a person.

One staff member noted the positive rippling effect that being welcoming to students creates. “When I greet students and let them call me by my first name, they feel welcome, and they feel like they belong. I think that’s one of the most important things, that students feel like

they belong.” Another staff member recalled her own experience in college when a welcoming environment affected her persistence in a profound way.

It started right in the admissions area. They were just so welcoming! It was just a really welcoming environment. You could tell everybody liked being there and liked what they were doing. I think a lot of the teams had worked together for a long time. You could tell people felt valued in their job positions. It felt like everybody cared about everybody, staff with each other, staff with students. And the staff were so happy to see students.

I get very emotional thinking about it. I had a lot of bad things going on at that time, and I went back to school to change my life. Everything at that college was so supportive, so encouraging, and so empowering that I felt like I was on top of the world. It was such a positive experience.

Faculty and staff who set a positive and inviting tone by being friendly and informal in their interactions with students understand that making students feel comfortable and welcome is the first step in rapport building. They also know that in order to connect with students in a meaningful way that they need to learn their names and get to know them on a personal level, which is the next step in rapport building.

Get Personal and Know Students’ Names

The importance of faculty and staff learning and using students’ names was a prevalent theme in all the interviews for the study. There was an overwhelming consensus that knowing students’ names is essential to rapport building. Faculty and staff noted the benefits that come with acknowledging students by name. Faculty, in particular, have better attendance and more engagement in the classroom, as pointed out by this full-time faculty:

I think getting to know your students and knowing their names is huge. I've learned all of my students' names from the very first day I was a teacher. And I did that because one of my mentors did that when I was in college. I also think it's important for students to learn each other's names. I do what a lot of other professors do, I play the name game, so we all learn each other's names in all of my classes. I think that's huge.

Another full-time faculty shared her simple yet creative practice for learning students' names:

I take a photo of each of my students, and I write their name on it. That way I have a hands-on way to take attendance. I also then know their face and know their name. And I can then use their names right from the beginning. This tells them that, "Oh, this teacher really wants to know me!"

Students overwhelmingly concurred as noted by Jessica, a first-generation college student: "We don't want to be just a number. We want professors to remember us, to know our names.

Everyone loves to hear their name!" While learning students' names seems like something that would be a common practice for all professors, one part-time faculty noted to the contrary: "I've had students tell me that I'm their only professor who knows their name."

Faculty who learn and use students' names, in and out of the classroom, and make an effort to get to know students understand that rapport building is about making connections and finding commonalities. Students appreciate and prefer faculty who call them by their name and make an effort to get to know them on a personal level. Faculty, staff, and students made a point of noting, however, that any such efforts have to be authentic and demonstrate genuine caring, which is the third step in rapport building.

Demonstrate Authenticity and Caring

When talking about rapport building and informal mentoring relationships, faculty, staff, and students frequently noted the importance of authenticity and caring. There was an overwhelming consensus that for someone to develop rapport with a student and be an effective mentor, they have to be authentic. They have to be sensitive to the needs of students and understand that informal mentoring relationships develop authentically and organically over time through frequent and meaningful interaction and cannot be forced. This was reiterated by one full-time faculty: “Relationships are not formed by force. They’re formed because you experience a warmth or a click with somebody. And that can’t be mandated.” Another full-time faculty concurred. “There are always people who you feel like you have a little special connection with for whatever reason. You know you just click with each other. You get to talking...it’s pretty organic, really.”

A truly rewarding mentoring relationship is authentic, comfortable, and easy. As one full-time faculty put it, “Students want us to be real. They want us to be vulnerable, authentic. I’ve learned that through student evaluations. I think that’s what connects me with students, that I am willing to be vulnerable as a human being with them.” Another full-time faculty also noted the need to connect with students as human beings. “I’ve had students tell me that the talk we had, just that 10-minute talk, was priceless. ‘It brought back hope, got me back on my feet.’ I think it all comes back to human connection, genuine human connection.”

One part-time faculty noted that authenticity means seeing students as human beings first and students second. “When a student tells me they’re sick and can’t come to class, I’ll say, ‘I hope you feel better’ before I talk about class stuff. This lets them know I care about them as a

person first, then as a student.” There was also a consensus that authenticity cannot be faked and that students quickly recognize when someone is insincere, as noted by this part-time faculty:

I am authentic almost to a fault. I don’t have a teacher persona and an out-of-school persona. I’m just one person all the time. It doesn’t matter if I’m with 4th graders or high schoolers or college students, I have one personality. And students—and, I believe, humans in general—can sniff out the people who are authentic and the people who are putting on a show.

One staff member who frequently interacts with students in one of the largest departments on campus had this to say about the importance of being authentic:

I think it’s important to gain students’ trust and to meet them where they are. I share some of my experiences with students to show them how we’re not that different, that we have a lot in common. Students need to feel that we believe in them. And more than anything else, that we respect them. I think, in general, our students don’t get a lot of respect. Professors are dismissive. Students often don’t feel heard. They don’t feel validated. Professors don’t take the time to understand their situations. Students feel my authenticity and honesty in the way that I present myself. I see it in the expressions on their faces.

Every student in the study expressed a deep need to feel cared about, authentically, by faculty and staff at the college, as did Aden, a 25-year-old first-generation college student:

Feeling cared about led me to want more, to try to achieve things that were greater than I thought I could achieve. Just the pure fact that someone else is telling you that they see the potential in you goes a really, really long way. When you feel cared for, you want to

improve, instead of feeling like you *have* to improve. And professors who care, make themselves available to you.

Continuity of Care

One full-time faculty noted that not all community college professors are good at connecting with students. “There are professors who are amazing content experts but are missing that other very critical side of teaching—that ability to connect with students.” Sophie, a 19-year-old international student added, “It’s very important for me to feel cared about at the college. I need to know that people on campus really want me to succeed. If people around me have a ‘whatever’ attitude, that’s not helpful and will discourage me.”

The harm of having faculty and staff who are unable or unwilling to connect with students was expressed by one staffer: “I think students who don’t feel cared about at the college often get discouraged about pursuing higher education and are likely to move on to another college or drop out altogether.” The lack of consistency in caring behaviors of faculty and staff was reiterated by another staffer:

There are programs on campus that do a really good job at making students feel cared about, but when the student goes into the classroom, they encounter professors who don’t view them in the same holistic and caring way. There’s a disconnect, a lack of continuity of care, no consistency. Caring behavior is hit and miss.

One full-time faculty expressed the importance of empathy: “Faculty and staff need to be more empathetic to who our students are and what their lives are like. And if they can’t relate to the population, they should teach elsewhere, or not at all.”

Be Attentive and a Good Listener

Faculty and staff talked about how being attentive and a good listener when interacting with students is important and demonstrates caring. One staffer had a vivid recollection of a powerful experience that one of her students shared with her.

The staff member in the ASB office was just really, really good at listening and making this student feel cared about and heard for the very first time. She reinforced the student's perspective and was emotionally attentive to the student's struggles. It was really great. The student told me that before she met this person, she was feeling really deflated. And because she felt the support of this person in ASB, she then felt the confidence to reach out to several instructors to ask them if they'd be a co-advisor for the club she was starting.

The student was very persistent and ended up developing a great relationship with the professor who agreed to be the co-advisor for her club. And that professor asked her a lot of great questions, like, "what do you need from me?" and "what can I do to help you?" And, again, provided a space for the student to talk about what she felt was needed, what she wanted, and what her vision was for the club. And while the professor offered little tips and feedback, he really let the student take the lead. He was very hands off while at the same time being a solid support for her, which was exactly what she needed! The confidence she developed from both of those relationships carried over, and will continue to carry over, I believe, to everything else in her life going forward.

It is extremely important to the 20 students interviewed for the study that faculty and staff demonstrate attentiveness and good listening skills. The value of having someone on campus who they can go to for advice and guidance, someone they know will put aside whatever they are

doing and really listen, was noted by every student as highly important. Jessica, a 27-year-old first-generation, current university student, said, “School is overwhelming, especially if you don’t know what to expect and what the next steps are and what you need to do. So, it’s definitely helpful to have somebody on your side, to know that you’re not alone on campus, even if it’s just one person.” Elle, a 33-year-old returning student, summed up the importance of several rapport building behaviors, including being attentive and a good listener: “Professor Tucci knew everybody’s names, and he would always stay after class to talk. He always made eye contact with you. He was never looking at his phone. He gave you his full attention.”

Be Visible on Campus

One full-time faculty believes that being visible on campus is a way to demonstrate caring to students.

Being an advisor for a club makes you more visible to students. You’re at booths; you’re at fairs. If you’re not a club advisor, you can still go to outreach fairs and other campus events and be a representative for your department. When students start to see you as someone who’s always there, always involved, they will view you as someone who cares and someone who they can have a conversation with about something outside of class.

And to that student who may have trauma from people going away, you will seem more permanent.

It was very apparent from the interviews in the study that authentic demonstrations of caring by faculty and staff are critical to building rapport with students. The willingness of faculty and staff to be open and vulnerable with students, to be thoughtful and attentive, to be visible on campus, and to see and treat students as human beings first and students second, are factors that facilitate rapport building and informal mentoring relationships. To strengthen and

maintain rapport, faculty and staff also recognize the need to be enthusiastically supportive and encouraging, to be cheerleaders for students, which is the final step in rapport building.

Be a Cheerleader: Support and Encourage Students

After setting a positive and inviting tone, getting personal and knowing students' names, and demonstrating authenticity and caring, students want faculty and staff to enthusiastically support and encourage them, to be cheerleaders. Faculty and staff believe that encouragement contributes to building confidence in students. Students believe that the confidence they gain through encouragement from faculty and staff helps motivate them to persist in achieving their goals. Faculty and staff who understand the importance of being a cheerleader for students are more likely to develop informal mentoring relationships. One staff member summed up how all participants in the study viewed encouragement: "Sometimes, all students need is just someone to root for them, someone to push them, someone to challenge them to succeed and do better."

The role of encouragement was reiterated by another staffer:

To me, all students need somebody to believe in them and somebody to tell them they can do it. It's that one-on-one connection, it's having somebody believe in you, somebody when you're struggling who continues to inspire you. A mentor is someone who takes the time to encourage you and listen to you.

Students' experiences with informal mentoring varied widely. One full-time faculty recalled her own experience as a student: "My mentors weren't always the people who I spent the most time with. They were often simply people who showed a lot of caring and told me how much they believed in me, even just once or twice." To Carl, a 27-year-old first-generation, formerly incarcerated student, encouragement meant everything to his community college experience.

I went to jail when I was 16; I came out when I was 26. I didn't even know what an I-phone was. I came here; I went to classes; I went to club meetings. Professors literally held my hand and helped me navigate the system, and not only that, every time I wanted to give up, they were there to tell me, "No; you're not giving up. We are here for you!"

I'm a first-generation college student. Nobody in my family even has a high school diploma. When Professor Sorkin told me she really wanted me to get this degree, I felt joy; I felt motivated. I felt happy because nobody has ever said that to me before. That made me feel like somebody actually wants to see me do good. And she's a college professor. To know that it matters to her is significant. It feels really good.

Professional Development

Some faculty and staff believe rapport building behaviors can be learned, while others think they are intrinsic to one's personality. One full-time faculty talked about the role of professional development in supporting students. "There should be more trainings, absolutely. Trainings are really important. They help faculty gain understanding, as well as tools for creating productive relationships with students that will contribute to their support and growth." Another full-time faculty reiterated the importance of professional development to rapport building: "We need to focus on the intangibles, and train all classified staff, administrators, faculty—pretty much everyone—to recognize that every impression with a student has to be a *good* impression, a helpful impression."

There was a consensus in all the interviews that rapport building behaviors of faculty and staff are critical to the quality of a community college students' experience and educational trajectory. Their sense of self and their sense of belonging—at the institution, in higher education, and in the world—depend on feeling cared about, being heard, and being respected

for who they are and not for who somebody else thinks they should be. Faculty and staff who understand that rapport building is the first step in creating opportunities for informal mentoring also understand the importance of being proactive.

Proactive Behaviors

After building rapport, faculty and staff being proactive in their thinking and actions in order to anticipate the needs of students was found to be essential for developing informal mentoring relationships with students. Three categories of effective proactive behaviors emerged from the interviews with faculty, staff, and students: (a) reach out to students, (b) understand help-seeking behaviors, and (c) demonstrate flexibility.

Reach Out to Students

A key tenet to being proactive as faculty is a willingness to reach out to students who may not otherwise reach out themselves. Students who are new to higher education and who may lack self-confidence are not always eager to interact with faculty for fear of embarrassment. One full-time faculty empathized with students in her department who are reluctant to reach out for help and support. “In a survey we give to students at a department orientation, the statement, ‘I don’t understand how college works,’ is checked by a significant number of students every semester. And how do you go to someone and say, “I don’t understand how college works?”

Another full-time faculty put it this way:

If I wait for students to come to me, they may never come. And that doesn’t mean that they don’t need me. I’ve realized as an instructor, that it’s my job to reach out to every student and to let them know that whether or not they reach out to me, that they do have a relationship with me.

A lot of the mentoring relationships that I've established have been because of my own nature to ask students questions—and not just questions about school, but also about what's going on in their life. So, students may be more comfortable addressing personal issues with me than maybe someone else because I asked them questions first.

There are many reasons why students abruptly stop turning in work or stop attending classes. Based on the experiences of the students and faculty who participated in the study, those reasons rarely have to do with a student's academic ability, but rather are usually related to their family, work, or financial obligations. In many cases, unless faculty reaches out to the student and the student responds, no one at the college ever knows why a student stops attending classes. One part-time faculty recently learned the importance of reaching out to students, especially during COVID-19.

I just called one of my online students who hadn't turned in any work, and I asked her if she still wanted to be in the class, or did she want me to drop her. She said, "Oh no; we lost our jobs due to COVID-19, and we don't have internet right now, but we will soon. Thank you so much for calling." I would've never known any of that had I not called her.

Students almost always are very surprised when professors reach out to them. Their expectations, in some cases, are already very low due to negative or apathetic behaviors of teachers they have had in the past. They do not expect faculty to notice them, much less care about them. In the interviews for the study, students overwhelmingly were touched and appreciative when faculty reached out to them with concern and encouragement. One part-time faculty has made it his practice to call every one of his students at least once during the semester.

When I call my students, I get the same response every time, "Oh my God; a professor has never called me before!" *Every time!* I have an 8-week course, and I always call 2-3

weeks in and ask, “How’s everything going?” Just that one phone call has opened up so much dialogue that otherwise would’ve never happened. And now, suddenly, those students will start texting me and asking me questions, after I reached out to them first. That one phone call made a huge difference! And I call my online students, too, who never meet me, and they’re *so* appreciative! “Oh my Gosh, thank you for reaching out. Thank you for being concerned.”

The reasons for being proactive and reaching out to students are not limited to faculty and students in a classroom setting. One staff member thinks about reaching out to students every time she is out and about on campus. “I know we all get super busy, but taking time to chat with a student when you see them alone on campus can be very impactful for that student.” One part-time faculty reiterated the importance of taking time for even very brief conversations with students: “When you take a minute to talk to a student on campus, you may be the *only* person that student talked to that day.” And to students who are feeling alone or defeated, the simple act of a professor reaching out through an e-mail, phone call, or text to inquire about their well-being is often transforming. Carl, a 27-year-old first-generation, formerly incarcerated student, shared how he felt when he received an e-mail from one of his professors:

There was an assignment that I missed, and my professor actually reached out to me to ask me if everything was okay. She had seen that I had missed another assignment before this one, and she was wondering if something was going on that I needed to talk to her about. It made me feel kind of happy that she actually reached out to ask me because there are not many people who care about certain individuals. There are professors who may notice that something’s going on but don’t actually ask you. So, for this professor to

actually ask me if everything was okay, if there was anything that she could help me with, that was great.

That actually made me feel like somebody actually cares, like somebody's actually paying attention. Somebody's actually there. When I first saw her e-mail on my phone, I felt joy! I actually felt joy inside of me. I mean, obviously, life happens and so many things happen, but when I saw her e-mail and how sincere it felt, I thought, "Oh, she actually cares; somebody cares!" It definitely added to my motivation and my need to manage my time a lot better.

Faculty interviewed for the study who regularly reach out to students never regret doing so. In fact, having a proactive mindset was found to be one of the most effective qualities of a community college professor, according to students and faculty in the study. Not only is it important for faculty to be willing to reach out to students, but it is also important for faculty to know when to reach out. Faculty have to be able to recognize and understand the different help-seeking behaviors of students.

Understand Help-Seeking Behaviors

There are many reasons for students being reluctant to ask for help. Some students are told as children that asking for help is a sign of weakness and that they need to figure things out for themselves. Some students do not ask for help because they had a negative experience doing so in the past or they see professors as important authority figures who should not be bothered. All three of these scenarios were lived experiences of students interviewed for the study, and they are common for community college students, according to one full-time faculty: "At the university level there might be a handful of students who are reluctant to reach out, but in our classrooms, that's the norm."

Students who do not have a support system at home or at the college may feel like they have no choice but to rely on themselves. When faculty or staff do reach out to them and they experience support for possibly the first time, they become more self-confident. This was the experience of one staff member who regularly interacts with students in a large department at the college:

I think community college students as a whole are less supported, family wise, than university students. They're more likely to be going it alone. And I think they don't feel like they should need anybody since they've been doing it themselves all along. Some students do need "mothering," while others who grew up with mothering, may not. It's about meeting each student where they are. And to get them to where they don't need that mothering, or handholding, you may have to do it for a little while until they become more self-confident. And we have to be ready to respond differently, depending on the student. Some students really need more handholding, while others don't.

Some students acknowledged having ineffective help-seeking behaviors in the past and shared what helped them become better advocates for themselves. Jake, a 29-year-old returning student, felt a safe classroom environment helped him reach out to professors.

I wasn't always motivated. That's why I dropped out when I first went to college right after high school. I didn't know how to participate in the process and ask for help when I needed it. I think it's important for teachers to embed in their practices an environment where students feel safe to reach out.

Carl, a 27-year-old first-generation, formerly incarcerated student, empathized with his fellow students. "Unfortunately, there are a lot of students who have had a bad experience and so, they don't want to open up again. They don't want to ask questions again. They don't feel that

encouragement. So, they just leave.” For Donna, a 19-year-old education major, a language barrier and cultural biases affected her help-seeking.

Because of how I was raised, I was very independent, and I didn’t ask for help. I started school in America without knowing any English, so, it wasn’t like I could ask for help. And I was punished and bullied a lot in school if I did try to communicate. I’d usually get sent out and would spend the day in the principal’s office. It wasn’t until really college that I was like, “Okay, I’m going to have to learn to swallow my pride and put aside my cultural biases and just suck it up and ask for help or clarification or understanding when I need it.” I got so used to doing everything on my own, I think that just sort of manifested into this “it’s part of my identity to be independent” persona and an attitude of “I’m not the person who asks for help. That’s not who I am.” That kind of thing.

Faculty who utilize active learning strategies in the classroom are better able to assess students’ help-seeking behaviors. Walking around the classroom during group work, for example, gives faculty opportunities to engage with students individually. Sophie, a 19-year-old international student who is a tutor on campus, has learned to recognize students who are reluctant to ask for help. She also noted the role of rapport building in connecting with students:

You can tell in the classroom when a student may be struggling just from their vibe.

When I was an in-class tutor, I would go around and ask everybody if they needed help.

But first I had to establish a rapport with them, like, “Hey, how are you doing today?” If I also used to struggle with whatever I’m trying to help them with, I’ll share that with them. Professors need to make students feel comfortable with them as a person. Walking around the classroom and talking to students during small group work is a great way to

do that. Being understanding to students' situations is also important. Sometimes students don't talk to professors because they've had a bad experience doing so in the past.

Not all faculty and staff, however, attribute students' problems to their help-seeking behavior. Some faculty interviewed for the study do not understand why students who need the most help never asked for it. They tend to believe that a student's lack of self-efficacy is because they do not care about their education, do not want to learn, or because they are lazy. These faculty never hold themselves accountable, to any degree, for students doing poorly in their classes. They are also the faculty who never think to reach out to students. The mentoring experiences they shared for the study were with "strong" high-achieving students who they felt were already on their way to being successful and just needed a little extra push. Some faculty, in fact, held an "old school" Darwinian view that mentoring is only appropriate for strong students. Some faculty were even passionately perplexed at why underperforming students never come to meet with them during their office hours.

It is clear that faculty need to better understand help-seeking behaviors in order to not only be effective in the classroom, but also to be potential informal mentors for their students. The faculty who see themselves as partners in their students' education understand that the reasons students do not ask for help are personal and often complicated. These faculty do not hesitate to reach out to students. They also understand that in addition to being proactive, they need to be flexible.

Demonstrate Flexibility

Faculty and staff who understand who community college students are and what their lives are like, recognize the need to be flexible, as noted by one full-time faculty: "I am very aware of the challenges my students have in life, and so, I'm very flexible. I'm not here to punish

anybody. I don't have a punitive mindset; I come from a place of support for the student's good." In the interviews for the study, faculty shared many examples of being flexible with students. In one example, a full-time faculty was working with a student who had experienced domestic violence and was in jeopardy of not finishing her program. "When I told her I would make an exception for her, you should have seen her face. It was like a ton of weight had been lifted off her shoulders."

Other faculty talked about the importance of being realistic and thoughtful in their policies, as noted by one part-time faculty: "Flexibility is important. How can I hold my students to a standard that I don't hold myself to? I make mistakes, too, and I appreciate grace." Another part-time faculty concurred: "I try to be honest with my students when I've had technical difficulties and come to class not completely prepared. That has helped me be more understanding and flexible when they have similar issues." The feedback faculty receive from students regarding flexibility is always positive, as noted by this full-time faculty who works in the counseling office: "In counseling we're bound to 30-minute appointments, and students will often tell me they always feel rushed. But when they come to see me, they don't feel rushed. They appreciate my willingness to slow down and go off script."

In Conclusion: Positive Faculty & Staff Behaviors

Faculty, staff, and students understand how rapport building and being proactive are essential to the development of informal mentoring relationships. One full-time faculty summed up the consensus view of study participants: "It's simple, and it's so easy to do. And it doesn't cost anything. You welcome students into your classroom. You call them by name. You take an interest in them. You make them feel cared about. And you check in with them." Students in the study appreciate faculty and staff who make an effort to develop rapport with them, in and out of

the classroom, and they are grateful when faculty proactively reach out to them through phone calls, texts, and e-mail. All participants in the study recognize the importance of rapport building and proactive behaviors to not only the development of informal mentoring relationships, but also to the quality of the community college experience overall.

Positive Classroom Experiences

Relationship Building

Community college students tend to not spend a lot of time on campus outside of attending their classes. Those who do usually have jobs on campus. University students, on the other hand, especially those who reside on campus, are more likely than community college students to partake in college activities, clubs, and events. They are also more likely to have opportunities to develop relationships with their professors outside of class, including meeting with them during their office hours. These differences were brought up in the interviews with faculty and staff who had previously worked at universities. And while some faculty—and college administrators—fail to acknowledge this reality of community college life, most do. The faculty who are the most in tune with community college students' lives understand the need to incorporate relationship building into their classroom activities and experiences. They are also, not surprisingly, the most popular and most sought after faculty by students.

Relationship building in the context of the classroom emerged in the interviews as a highly positive condition for informal mentoring. One full-time faculty who had taught elementary, middle, and high school prior to becoming a community college professor, made this observation: "One of the values that has stayed with me from teaching in the K-12 world is the importance of having relationships with students, of having even brief conversations with each and every student every day." Faculty, both full- and part-time, who regularly utilize active

learning strategies in their classrooms and make themselves available before and after class are frequently thought of as informal mentors by students. Abby, a 22-year-old current university student, had this to say about one of her professors:

Professor Franco was a big influence on me. He was really inspiring, and I loved the way that he taught. I really connected with his teaching style. He was very personable, really friendly, comforting, very welcoming. I felt like I could go to him with not only academic questions, but also questions about my career or even personal things.

Four categories related to relationship building in the classroom emerged in the interviews with faculty and students: (a) students on campus for class only, (b) active learning in the classroom, (c) time with professor before and after class, and (d) faculty photos and biographies on college website.

Students on Campus for Class Only

Most community college students come to campus to go to class and then they leave. They have jobs. They have families. Sometimes they are single parents with young children, like Diane, a 28-year-old mom who grew up in foster care and has three young children. Diane never felt supported or cared about while growing up, and her experiences in school were mostly negative. She never graduated from high school. One day, a conversation with a kind and inquisitive rideshare driver changed her life's trajectory. On the advice of the driver, Diane enrolled in community college, and she is now part of a campus program for former foster youth. Diane attributes her persistence in college to the support of her professors and one of the program's staffers, Miranda. "I have a really strong connection with Miranda. I feel good when I'm talking to her because she gives me advice. She gives me motivation. She always tells me to keep going, like, 'Don't give up. You can do it.'"

Some community college students already have a bachelor's degree and are back in school to obtain credentials for a new career, as was the case for Jake, a 29-year-old returning student. Jake knew the benefits of having relationships with faculty but did not want to spend a lot of time on campus.

I would only come to campus when I had a class. I worked full time, commuted a long distance, and I already had an undergraduate degree experience, so I didn't want to spend my time on campus. I was trying to have balance in my life and not be on campus too much. So, I do think it's hugely important for opportunities for connection be built into and around classes.

The 3-hour Class Advantage

Jake, like many students interviewed for the study, appreciates an informal, comfortable classroom environment where students feel safe reaching out to the professor, as well as to each other. "I was able to develop a relationship with Professor Rose in class and during breaks, which was really nice. It was a 3-hour class. Having breaks also allowed students to connect and develop relationships with each other." Elle, a 33-year-old returning student, agreed that break time facilitates relationship building: "I also made a connection with one of my math professors. We got to know each other on the breaks during class and discovered we had a lot of common interests, and we just became friendly." There is a clear advantage to relationship building with once-a-week 3-hour classes over shorter classes twice a week. This fact was reiterated by other students, as well as faculty, including one part-time faculty who said, "I think 3-hour classes are better for students because we can take our time and not feel rushed, and students can get to know me and each other better during the breaks."

Shelby, a 28-year-old first-generation, returning student, first attended college right after high school, but subsequently dropped out. She returned to school to continue her education and has a job on campus as a part-time tutor. Shelby understands the lives of her fellow students. “A lot of students don’t partake in clubs and other campus activities. They are on campus just for their classes. So, the only opportunities they have for connecting with professors and their classmates are before, during, and after class.” One part-time faculty concurred strongly with Shelby’s observation: “I’m an adjunct, and like many of my students, I am only on campus for class. I think it’s great that activities are offered on campus, but to expect students to participate is absurd! Community college is not that place.” The limited time students are on campus also impedes their ability to attend faculty office hours, as noted by Donna, a 19-year-old education major:

I talk to professors after class, but I don’t like to go to office hours. The reason I don’t go to office hours is that I don’t drive, and I live a bit of a distance from the campus. So, the times I am on campus don’t usually line up with my professor’s office hours. I squish all of my classes into one day, and I just stay there the entire time. So, even if I am on campus during office hours, I’d be in a different class.

Although community college students do not spend a lot of time on campus outside of class, they do still want to develop relationships with their professors. The most effective way for faculty to promote relationship building is to utilize active learning strategies in the classroom.

Active Learning in the Classroom

For faculty who prioritize relationship building in their classes, a definite pattern of practice emerged in the study. There was repeated recognition that less time spent on lecturing and more time spent on small group work and other active learning activities, results in more

engaged students, better attendance, and a higher likelihood of informal mentoring relationships developing. The pattern of practice that emerged is four-pronged: (a) checking in with students, (b) promoting community, (c) building in one-on-one time, and (d) breaking into small groups. One full-time faculty noted an additional benefit to adopting active learning strategies in the classroom:

As to discipline issues, I find that I really don't have any because of the way I've set up the class. It's very interactive, and students stay engaged. Lessons have to do with higher order thinking, and everything's contextualized. I feel like that sends a message to students that they are valued and that I'm not just wasting their time, that what I'm teaching is important. And when a student feels that you take the subject seriously and that you're trying to give them real world experience and connect it to their life, I think they naturally feel like they can talk to you. They're more comfortable asking you questions if they don't understand something. They can be real with you.

Checking in with Students

Faculty who prioritize relationship building in their classes understand the value in taking a few minutes every class period to check in with their students. The students interviewed for the study appreciate faculty who view them in holistic terms, as people with full lives and not just as students, as noted by this full-time faculty:

Some instructors are very rigid in terms of what they'll discuss during class time. But just having a couple of minutes at the beginning or end of class to just kind of check in and see what's going on in students' lives, I feel is important. It lets students know that you're open and that you're thinking about their well-being outside the context of the class.

Students also appreciate faculty who express interest in their lives outside of class, as another full-time faculty noted: “Mentoring is just caring about a student’s life outside of class. It’s about being able to connect with students in a caring way about what’s going on in their lives—the good, the bad, and the in between.” Students like having a few minutes during class to interact with each other and their professor. They believe it creates a supportive environment and sets the stage for meaningful learning and for developing informal mentoring relationships. This full-time faculty views her role in students’ lives in holistic terms:

I believe part of my teaching role is to be a support to my students in whatever way I can.

I always tell my students, “I am here for you when you are in my class. And that means while you’re in the class, before class, during break, after class, after hours, and always available on e-mail.” I’m too good, I think, about being on e-mail. They don’t have to wait 24 hours to hear back from me. Most of the time, unless I’m sleeping, they’ll hear back from me within an hour or two, and they’re always surprised by that.

Promoting Community

When faculty devote time in class to checking in with students, they promote a sense of community, as one part-time faculty noted: “I think the first step for individual instructors is to create a community within their classes because that’s how you get to know each other. And that helps students feel comfortable coming to you for help.” One full-time faculty sees grouping as a way to promote community and interaction between students and also as a way to create a collaborative learning environment. “I make the beginning of every class an interactive workshop where students talk and meet the other students in their table group. I think grouping students together implies, ‘This is not just about me giving you information, this is

collaborative.” This part-time faculty noticed that creating community in her classes led students to share information with each other:

I work really hard to build a community in my classroom so that they talk to each other and they talk to me...and they listen, and I listen. I think once I do that, they understand that other students are in the same boat as they are. And many times, they will talk to each other about help that they've gotten, the offices that they've gone to, or counselors they've talked to. I think this helps them see things in a more positive light.

Building in One-on-One Time

The faculty who are most in tune to the lives of their students understand that they may not be able to meet with them outside of class. These faculty are creative in finding ways to build in one-on-one time with students into each class period. This is one part-time faculty's practice: “I go around and personally check homework. While this does take a big chunk of class time, it gives me an opportunity to briefly interact with every student, individually, and the class has a chance to talk with each other.” Another strategy for building in one-on-one opportunities is workshop time, as one full-time faculty explained:

Some instructors are building in workshop time into class time, where they meet with each student individually and go through the student's work together. The instructor says, “Talk me through your essay.” And if the student catches a mistake they made, they can correct it. According to instructors who do this, the students learn so much more because they can talk about their work, defend it, and make corrections, if needed. And it produces so much more meaningful growth in the students. It's these types of practices that facilitate relationships between students and faculty. Those who doubt the practice say, “Well, what are the other students doing while you meet with one student for 15

minutes?” It’s called differentiation—you give the other students something else to do. In the elementary classroom, everyone does small groups, individual self-paced, self-directed learning, and one-on-one time with the teacher. I think the concept of differentiation gets lost in college. People are not used to, “How do I meet the different needs of learners in my class? How do I modify an assignment or provide support to students?” Differentiation and relationships shouldn’t be just for children.

Breaking into Small Groups

There are multiple benefits to using active learning strategies and breaking students into small groups in class, according to faculty interviewed for the study. Students are more comfortable reaching out to faculty, more students visit faculty during office hours, and more informal mentoring relationships develop. One part-time faculty shared feedback she has received from her students: “I do a lot of group work, which is helpful to relationship building. Students tell me that my class feels the most like high school to them, in that they feel supported and know the other students around them.” Jessica, a 27-year-old first-generation, current university student, prefers group work over all-lecture classes. “Group work is also good—where the teacher walks around and checks in with each group. That format is much better than all lecture classes.” Breaking the class into small groups also helps faculty have one-on-one time with students during class, as noted by this full-time faculty:

I find that reluctant-to-reach-out students do open up in small groups. All of my classes are 3 hours, and I will typically do a 15-minute lecture then a 30-minute activity. When the students are working in small groups, I walk around to every single table and pause. And they all talk to me. Even the quietest students talk to me. I try to engage my students

in as much back-and-forth conversation as possible during class. I try to get everyone involved.

The faculty and students interviewed for the study recognize the value of active learning strategies and small group work to relationship building in the classroom. They also understand how important it is to the development of informal mentoring relationships, for students and faculty to have opportunities to interact informally before and after class.

Time with Professor Before and After Class

Faculty who believe that relationship building is important and understand that students' time on campus is limited, regularly arrive early to class—sometimes as much as an hour before—and stay after class for as long as students need them. This is the practice of one part-time faculty: “I tell my students that as an adjunct, I don’t have office hours, but I will come to class an hour early, and I’ll stay after as long as anybody needs me.” This full-time faculty makes sure that when she arrives early that it is not to prepare for class, but rather to be available to students.

I do come in the classroom early, and I talk with my students. I make sure that all of my stuff is already done, so I’m not frantic when I come into class. When students have questions, I can give them my full attention. I set things aside. And I remind students that they can talk to me about anything, whether it’s class-related or not. I make sure they know that I am always here for them.

Students interviewed for the study overwhelmingly expressed appreciation for faculty who make a point of arriving early to class and staying after to interact with them. When students know their professors arrive early, they do as well, like Donna, a 19-year-old education major: “I would come to class early and stay after if I knew my teachers were as well.” Elle, a 33-year-old

returning student, joked about one professor's commitment to students: "He would always stay after class, too. He would sit there like he had a seatbelt on. He didn't start packing up until everyone was gone." Sophie, a 19-year-old international student, especially appreciates when part-time faculty come early to class and stay after: "I think it's really helpful when instructors come early to class and stay late, especially for adjunct professors who aren't on campus to interact with students otherwise." Carl, a 27-year-old first-generation, formerly incarcerated student, looked forward to coming early to class to talk to his informal mentor. "I would always come to class early because I knew Professor Sorkin would be there. She was always there an hour before class. And I would stay after class to talk with her, too. Having a conversation with her was so comfortable."

Students want to have relationships with faculty. They also want to have access to information about faculty before they register for classes. Photos and biographies posted on the college website are one way students can learn about faculty.

Faculty Photos and Biographies on College Website

Students interviewed for the study strongly believe that faculty matter, that who teaches a class makes a difference, not only to learning, but to the enjoyment of the class. Students want to take classes with faculty who they can relate to and who will be a resource for them going forward. Students want to make connections and have informal mentoring relationships with faculty. Colby, a 23-year-old first-generation, performing arts major, noted how important it is to be able to learn about faculty before taking a class:

It is helpful to have faculty photos and bios on the website because you can learn more about them. And if their bio seems interesting, I'm like, "Nice. I want to take this class with this professor because it seems like they know what they're doing." The professor

definitely makes a difference because if they're passionate about the material that they're teaching, then that will make the class a lot more fun.

Vince, a 22-year old performing arts major, always tries to choose classes with faculty he thinks he will connect with. "I think being able to read a professor's bio on the website helps you to build a connection with that person before class begins. And it helps you determine if that professor will be a good fit for you." Elena, a 19-year-old first-generation college student, has specific characteristics she looks for in a professor:

I do think it's good when teachers have bios on the website. That way I can get to know them a little bit before class starts. And I do use "Rate My Professor." What I look for in a professor is someone who is very caring, someone who is observant, and someone who is nice. Race/ethnicity doesn't matter to me. I do go for women more than men because they seem nicer and more understanding. They seem more attuned to emotions.

When faculty do not have their photos and biographies posted on the college website, students go to ratemyprofessor.com—a website where students can post and read anonymous reviews of faculty. This is a common practice for all 20 students interviewed in the study. Students expressed the frustration they feel when they click on a professor's name in the schedule of classes and find no information or when a class is listed without an instructor's name, as was the experience of Keith, a 30-year-old former student:

I think it's very helpful when faculty and staff have photos and bios on the website. That always helped me determine which faculty I wanted to approach based on what I was able to learn about them as a person on their bio. It was extremely frustrating when no one had photos or bios because then I either had to take a shot in the dark or go to another website like, Rate My Professor to try to find out about them. I don't like taking classes

when an instructor's name is not listed because I believe the instructor is as important or more important than the subject matter.

Organic Connection

Faculty photos and biographies posted on the college website help students identify people who they think they will connect with on campus. They are, however, often surprised to find connections in unlikely places. Faculty, staff, and students interviewed for the study recognize the organic nature of informal mentoring relationships. Unlike formal mentoring programs at other colleges where students are assigned mentors with little or no consideration given to compatibility, informal mentors and mentees come together organically, or naturally, and sometimes by chance. One staff noted, "Some students respond better to people who are gentle and caring, while others work better with someone who is more direct." One full-time faculty reflected on how students relate to different teaching styles.

One of my colleagues has a very different teaching style than mine, and some students are more comfortable reaching out to her, while others are more comfortable reaching out to me. And we sometimes have some in-between students. It just depends on what kinds of personalities students are comfortable with. So, it's good that she and I are like polar opposites.

Faculty and staff who understand the organic nature of informal mentoring relationships recognize that just because they may not be a good match for one student, does not mean that they will not be a good match for another student. One full-time faculty noted this: "One student mentee I have currently was referred to me by a colleague. She was going through something that this colleague thought I might be able to help her with. She and I really connected when we met, and we've stayed in contact." One part-time faculty strongly believes that an informal

mentor can be anyone at the college and that it just takes one person to make a difference in a student's life. "The difference between two students who face the same adversity—where one succeeds and one doesn't—is that they have one person, at least *one* person in their life who helps them make sense of what's going on." Another part-time faculty summed up the organic nature of informal mentoring relationships: "We're all going to connect with different students. I may not be the best mentor for a certain student, but somebody else will be."

In Conclusion: Positive Classroom Experiences

Faculty who are in tune with the lives of their students incorporate relationship and community building activities into their classes. They utilize active learning strategies, break into small groups regularly, and build in one-on-one time with students. Students in the study prefer active learning over lecture classes, and they seek out faculty who teach using active learning strategies. Students also enjoy and appreciate the sense of community in active learning classes, as well as having opportunities to develop relationships with other students and faculty.

Positive Campus Culture

Community-Oriented

After exploring the behaviors of faculty and staff and the classroom experiences that contribute to relationship building, the campus culture was examined to further identify conditions that influence the development of informal mentoring relationships. Faculty, staff, and students shared their lived experiences and perspectives on campus culture, and there was a consensus that having a sense of community is critically important for students, as noted by one full-time faculty: "The best thing for students is for them to feel like they're really a part of a community." Elle, a 33-year-old returning student, concurred: "In every single corner it's important to have community." Another full-time faculty reiterated the importance of building

relationships with students on campus: “Building relationships with students is important because all of the literature says that students who make connections on campus are more likely to be successful and complete their programs because they feel like they belong.” Others think that college events promote community on campus, as noted by this full-time faculty:

A lot of the informal mentoring relationships that I’ve developed have started with major and career specific activities and events. I think having those spaces where students and faculty can engage informally is really beneficial. I would also say that being a club advisor is a great way to connect with students around a shared interest. And those conversations can then develop into informal mentoring relationships.

Elena, a 19-year-old first-generation college student, shared how being part of a sports team on campus gave her a sense of community. “There was one dedicated counselor for all the sports teams. Our coaches handled a lot of stuff for us. The team definitely provided a community for me at the college and made me feel like I belong.” One part-time faculty brought up the fact that students who take classes at night do not feel a sense of community as everything on campus is closed.

Another problem is when students are on campus in the evenings and everything is closed. It makes them feel like they’re not really a part of the campus community, that they don’t matter. If classes are being held, services should be available, and offices should be open. The students who don’t feel like they belong already have a chip on their shoulder when they arrive in my class.

Four categories emerged from the interviews related to a community-oriented campus culture: (a) student lounges/study areas near faculty offices, (b) student jobs on campus, (c) student conference hours, and (d) mentoring included in faculty college service.

Student Lounges/Study Areas Near Faculty Offices

Every student interviewed for the study talked about the importance of having places to gather that are close to faculty offices, and how having such a place, more than anything else, creates a sense of community for students. Students who have these spaces appreciate them greatly, and those who do not, wish they did. One staff member sees the value of creating such a space in her department.

Students need places to gather. They need places to study and to interact with faculty and staff and each other—ideally in each school or department. We do have a computer lab, and students will interact there sometimes and help each other out with things. But we don't have a space or lounge area near our offices for students to gather. If we did have such a space, I can guarantee you that students would come there, and often.

Part-time faculty who do not have private office space on campus appreciate the idea of lounge areas where they can meet with students, as noted by one part-time faculty:

In terms of conditions, things that were really helpful, as a student and as a faculty member, were space and time to gather and connect. When adjuncts don't have designated office space, it can be difficult to find a place that's comfortable where you can sit and have a conversation, a place that's at least semi-private. So, a condition that I think is really important is making sure that there's some sort of lounge space or part-time faculty office space to be able to 'meet and greet' students.

Students who have places to go to on campus to study and interact with other students near faculty and staff offices clearly see the value in such spaces and stressed the need for more similar spaces, as noted by Keith, a 30-year-old former student: "Having student common areas near professor's offices makes them more visible and approachable to students. When students

and faculty can interact informally on a regular basis, relationships will develop.” Having dedicated community-oriented study areas near faculty offices is one way students are able to interact informally with professors, which often leads to informal mentoring relationships. Another way students are able to interact on a regular basis with faculty and staff and develop a sense of community is by having a job on campus.

Student Jobs on Campus

Every student interviewed for the study works at least one part-time job. Some students work full time and others work two part-time jobs. The students who have part-time jobs on campus spend more time on campus and attend campus events and faculty office hours more than students who work off campus. They also feel more of a connection to the college, have more self-confidence, and have more informal mentoring relationships than students who do not work on campus. One full-time faculty noted how easy it is to connect with a student who works in her department:

One of my informal mentees is a student worker. I think the close and consistent proximity we have with each other definitely assisted in the development of our informal mentoring relationship. I would see her when I went in to check my mail and things like that and we would start talking about my college choices and my background and so forth. So, it developed in a very casual manner over time.

Faculty and staff see the value in students having jobs on campus and think the college should create more employment opportunities for students, as noted by one staffer: “We need more jobs for students on campus so they can earn money and not have to worry about juggling their work and school schedules. They also learn transferrable basic work skills and are able to get to know faculty.” Another staff member concurred: “Having jobs on campus is a great way

for students and faculty and staff to develop informal mentoring relationships.” The value of working on campus was summed up by Colby, a 23-year-old first-generation, performing arts major:

When I first started college, I was a different person than I am now. I was more reserved, shy. I wouldn’t talk to people just because that’s how I was. But spending time on campus and getting to know my professors through the work-study program definitely helped me change and grow as a person. I felt like I had a support system. And it made me feel important as a student, like I wasn’t just another name on the roster, that I meant something. Working on campus boosted my confidence to be more outgoing and to talk to people instead of just being shy and reserved. I definitely felt more a part of the department because I had more one-on-one time with my professors, Professor Shelby in particular, because I was doing all these tasks for him. I learned how to manage a library-type setting and how to keep it organized and everything. It was a really beneficial thing for me, definitely. And I’d say it helped me to be more confident in myself because I was doing more things, and I got more experience.

My relationship with Professor Shelby definitely made my time at the college easier and a lot more fun. We would joke around, and over the years we developed a real personal connection. He was my go-to guy when I needed information about anything. I think I became a better person, in general, through the work-study program. It definitely broke me out of my shell. I was a different person two years ago than I am now. And all of those experiences kind of helped me get to where I am.

Jobs on campus provide students with easy and meaningful access to faculty and staff that they would not have otherwise. Student conference hours—also known as faculty office hours—are another way for students to have one-on-one access to faculty.

Student Conference Hours

Full-time faculty at the site college are required to have scheduled student conference hours. Part-time faculty at the college are not required, nor are they paid or provided space for holding student conference hours. Students in the study reported rarely attending office hours, which perplexed this full-time faculty: “We really have to figure out why students who are not doing well in class don’t come to office hours. Across the board, I think all faculty will tell you students don’t come to office hours.” Another full-time faculty recognizes that meeting with students is an opportunity to connect. “I have a few students who regularly come to my office hours. And they’re so sweet about how they start talking about other things than school, and you find out what they’re interested in, and you have these real human conversations.” Aden, a 25-year-old first-generation college student, believes visiting a professor’s office is an opportunity to get to know them.

I think faculty having a decorative office is helpful. A professor’s office says a lot about them, and things students see as they enter the space can help ‘humanize’ them—the kinds of books they read, pictures of their family, their alma mater, etc. These things can spark conversation.

One full-time faculty reflected on professors who maintain an open door policy:

I’ve noticed that the professors who keep their office doors open are the ones who have students coming in to visit during office hours. When a faculty’s office door is closed, that sense of a barrier, I think, speaks volumes. And I think the students see that.”

Assigned Meetings and Extra-Credit

Faculty believe that requiring or giving extra credit to students for meeting with them during their office hours is a successful strategy, as one full-time faculty noted:

Extra credit coupons for going to office hours is something I adopted because students and faculty shared that it worked. And I make sure that students know that it can be used like a mentoring meeting and not just for a grade check or clarification on an assignment.

Redefining office hours as student conference hours is encouraging, also.

Students agree that giving extra credit for attending office hours is a smart move on the part of faculty, as noted by Elle, a 33-year-old returning student: “I think the professors who give extra credit or make it an assignment to go to office hours make a bigger impression on students. And it shouldn’t be just to ask questions, it should be about getting to know the student.” Sophia, a 19-year-old international student, agreed that extra credit helps, but added that office hours are often inconvenient for students: “I think when office hours are scheduled can be a problem if they’re not convenient for students. And it helps when instructors give extra credit to students for coming to see them during office hours.” One full-time faculty believes that assigning an office hour visit makes students more likely to attend.

One of the things I did when I taught previously was that I had an assignment where all students had to meet with me outside of class. And that was really helpful because while it was on each individual student to come meet with me, they all were having to do it. No one felt singled out. And that’s another thing—students don’t want to do something that everyone else isn’t doing. Especially community college students—they don’t want to seem too eager...too overly invested...you know?

Office Location

Not only is the time of faculty office hours a factor for students, but the location and visibility of the office itself also factors into students meeting or not meeting with faculty. One full-time faculty in the performing arts department noted the importance of his office's location:

My office is located between the bathrooms and the practice rooms, so every music major passes by my open office door like 15 times a day. And because it's a high traffic area, I end up talking to them a lot. My office used to be on the opposite corner of the building, which is kind of isolated, and a lot fewer students would come by to see me. So, I went from having no students coming to see me to having many, just because of where my office was located.

Vince, a 22-year-old performing arts major, agreed: "I think faculty having their offices along hallways where students walk is helpful for connecting with them, especially when faculty leave their doors open." Students appreciate faculty who encourage them to attend their office hours by giving points or extra credit. And while faculty do not always understand why more students do not utilize office hours, they do believe that having them contributes to the campus culture of supporting students. Faculty, however, acknowledged in their interviews that their office hours are often spent on administrative and committee work related to the five hours a week of college service that is required per their contract.

Mentoring Included in Faculty College Service

Full-time faculty overwhelmingly agree that college service is too narrowly defined and that mentoring students should be included and be a priority over attending meetings and being on committees. Shelby, a 28-year-old returning student, noted the impact faculty college service hours have on students: "Professor Hart was always working on projects, curriculum and stuff.

And she had a lot of meetings. Her e-mail response time was not very good. I'd usually here back from her within a week or so." This faculty summed up the views expressed by the full-time faculty interviewed for the study:

I think we need to change the culture and prioritize mentoring. We need to see our responsibility to students more holistically and more outside of our classroom walls and course content. When our students believe we care about them as people outside of class, they tend to perform better in class, or at least that's been my experience. Mentoring is one of those wraparound supports for students.

I think time is the biggest obstacle to mentoring. I'm thinking specifically about the five hours of college service. We're all serving on committees and going to meetings, but no one is sitting there calculating the hours, but it's expected that we're contractually meeting those five hours per week. So, mentoring could also be an expectation of leadership. Committee work is not contractual, it's an expectation of leadership. What's contractual is fulfilling five hours of college service per week. What can be—or should be—included in those five hours is up to college leadership.

Another full-time faculty talked about the contract, which was a topic discussed with much passion in all the interviews with full-time faculty. "I think being pulled in too many directions, being overwhelmed, is certainly part of the reason faculty don't develop more informal mentoring relationships with students. And there's a culture at this college to do exactly to the contract—nothing more, nothing less."

Faculty want to be more available to students, and they expressed frustration with their workload, as noted by one full-time faculty: "A lot of times when you're with students, you feel rushed because of all the paperwork and committees, etc..." Another full-time faculty added,

“Balancing committee and department work with spending time with students can be challenging. If I save work for my office hours and a student comes in, I feel pressure and the student may sense that my mind is elsewhere.” There was a consensus among faculty that college services hours should be redefined to include time for mentoring students, as noted by this full-time faculty:

I think mentoring should be encouraged more; it should be more embedded in our practices. It would be great if mentoring was included in the five hours of college service that faculty are responsible for each week! Maybe in our program plan we could mention something about fostering relationships with students, some kind of mentoring component. I don’t know, though, how measurable that would be...

In Conclusion: Positive Campus Culture

Faculty, staff, and students in the study believe that creating a community-oriented campus culture contributes to the development of informal mentoring relationships. Students appreciate having student lounges and study areas near faculty offices, which gives them more opportunities for informal interaction with faculty. Students who have jobs on campus also have more opportunities for informal interaction with faculty and are more likely to develop informal mentoring relationships than students who work off campus. Faculty interact more with students in their offices when they give assignment points or extra credit to students for attending student conference hours. Faculty also recognize the need to redefine college service to include—and prioritize—time for mentoring students. There was a consensus view among all participants in the study that informal mentoring behaviors and practices need to be institutionalized at the college.

Negative Faculty & Staff Behaviors

Dismissive Behaviors

All the students interviewed for the study have experienced some form of dismissive behavior by faculty or staff at some point during their time at the college. How they responded to that dismissive behavior varied and had a lot to do with their circumstances at the time, as well as their level of motivation, self-confidence, and resiliency. A negative interaction that was brushed off by one student led another to leave community college and not return for 15 years.

Dismissive behaviors that were brought up during the interviews include being rude, not being attentive, not listening, and not responding to e-mails. Faculty, staff, and students recognize the harm dismissive behaviors cause students, as noted by Abby, a 22-year-old current university student: “When a student has a bad experience at the front desk of any office, there’s a good chance they’ll leave and never come back.” Some students feel like they are not a priority at the college, as Keith, a 30-year-old former student noted:

There’s a sort of dismissiveness. It feels like the faculty and the staff are too busy. And making an appointment is difficult. When you do speak to them, they don’t answer your questions to a satisfactory degree, and if you try to ask for further clarification, they’re not very good at giving it. Getting me the right answer does not appear to be of high importance to them.

Carl, a 27-year-old first-generation, formerly incarcerated student shared how being dismissed led him to stop asking questions of one of his professors. “I’ve had some negative experiences when approaching faculty. They would be looking down at their computer while I was asking a question. They didn’t pay attention to me. So, I stopped myself from asking that person other questions in the future.” Fortunately, Carl had informal mentors on campus who

helped him mitigate that and other negative experiences he had with faculty and staff. When he felt defeated, his resiliency was strengthened because he had an informal network of trusted supporters on campus who listened to him and encouraged him to move forward. He had cheerleaders.

Other students share their negative experiences on campus with the faculty and staff they trust. One full-time faculty noted frustration with her colleagues: “Students say that sometimes when they go to a professor’s office, they seem like they’re busy with something else. That’s very discouraging. Students should never feel dismissed. They know when you don’t want to give them your time or attention.” Another full-time faculty asserted that hiring committees should be looking for more social skills in candidates:

Students will say they didn’t want to bother a faculty who was in their office. And that gets exacerbated when a student does go to a faculty’s office and that person says, “Yeah; can I help you?” instead of, “HI! Come on in!” And that’s just what I would call social skills. And I think we need to be hiring...in part...based on some of those things.

This full-time faculty empathized with students’ frustration: “If they’re just monotone and checking the boxes...I mean, that’s the thing that just shuts everything down! We’ve all probably had a teacher that the mere action of asking a question bothered them!” Another full-time faculty talked about favoritism. “When teachers have a favorite and cater to that student very openly, it ruins the whole tone of the classroom for everyone else. Students get so discouraged that they want to boycott the class. They feel a sense of injustice.” The stories this full-time faculty has heard from students are more negative than positive.

A lot of times students tell me about how they’ve been dismissed, how a professor didn’t take time to listen to them, how they felt put down. But then, of course, there are also

times where a student says a professor was wonderful, and that they enjoyed the class.

But unfortunately, it's usually more on the negative side.

There are two main categories of dismissive behaviors: students treated rudely and faculty not responding to e-mails.

Students Treated Rudely

Students often feel that they have been treated rudely, particularly when interacting with frontline staff at admissions and records or financial aid, as noted here by Jenna, a 21-year-old first-generation college student: "I was treated rudely by the person at the financial aid window. I understand that their patience level is low because students can be disrespectful when they're upset. But being treated rudely can ruin a student's day." One staffer was very frustrated that administrators allowed an employee to remain on the front lines who was openly known to be rude.

Too often students tell me that they were treated rudely and with disrespect when seeking help at various offices, like the cashier or admissions and records. On one occasion, several students complained about the same person, and when I notified my supervisor, I found out that that person had been there for 20 years! The campus can't afford to have people like that on the front lines. There's too much at stake for students.

Another staff shared a similar story:

Recently, I was helping on campus to direct students during the first week of classes, and one student thanked me for greeting her kindly. She then shared with me that she had just gone through a long line and had been treated very rudely by another staffer. She gave me all of her information—contact, student ID#, etc.—and asked me to please pass it on to someone of authority. I promised her I would. I gave the information to my supervisor.

And I never heard back. That made me think that we're constantly fighting a losing battle. We are noting destructive behavior of staff; we are seeing it, but nothing changes.

If there's no accountability it just seems like nobody's watching and nobody cares.

A student's response to being treated rudely by faculty or staff was sometimes devastating and led that student to consider dropping out of college or never enrolling. Faculty and staff acknowledge that "people skills" need to be a higher priority in training and hiring at the college. Students shared that in addition to being treated rudely, they also had faculty who ignored them by not replying to their e-mails.

Faculty Not Responding to E-Mails

Many students interviewed for the study had experiences of e-mailing faculty and never hearing back, as was the case with Jessica, a 27-year-old first-generation, current university student: "There have been multiple times when I never heard back from an instructor that I had e-mailed." Jake, a 29-year-old returning student, feels dismissed and frustrated when faculty do not answer his e-mails. "I think people at the college need to do a better job at responding to e-mails. It's disheartening when I reach out and don't hear back." Blaire, a 30-year-old returning student echoed Jake's frustration:

I had a professor this semester that I couldn't communicate with at all. Anytime I would e-mail him, there would be no response. I would show up at his office during his office hours, and he wouldn't even be there. And he's not the kind of person that comes early to class or stays after. It's like he's in and out of there before we are. I was really struggling and trying to get help, and I was met with silence. When we switched to online due to the coronavirus, it got even worse. He has no people skills. I did research him before I signed up, and he did have horrific reviews—I mean *horrific* reviews. But it was the only section

that worked with my course load and my job. I thought to myself that I've had crappy teachers in the past and gotten along just fine. However, this was not the case. And he's the department head! He shouldn't be a teacher much less a department head. I ended up dropping the class—which I've never done before.

Faculty and staff also feel dismissed and frustrated when colleagues do not answer e-mails, as was the case with this part-time faculty who empathized with students:

Another thing that can help faculty have more time for students is for all faculty and staff to actually respond to people's e-mails. I can't tell you how many times I've reached out to somebody asking for a resource or asking for help or asking for something, and I send 3 or 4 e-mails and never get a response. Then I have to go to my department head for assistance. Talk about a waste of time. It's unprofessional. It's inconsiderate, and it drives me insane.

Also, I myself get frustrated trying to find the right person to help me with a certain situation, so, I can only imagine the frustration students deal with trying to do the same thing. And I am more familiar with the campus system than they are, and my problem-solving skills are likely better than theirs. I can see why students give up and drop out when getting support can be so unnecessarily difficult.

The interviews with faculty, staff, and students illustrate how damaging dismissive behaviors are to not only the engagement and persistence of students, but also to the morale of the campus as a workplace. Dismissive, as well as impersonal behaviors, negatively influence the development of informal mentoring relationships.

Impersonal Behaviors

Students interviewed for the study talked about not being seen as individuals and being treated as numbers rather than people. In every case, these incidences of impersonal behaviors were in the context of appointments with academic counselors. This was the experience of Blaire, a 30-year-old returning student:

My experience with counselors has not been great, and I've seen quite a few. Many are way too rigid with sticking to the standard meeting procedures and protocols and are unwilling to personalize a session to meet a student's needs. It's very frustrating, and it doesn't allow the student to actually communicate and create rapport with the counselor. There's a lack of validation.

Jenna, a 21-year-old first-generation student, had a similar experience:

I got the feeling that the counselors didn't really care that much. The meetings I had with counselors were more like, "Oh, you're just an appointment" and they just wanted to get it over with. I never felt like I was really able to talk to them, like talk to them about what I was struggling with or what I didn't understand. I felt like I was being an inconvenience to them and their time. I felt rushed.

Other students, like Shelby, a 28-year-old first-generation returning student, hoped to develop a relationship with a counselor and to be able to see that counselor as she progressed at the college.

I never really enjoyed the process with counselors. I know there are thousands of students, and only so many counselors, so they can't devote a whole lot of time to just me. And not that I was looking for them to spend the whole day with me, but I was looking for consistency where I could meet with the same counselor and make sure I was on the right track.

I was hoping that I would be able to develop a relationship with a counselor beginning with my first appointment, but that didn't happen. And every time I went it was rushed and impersonal. So, I finally just stopped going, and I relied on myself.

Abby, a 22-year-old current university student, shared her negative and positive experiences with counselors at the college:

I've had negative experiences with counselors at this college. The first counselor I saw just wanted to get through the appointment and move on. She didn't want to connect. She wasn't interested in my long-term goals. She just wanted to tell me the classes I needed to take for that semester. She didn't seem interested in me as a person. I felt like I was bothering her. When I left that appointment, I was annoyed because everything was rushed and impersonal. I was confused and kind of defeated. I didn't have a strong path yet, and I really needed advice and support. And the appointment was short to begin with, 30 minutes, and I felt very rushed. And she was rude. I remember thinking, "I'm *never* going to come to these counselors again!"

After that, I did find a counselor that I liked, but I had to go through a few other people first. They were a little better than the first woman, and, they at least tried to build some rapport with me. The counselor that I liked, she was great, and I felt really relieved after meeting with her. She helped me understand the transfer process and all the steps I needed to take and all the paperwork I needed to fill out. And if I had a question she couldn't answer, instead of telling me she'd look into it and get back to me, she'd call somebody right then to get the answer, while I was sitting there. And she asked me about my passions and what I thought were my strengths. She gave me links to websites with career assessment tools. And when I was trying to decide between three different career

paths, she told me about her journey to her career and how she thought she wanted to do one thing and then discovered something else she liked better. She wanted me to be open to things. After meeting with her, I felt empowered and confident. It made me happier.

In Conclusion: Negative Faculty & Staff Behaviors

There was a consensus among all participants in the study that negative faculty and staff behaviors, including being dismissive and impersonal, are extremely toxic to the development of informal mentoring relationships. When students are treated dismissively or impersonally by faculty or staff, their motivation, self-confidence, and resiliency are weakened. And while some students shared stories of bouncing back and moving forward after a negative experience, others, whose motivation, self-confidence, and resiliency were already weakened prior to the negative experience, were not able to bounce back and move forward. Faculty, staff, and students agree that professional development would help reduce incidences of dismissive and impersonal behavior and that informal mentoring relationships can strengthen students' motivation, self-confidence, and resiliency and, thus, mitigate negative interactions they experience on campus.

Negative Classroom Experiences

Educational Traumas

Faculty, staff, and students in the study shared powerful stories of educational traumas they had experienced in their lives, memories of which are still quite vivid, even after many years. The impact of past traumas—short term and long term—varied widely and depended on the person's life circumstances, as well as their level of motivation, self-confidence, and resiliency. One staff member shared her experience from elementary school:

I grew up in what I consider a hyphenated household. I identified as both Native and Mexican American. My identities have always clashed, which has, I think, affected my

sense of belonging in education. In elementary school, I was one of a few non-White students who played together at recess. When I was in 2nd grade, the teacher pulled us aside and told us we couldn't play together anymore because she didn't want us to become gang members. She didn't do that to any of the White students. That really affected me, and from that point on, I struggled. Looking back that was definitely an educational trauma for me, and it colored how I viewed education going forward. And because of that incident in 2nd grade, I started forming this belief that maybe the education system wasn't for me. Maybe the world only saw me as a gang member-type person. So, for a while I started believing that, and I started practicing those dysfunctional habits that some of my extended family members had been practicing.

Another staffer also experienced racism that led her to question whether higher education was for her. She shared a similar story:

I did have negative experiences in school that kept me back and have stuck with me. An English teacher once called me and one of my friends out when we were talking by saying, “*Hey!* You want to stop that Mexican tea party over there?!” And when I was in 12th grade I asked my counselor about what I needed to do about college, and, somehow, I ended up with an appointment with a military recruiter. Read into that what you want; It was the 80s, and it was a small predominately white rural high school.

I did end up at a community college, on my own. And then I met a guy who I later married. He really encouraged me and told me that I was smart and that I could do it. It really was about the *not* believing. I remember this feeling of this isn't for me. We had gone on a college tour to San Diego State, near where I lived, and I remember

thinking, “*This* is not for somebody like me—I don’t belong in college.” Everybody I saw did not look like me.

Math was a common theme in the stories of educational trauma. One part-time faculty shared this story of a student who was unable to overcome educational trauma he experienced in high school math classes:

My first job was as an academic counselor, and I had 1,200 students. One student was a SWAT team officer in his 30s, and he needed two classes to get his bachelor’s degree—math and math. He had horrible PTSD that had developed from feelings of embarrassment from teachers who made him feel stupid in math classes in high school. In addition to, possibly, his parents telling him that they were bad at math, leading him to think he probably would be as well. I literally dragged him to class, but he never graduated. Within 30 minutes in his first college math class he had a full-on anxiety attack. Here he is a SWAT officer, but he couldn’t sit in a math class in college.

Shelby, a 28-year-old returning student, almost dropped out of college as a result of years of educational trauma related to math.

I always struggled with math, and I would tell my teachers, “I don’t understand what you’re telling me...I don’t get it...can you show me, please.” Most of the time they would ignore me, or they would get angry or frustrated because they couldn’t find a way to explain it to me that I understood. I now know that I’m a visual and kinetic learner. I have to see it as it’s happening and to work with it hands on for me to get it.

When I got to college, I thought I wasn’t going to have to do math anymore, but, lo and behold, I had to take more math classes, and it was just like in high school all over again. I felt really dumb, and I felt like I wasn’t capable of learning and that there wasn’t

a point in me even going to school. In every other subject, I felt at least somewhat confident in my ability, but math was just like this huge dark cloud that hung over me.

There were quite a few times I almost dropped out of college because I just didn't want to deal with the stress of math hanging over me.

One full-time faculty uses her own negative math experience to help her be a better professor for her students.

I had a very negative experience with a professor when I was in community college. It was a statistics class, and math was not my strong suit. I was sitting kind of in the front of the room, and I was so confused. And I will never forget this—I asked the professor a question, and he told me not to ask such stupid questions. I was so embarrassed; I started crying. I was like 19 years old. A friend of mine who was also in the class was sitting next to me, and she was shocked. Then, somebody passed up a Kleenex to me. I was just sitting there crying. I felt so stupid. The professor did apologize to me at the next class meeting, but the damage was done. After that, I just did what I needed to do and got out of there. Now as professor of 20 years, I know that when one person asks a question, there are others in the class who have the same question.

For many students, negative experiences from high school were especially hard to shake off. One student shared how she went from loving and excelling in science to hating it because of the way she was treated by a high school science teacher. Elena, a 19-year-old first-generation college student, had haunting memories of sitting in the corner of a classroom. "I once had a teacher who got mad at me for having therapy appointments. She made me permanently sit in the corner of the room facing the wall. It was so humiliating. It made me not want to go to school."

One full-time faculty talked about the difficulties that many students have trying to overcome negative experiences from high school:

I have to be mindful that so many of our students come to us feeling fearful of college and of their own abilities because of their high school experiences. And it's not about their intellect. It's not about even their work ethic. It could be the environment they were in; it could be so many other things. So, when I work with students, it's like they're ashamed to tell me, "Well...you know I didn't do so well in high school." Or, "I didn't finish high school." But even as much as I tell them that all of that's behind them, it's still very much in the forefront of their minds. And it's the lens through which they see their college experience. So, the students who need us the most—our Black and Latino males—are the ones who are the least likely to reach out and say, "Hey; I need help," even though they need the most help.

This staff member's story is reflective of so many participants in the study. It perfectly illustrates the invisible nature of fragility and resiliency and how one negative interaction—one simple brief interaction—can set in motion a complex reaction with immense consequences.

When I went to register for my first class at a community college, I remember being met with an angry person on the other side of the desk. And I was so intimidated, as it was, just to walk in there, and then to be met that way. After that, I wanted nothing to do with school. I remember that so clearly, and I remember that feeling so well. About 15 years went by before I went back to a community college. I was so intimidated by just the thought of going to college for so long. Now, I do have students who share with me how other faculty or staff on campus were rude to them. And it happens enough that you know it's not just the student...

In Conclusion: Negative Classroom Experiences

Past educational traumas have a lasting impact on the faculty, staff, and students who shared their experiences for the study. Their memories are vivid and, in some cases, have left emotional scars. Some faculty use their negative experiences to inform their own teaching as a reminder of how not to treat students. Staff try to learn from their past negative experiences by being committed to treating students kindly, so that they will have only positive memories of their community college experience. Faculty, staff, and students agree that informal mentoring relationships help students mitigate and move forward from past educational traumas.

Negative Campus Culture

“Old School” Darwinian

The faculty interviewed for the study fall into two camps. They either acknowledge that “old school” Darwinian attitudes and ways of teaching still exist in classrooms today, including at this community college, or they do not because they continue to think and teach that way themselves, the way they were taught. One full-time faculty noted the problem with the latter group: “There will be faculty who will be resistant and very defensive. And that’s going to bleed over into the classroom. They’re not open to new ideas; they may even go on the attack with other people. And nobody wants that!” Aden, a 25-year-old first-generation college student, observed that old school faculty often have a “college is not for everyone” attitude and seem to be weeding out students, possibly unintentionally, by not having high expectations for everyone. “One of the problems is that teachers see high achievers and treat them as high achievers, and they see low achievers and they treat them as low achievers.” Another full-time faculty reflected on her own teaching and realized that her old school ways were ineffective with today’s community college students:

It's about taking the time. I remember when I used to get really frustrated trying to explain things to students. In my mind, I would think, "You should already know this!" or "When I was in college, I was able to figure it out; why can't you?" I had that sort of mentality. And it wasn't doing my students any good.

I recently had a student who was confused about how to get with an academic counselor, and the old me would have gotten so frustrated, and been like, "I don't have time to be explaining this to you!" But I now know that's not right or fair, and that what this student needs from me, right now, is help getting to a counselor. So, I think it was a shift in my way of thinking, a shift in perspective. And it's the right way to teach, a good way to teach. You're less frustrated. I guess it's that mindfulness, too, right? Being okay with what is. If those are my students and that's what they need right now, then that's what I need to do right now. I'm here to be a guide for them, a facilitator.

The majority of faculty understand that they are the ones who need to change, not the students, as noted by this full-time faculty:

We're the ones who have to change, not our students. Our students are going to come with what they're going to come with. We're not going to change them in that way. It has to come from us. We have to be the ones that change if we want them to be successful.

Unfortunately, we tend to teach how we were taught. And the old school way of 'here's the lesson—learn it or don't' still persists today, and it's not effective.

One part-time faculty noted that many faculty make the mistake of comparing their own college experience with their students' experience:

I think there are too many faculty who did not go to community college and are out-of-touch with today's community college students. Faculty end up 'mapping' their own

college experience instead of adapting and serving students where they are and with what they need. Faculty often say, “Well, when I was in college...” They have a four-year college mindset in front of students who are at a two-year institution.

Faculty who are still clinging to old school Darwinian ways often question themselves but are unsure and hesitant about abandoning their “tried and true” teaching methods. One part time faculty reflected on her internal struggle:

I’m of two minds. I completely understand reaching out to students and saying, “Hey; are you okay?” And sometimes I will, especially if they’ve written something that’s a little concerning. However, I feel very strongly that these are college students, and they need to learn to be independent learners. You can’t be successful, especially in an online class, if you’re not self-directed and an autonomous learner. So, I feel like sometimes, especially in an online class, students need to fail to see that either this is not the learning environment for them, or they need to fail to understand that they need certain resources and need to advocate for themselves better.

Some faculty question the appropriateness of reaching out to students, as was the case with this part-time faculty:

I’ve always been worried that reaching out to students who have stopped coming to class would be enabling them. I’ve always thought that students need to take ownership of their education, and that if we enable them too much that they’re not going to take the next step and become more independent in their learning.

In Conclusion: “Old School” Darwinian Campus Culture

The majority of faculty interviewed for the study recognize the value of active learning strategies and acknowledge that old school Darwinian attitudes and teaching methods are

ineffective, inequitable, and harmful to community college students. Faculty who embrace a more interactive and collaborative classroom environment, hold high expectations for all students, and spend time with students outside of class tend to develop more informal mentoring relationships with students. And these are the faculty students prefer, every time.

Testimonials

Several powerful narratives emerged from the 46 interviews conducted for the study. Faculty, staff, and students shared personal and inspiring stories of overcoming hardships to give higher education—and themselves—a second chance. From growing up in foster care to being incarcerated for a decade at age 16, the varied lived experiences of faculty, staff, and students illustrate some simple truths about life: (a) that everyone deserves a second chance, (b) that feeling cared about can make up for a lot of despair in a person's life, and (c) that there is both strength and fragility in the human spirit.

Keith and Professor Carter: An Inspiring Informal Mentoring Relationship

Keith

I started out at university right out of high school, and I didn't really reach out too much or try to get help. At one point I wasn't doing too well in my major, and I sort of went into a downward spiral and ultimately ended up dropping out. I was still really young, and I just assumed that everything was on me. I think if someone had been there to reach out and help pull me back, things might've gone differently for me.

When I eventually came back to school, I went to community college. Initially, I was still sort of the same way; I wasn't reaching out to people. I think building a relationship with Professor Carter was the beginning of me being more open to reaching out to professors. He impressed me with his teaching style and his experience. I really liked what he had to say, so I

took him for additional classes. Then I began visiting him during his office hours, and I slowly got to know him better. He helped me a lot on my path as I tried to figure out what I wanted to do with my life. Before I met him, I was pretty lost. I had no idea what I was doing in the world, and he really helped me find a sense of purpose that I had not had before.

Professor Carter demonstrated an openness to helping his students and a genuine care for their learning. He held us to a high standard without trying to purposely make things overly difficult. He had a good sense of humor. He made me want to go to school. Initially, my meetings with him outside of class were at his office during his office hours. That was convenient for me because I was on campus all the time, as I was a full-time student and also worked on campus part time.

Professor Carter really helped me grow as a person. He would ask me how my family was, and he would tell me about his. We became very close through those talks. His willingness to open up to me about his family really meant a lot to me. He trusted me. And I think trust is very important. I've spoken with many professors where it was more like a one-way street, where they didn't really take much of an interest in students' lives outside of class. They were much harder to approach, compared to professors who were more willing to open up about themselves. It's not good when students feel like they can't talk to their professors. Also, Professor Carter had a policy that once you're his student, you're always his student. So, you're always welcome to come back and speak with him.

Professor Carter

Keith was one of those young men who you knew was very bright, but just needed some guidance, some direction, and a lot of encouragement. He ended up transferring to a university and got his bachelor's degree. Now, he's in graduate school and almost finished with a master's

degree. He and I still keep in touch, and it's been a very rewarding relationship. I'd even say we're friends now. We have lunch together probably once a month. And it didn't start as anything formal; it was just one of those things where we happened to hit it off. He would come to my office and seek my guidance on things. He was very academically gifted. He just needed someone to help him realize that. He's done all the hard work; I just asked a few questions and provided some advice and encouragement. And he's done well.

Jake: A Mentoring Classroom Environment

Professor Rose was very cool, an awesome person. She let us call her by her first name, but we didn't have to. She was super approachable and kind, someone to look up to, a professional. I started taking her classes, and I kind of fell in love with her and her teaching style. I thought of her as a mentor. She would always stay after class and invite us to stay after as well to ask questions or just to talk.

I felt safe opening up to her because I just appreciated her as a person. She made herself multi-dimensional, not just a professor, by talking about her family and her personal life experiences. She talked about some of the hardships she had gone through growing up. And she was extremely vulnerable in her sharing and would do so within the context of what we were learning. I kind of had some similar experiences of trauma growing up, so just knowing that someone else had also gone through that helped me a lot. Professor Rose was an example of being vulnerable and powerful at the same time. She showed me what resiliency can look like. And she inspired me to do self-healing and to share my stories, so I could help people as well.

One time in her class we were talking about plants for some reason, and I mentioned that I liked plants as centerpieces. The next week in class there were plants in the center of every table. I thought, "WOW" she really is listening! I felt so respected and so happy. I don't know if

it was her money or the school's money, but she took the time to get it done. And I think it was not only in response to me, but I think it was just her embodying her practice, one of which is to create a beautiful environment and space for learning. So, instead of just talking about it or showing us pictures, she actually did it. That was huge to me!

At the end of each semester she would thank us for being in her class and tell us how much she appreciated us. And she encouraged us to get together with her in the future. In essence, she was saying the relationship didn't have to stop because the class was ending. My relationship with Professor Rose gave me the confidence to go out and feel like I could believe in my dreams and pursue them. My relationship with her went from teacher to mentor to professional coach to friend. Every student should have a Professor Rose!

Elle: A Portrait of Resilience

When I was 12, I was the angriest kid; I was really mad at the world. There were just all kinds of things happening at home, and around 7th or 8th grade I just stopped caring. I went to school just to get out of the house. And when I was in 8th grade I got suspended. I got suspended a lot. I think I was smoking on school grounds or something.

There was nobody that I felt like I needed approval from. I didn't care about my family's approval or anyone else's. But there was one English teacher, and she was very scary. She was the scariest lady, and her name was Mrs. Sherman. People called her the Sherminator. She was mean, and she demanded so much from us. She just didn't take any BS from anybody. And she *loved* me.

One day I was in the principal's office getting suspended again, and she came in, and she was almost in tears. She was like, "You know, I don't know what's going on with you, but it doesn't make any sense to me." And she said, "You are, hands down, the brightest student that

I've ever had, and I've been teaching a long time. I *really* want to see you do well, and I'm really afraid for you."

And, you know, nobody else got to me at all. I wanted to piss my parents off, so I didn't mind that I was getting grounded or whatever. But for *her* to show me her worry and her disappointment and then also like, her vote of confidence, that really meant a lot to me. When I got support from her, it made me want to perform better. I wanted to do well for her. But I still just couldn't escape the misery of my life, my home life, you know?

In 9th grade, I was put in a program for 'bad' kids,' and I was assigned a mentor who was a college student. We met a few times a week after school, and we would just sit and do homework with a group of other students. And when we finished our homework we would just hang out. I think just having a space for people to do that—hang out, talk, get our work done, get help and have it be fun—was a game changer for me. And every other weekend, we would go out and do an activity. It was really awesome, and I did *so* well. It was exactly what I needed. I got my homework done, I felt supported, and there were people there to help me if I needed it. And it was very personal.

But as soon as I was out of that program, I went back to falling through the cracks and nobody really noticing how bad I was doing or how unhappy I was until I got in trouble again. I think any time a kid acts out that they're looking for attention. And of course, if you asked them, they would deny it and just say they want to be left alone.

People weren't paying attention to me unless I was acting out. And I think, even though in my mind I really just wanted everybody to let me do whatever I wanted, there was an unconscious part of me that really just craved structure and craved a support network with people who cared about me. And I craved having people who would ask me how I was feeling. Nobody

asked me how I felt about anything. Nobody asked me my opinion on anything. And I felt like nobody wanted to share their thoughts with me. I felt like I was so unimportant; it just infuriated me.

In my high school if you were absent a certain number of times, you would fail that class, and I did that in most of my classes. I didn't really go to school very much. I needed four more credits in English to graduate, and even though I had missed credits in his class due to my absences, my 12th grade English teacher sent me an e-mail a few weeks before graduation. And in the e-mail, he said, "Look, I really don't think it will help you if you do another year in high school. You really need to get your act together, but I don't think you need another year of high school. So, I'm passing you, and please make good choices with this opportunity."

I went to community college for a year but was just completely uninterested, and I stopped going. I worked for 12 years, and when I was 29, I decided to try school again. And here I am!

Professor Sanders: On Being Proactive

Early in my career when students would go missing, I would've never e-mailed them, or called them, or anything like that. I felt like that was intrusive. And I never had a professor ever do that, so I just thought I'd be overstepping my bounds. But we've been so focused on student success, and the research shows that even just one person really caring about a student can make a difference for them dropping out or staying in school.

After I read that research about five or six years ago, I started reaching out to students with an e-mail saying, "Hey, I noticed that you haven't been in class for two weeks, and I really miss having you here. I wanted to see if something is going on and how I can support you. If you're concerned about past work, be assured that we can work it out. We can figure out

deadlines. I'm really concerned that something maybe has happened. And I care about you." The response I got was *astounding*! Students would e-mail me back—sometimes within minutes—and say, "Oh my gosh; you're the first teacher in my whole life to ever reach out to me!"

I've noticed that a lot of students are really ashamed when they miss classes. And the reason they don't come back or tell me is because they thought I'd be upset with them. They're so astounded when I say, "How can I help you? What's going on? I'm worried about you." They can't believe it!

I once had a student stand up at the end of the semester and say, "There's something I have to say to everybody. This is the last day of class, and I want you to know I almost dropped out of this class because I had some things going on in my family, and I got behind, and I was discouraged, and I was like forget it; I'm not going to do this. And then Professor S reached out to me and e-mailed me, and I've never had that happen, and I just want you all to know that she really cares about you. In case you don't know, she *really cares* about you." And this was coming from a kid who was super quiet all semester!

Professor Austin: The Lasting Impression of an Informal Mentor

When I was in community college, I had one person who was an ongoing source of support for me, someone I would consider an informal mentor. The first time I went to his office was to thank him. I had gotten an A on my first speech, and I was so excited because he had given me all of these fantastic comments. It was the first feedback I had received in college that was really positive, and I wanted to thank him.

He was very interested in why I was a business major and if I was enjoying it. And I wasn't enjoying it. He asked me if I'd given any consideration to a different major and, at the time, I hadn't. So, that kind of opened the door for more conversation between us going forward.

He was the professor that when you went to his office, he would put everything away. It didn't matter what he was working on, he would put it aside and give you his full attention. And he was always very encouraging. He would tell me I had so much potential, and he was very interested in what my goals were, what my aspirations were. He took a lot of time with me. He was the first professor I ever had who really took time. It seemed like he genuinely enjoyed talking with me. And it wasn't just with me; he dedicated time to a lot of his students. He was very welcoming.

In the classroom, he was always very positive and uplifting and very open. And we all had to learn each other's names. He would talk to us about former students and other people who started at community college and went on to do wonderful things. He once spent an entire class talking to us about how to build a resume, how to do interviews, and how to do other goal and job-related things that had nothing to do with the class or our majors. And that always stuck with me. He was always my go-to. If I had a question about anything, I would go to him. His involvement in my life kind of shaped where I am now. I now try to do the same for my students because I know what a difference it makes.

Professor Miller: The Value of Mentoring

Mentoring changed my life! I was that community college student who, you know, I'm surprised I even graduated from high school. But I made it to community college. And I had these mentors, these teachers, and through them like I really found an academic voice. I really found a passion for learning. They taught me *how* to learn. They taught me how to advocate for myself. They taught me how to appreciate life-long learning. And I just think that was *so powerful* and *so* transformative to me. I was 17, 18, 19 years old.

My mentors really enabled me to move past an associate degree into a bachelor's degree and now into two master's degrees. I think there definitely needs to be more value placed on these relationships. They really can be life-defining moments for students.

Summary

Each of the 46 faculty, staff, and students interviewed for this grounded theory study presented a rich and varied lived experience and an insightful perspective on building relationships and informal mentoring at community colleges. The conditions that emerged from the interviews as positively influencing the development of informal mentoring relationships include rapport building, a proactive mindset, relationship building in the classroom, and a community-oriented campus culture. The conditions that negatively influence the development of informal mentoring relationships include dismissive and impersonal behaviors, educational traumas, and "old school" Darwinian attitudes and teaching methods. Faculty, staff, and students agree that informal mentoring relationships help strengthen students' motivation, self-confidence, and resiliency and also help them move forward from negative experiences and past educational traumas. There was a consensus view among all participants in the study that informal mentoring behaviors and practices should be institutionalized at the college.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This chapter includes a summary of the study and its findings, followed by a discussion of the findings in relation to the literature and theoretical underpinnings of the study. Significant findings that were not anticipated by the researcher are also discussed along with the researcher's interpretation of the findings and recommendations for practice and future research. Concluding thoughts on the study are offered by the researcher at the end of the chapter.

Summary of the Study

The purpose of this grounded theory study was to identify conditions conducive to the development of informal mentoring relationships between students and faculty and staff at community colleges. The study was guided by the following research question: How do faculty, staff, and students describe the conditions, both positive and negative, that influence the development of informal mentoring relationships? As the researcher believes that such relationships provide students with much needed holistic, comprehensive, and personalized support, it was important to identify and understand the conditions that help and hinder their development.

The study illuminated powerful stories of informal mentoring relationships between students and faculty and staff at one large Hispanic-serving public community college in a metropolitan area of the Southwestern United States. Interviews were conducted with 46 faculty, staff, and students. Analysis of the interview transcripts revealed positive faculty and staff behaviors, classroom experiences, and campus culture that contribute to the development of informal mentoring relationships. The analysis also identified negative behaviors, experiences, and campus culture that hinder the development of informal mentoring relationships. While the

findings of the study represent the perspectives and lived experiences of faculty, staff, and students at one college, they may be indicative of conditions at community colleges across the United States, as key demographics at the site college are similar to national community college data, as seen in Table 3.

Table 3.

Comparison of Site College and National Key Demographics

Key Demographic	Site College Data	National (U.S.) Data
Students Receiving Financial Aid	75%	78%
First-Generation College Students	45%	29%
Students Attending College Part Time	62%	64%
Minority Student Population (AACC, 2020)	*81% (Higher Hispanic %)	56%

The study brought to light how informal mentoring relationships with faculty and staff help students overcome feelings of despair they experience following negative interpersonal interactions. This realization led the researcher to construct a theory that breaks down and explains the dynamics involved in a student's response to a negative interpersonal interaction.

Structural Resiliency Theory asserts that the ability to overcome negative interpersonal interactions is reliant on three interdependent factors: (a) the breadth and depth of one's personal support system; (b) the collective level of positivity in one's previous interpersonal interactions; and (c) the combination of one's motivation, self-confidence, and perseverance. The researcher defines interpersonal interaction as a process of communication between two or more people that involves the exchange of information, feelings, and meaning by way of verbal and non-verbal messages. The concept of structural resiliency is discussed in further detail later in the chapter.

Summary of the Findings

Three main categories emerged from the interviews with faculty, staff, and students regarding the conditions, both positive and negative, that influence the development of informal mentoring relationships. In Chapter Four, these categories, along with subsequent themes and sub-themes, were described in detail and illustrated with the lived experiences of study participants. The main categories, themes, and sub-themes are recapped in Table 4.

Table 4.

Conditions that Influence the Development of Informal Mentoring Relationships

	Positive Conditions	Negative Conditions
Faculty & Staff Behaviors	<i>Rapport Building Behaviors</i> Set a positive and inviting tone Get personal & know students' names Demonstrate authenticity and caring Be a cheerleader: Support and encourage students	<i>Dismissive Behaviors</i> Students treated rudely Faculty not responding to e-mails
	<i>Proactive Behaviors</i> Reach out to students Understand help-seeking behaviors Demonstrate flexibility	<i>Impersonal Behaviors</i>
Classroom Experiences	<i>Relationship Building</i> Students on campus for class only Active learning in the classroom Time with professor before & after class Faculty photos & biographies on website	<i>Educational Traumas</i>
Campus Culture	<i>Community-Oriented</i> Student lounges/study areas near faculty offices Student jobs on campus Student conference hours Mentoring included in faculty college service hours	<i>"Old School" Darwinian</i>

Findings in Relation to the Literature

The key findings in the current study are consistent with conclusions drawn from previous research reviewed in Chapter Two. There is a consensus view that caring behaviors and a proactive mindset of faculty and staff are integral to the development of informal mentoring relationships with students at community colleges. The current study concurs with multiple previous studies that students are more likely to interact with faculty and staff who they perceive to be caring, fair, respectful, and approachable (Benson et al., 2005; Richmond et al., 2006; Schaeffer et al., 2003; Stipek, 2006). In addition, the findings in the current study agree with previous findings that faculty who establish rapport with students are more likely to see increased motivation, attendance, and attention in their classes. They are also more likely to experience better communication with their students, in person and via e-mail (Benson et al., 2005). The current study concurs with multiple previous studies that the most effective faculty are the ones who build relationships with students, in and out of the classroom, and who are proactive in reaching out to students who may not otherwise seek help (Engle et al., 2006; Hand & Payne, 2008; McClellan, 2014; Torres et al., 2006; Vasher, 2010).

The findings of the current study also support previous research on the barriers to student-faculty interaction at community colleges, including students' limited time on campus, students' lack of self-confidence in initiating contact with faculty, and students' perceptions that faculty are busy and not interested in interacting with them (Dulabaum, 2016; McClenney & Arnsperger, 2012). Other barriers to student-faculty interaction supported by the findings in the current study include faculty's time constraints and a lack of institutional and departmental support for interacting with students outside of class. For those faculty who do interact with

students regularly, there is a consensus that it is because they personally believe mentoring is part of their role as faculty at the college (Lundberg & Schreiner, 2004).

Findings in Relation to Theoretical Underpinnings of the Study

The current findings confirm and extend the theoretical underpinnings of the study, Cuseo's (2007) *Seven Central Principles of Student Success* and Rendón's (1994) *Validation Theory*. In his first principle, *Personal Validation*, Cuseo (2007) posits that students are more likely to achieve success when they feel welcome, recognized as individuals, and that they matter to their institution. Students' need for personal validation is confirmed in the current study under rapport building behaviors of faculty and staff. Students testified that they feel validated when faculty and staff demonstrate welcoming behaviors and take time to get to know them personally. In his fifth principle, *Social Integration*, Cuseo (2007) premises that students are more likely to be successful when they develop interpersonal relationships with faculty, staff, and peers. This assertion is supported throughout the current study but particularly relevant under positive classroom experiences when group work and other active learning strategies are employed, and students have opportunities to develop relationships with each other, as well as with faculty.

Unanticipated Findings Related to Rendón's *Validation Theory*

One of the main premises of Rendón's *Validation Theory* is that students' academic success requires both external affirmation and internal acknowledgements of self-competence (1994). In other words, when students receive external validation first from an informal mentor, for example, their inner strength and self-confidence increases and contributes to self-acknowledgement of their internal capabilities and potential. Rendón found this to be particularly true for low-income, first-generation college students.

The researcher anticipated that the findings of the current study would indicate that informal mentoring relationships are highly beneficial as a source of holistic support, which was the case for the students interviewed for the study, the majority of whom were, in fact, low income, first-generation college students. These supportive relationships also help buffer and mitigate feelings of despair students experience following negative interpersonal interactions. While there is value in an informal mentoring relationship in and of itself, its true value, based on the findings of the current study, is to provide students with external validation that will lead them to acknowledge their own inner strength and capabilities, a key tenet of *Validation Theory*.

Interpretation of the Findings

A student's failure to thrive at a community college is not intrinsically linked to their intellectual capacity or capability. Students struggle for a variety of reasons, many of which are tied to their personal circumstances, involve poverty, and may be extremely difficult to overcome. The caring support of an informal mentor can be transformative for students who struggle with nonacademic issues. In interpreting the findings of the study, the researcher sought to not only understand the conditions that help and hinder the development of informal mentoring relationships at community colleges, but also to understand the value and role of these relationships to students' motivation, self-confidence, and perseverance.

Previous research and the current study have unequivocally established that community college students benefit greatly from ongoing holistic, comprehensive, and personalized support that addresses both their academic and nonacademic needs. While this is the ideal, it is not in line with the reality and resources available at today's community colleges, at least in the formal sense. It is, however, possible to provide every community college student—who wants it—that same support, informally. Rather than advocating for more formal mentoring programs, the focus

for community college leaders should be to institutionalize mentoring behaviors and practices on their campuses.

While community college students and university students may project similar outward appearances and behaviors, in most cases, how and why they came to be at their respective institutions represent two vastly different narratives, and their personal support systems may vary widely. As stated in Chapter One, students at community colleges do not go through a competitive admissions process and often arrive underprepared academically and with fewer supports than their university counterparts (Phillips, 2019). A student's personal circumstances, state-of-mind, and capacity for resiliency are invisible, and many community college students arrive on campus already feeling defeated. There is no way to know how and to what extent a student will react, respond, and internalize even brief negative interpersonal interactions. An interaction that is innocuous to one student and simply shrugged off will send another student back to the parking lot or bus stop and out of higher education. The reasons behind the different responses are complex and encompass not only the interactions experienced by each student prior to the current negative interaction but also each student's entire makeup, background, and life history.

Although some students are able to overcome hardships and invalidating experiences on their own, other students, for a variety of reasons, will instead respond to negative interactions by giving up and dropping out of college. The most surprising and consequential finding of this study is the realization that every interpersonal interaction a student has either strengthens or weakens their structural resiliency. They are never unaffected by any interaction. In other words, *every* interpersonal interaction a student has at the college either moves them forward or backward in their educational journey. To the researcher, this is huge.

Structural Resiliency Theory

As previously stated, *Structural Resiliency Theory* asserts that the ability to overcome negative interpersonal interactions is reliant on three interdependent factors: (a) the breadth and depth of one's personal support system; (b) the collective level of positivity in one's previous interpersonal interactions; and (c) the combination of one's motivation, self-confidence, and perseverance. When a student has structural resiliency, they have a strong network of support, including informal mentors. Also, the majority of their interpersonal interactions at the college are positive, and when they do experience negative interactions, their network of support—which may just be one person at the college—acts as a buffer and mitigator to the potential harm of that interaction. Having structural resiliency (a) minimizes the damage done by negative interpersonal interactions, (b) restores the ability to function after a negative experience in a timely and efficient manner, (c) increases the ability to adapt to and recover from the effects of changing external conditions, and (d) strengthens the ability to mitigate future similar negative interactions independently.

The Jenga Effect

When thinking about a student's structural resiliency, consider the classic Hasbro game, Jenga. The object of the game is simple: Players remove pieces from the bottom of a stacked tower of blocks and place them on top. Eventually, when the tower is weakened by too many gaps in the structure, the tower becomes unstable and collapses. The player who causes the collapse loses the game. The idea is to create a solid foundation for the tower in order for it to maintain its integrity through each player's turn. The tower only remains intact as long as the foundation remains strong.

Jenga is an apt metaphor to describe a community college student's structural resiliency. As stated previously, the researcher defines structural resiliency as the ability to overcome negative interpersonal interactions that is reliant on three interdependent factors: (a) the breadth and depth of one's personal support system, (b) the collective level of positivity in one's previous interpersonal interactions, and (c) the combination of one's motivation, self-confidence, and perseverance. To illustrate this further using the Jenga metaphor, think of each Jenga block as either a positive or negative interpersonal interaction. The positive blocks are constructed of hardwood and represent strengthening students' motivation, self-confidence, and perseverance. The negative blocks are constructed of cardboard and represent weakening students' motivation, self-confidence, and perseverance.

In continuing with the Jenga metaphor, think of the foundation of the tower as a student's personal support system—their family, friends, college advisors, and formal and informal mentors. In Jenga, when the foundation is strong, the tower can depend less on the blocks for its stability. When the foundation is weak, the tower has to depend more on the blocks—especially the hardwood blocks—to stay standing. The breadth and depth of support a student has, or the number of supporters and the amount of support given by each, are the most critical components of *Structural Resiliency Theory*. When a student has an informal mentor on campus, they can go to that person following a negative interpersonal interaction, and that person can mitigate the potential harm of the situation and help the student get back on track. When the informal mentor does that, the student's structural resiliency is strengthened, and they are better equipped to overcome the next negative interaction on their own. If they do not have somebody on campus or at home, they may go to the bus stop or parking lot and leave, and they may never return. *Structural Resiliency Theory* and the role informal mentoring relationships play in supporting

students are important findings of the study that can, potentially, make a significant difference in improving the educational trajectory and overall experience of community college students.

Recommendations for Practice

The researcher has multiple recommendations for practice based on the findings of the study. Aside from expenditures related to possible additional staffing needs and professional development, the recommendations do not require substantial financial investment. The three categories for practice are institutional recommendations, departmental recommendations, and recommendations for professional development, as seen in Table 5.

Table 5.

Recommendations for Practice

Institutional Recommendations	Departmental Recommendation	Recommendations for Professional Development
Consider eliminating large lecture classes	Staffed reception desks	Rapport building
More student jobs on campus	First day of class campus tours	Interpersonal communication skills
Student lounge/study areas near faculty offices	Student conference hours open door policy	
More 3-hour, once-a-week classes	Honest conversations/department meetings	
Basic services open during night classes	Honest conversations/brown bag lunches	
Informal mentoring as part of faculty college service hours	Observe, learn, and share: Culture of collaboration	
Interpersonal communication skills included in the hiring, promotion, and tenure processes	Be visible on campus	
Faculty photos and biographies on the college website		

Institutional Recommendations

The researcher recommends that college leaders consider eliminating large lecture classes and consider having (a) more student jobs on campus; (b) student lounge/study areas near faculty offices; (c) more 3-hour, once a-week classes; (d) basic services open during night classes; (e) informal mentoring as part of faculty college service hours; (f) interpersonal communication skills included in the hiring, promotion, and tenure processes; and (g) faculty photos and biographies on the college website.

Students and faculty overwhelmingly prefer classes with 40 students or less, as large lecture classes tend to be impersonal and not conducive to active learning activities, group work, or relationship building. Large lecture classes also tend to rely on multiple choice assessments which often do not involve higher-level thinking. Students are more likely to use surface learning strategies like memorization rather than deep-thinking strategies like comprehension when preparing for multiple-choice exams. While classes with 60-120+ students are attractive to college leaders because they generate more income than smaller classes, as stated previously, large classes are one of the biggest barriers to beneficial student-faculty interaction (Carbone & Greenberg, 1998; Cuseo, 2007).

Most, if not all, community college students need to work at least part time. Having a job on campus provides students with multiple benefits, including more opportunities to interact with faculty and staff. As stated previously, student-faculty interaction is strongly associated with multiple positive student outcomes, including academic achievement, critical thinking, and educational aspiration (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Tinto, 1993). Also, students who work on campus experience less stress and encounter fewer conflicts when coordinating their work and school schedules. Students in the study said that working on campus makes them feel important.

They also participate in more campus activities and attend more college events than they did working off campus. Students and the college benefit when there are more student jobs on campus.

Lounge-type study areas near faculty offices provide students with a safe place to work and interact informally with faculty. As stated previously, frequent student-faculty interaction, in and out of the classroom, is the most important factor in student motivation, persistence, and retention at an institution (Chickering & Gamson, 1995; Kuh & Hu, 2001; McGillin, 2000; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Students and faculty also prefer 3-hour, once-a-week classes because there is more time for interaction, particularly during small group work, which gives students one-on-one time with each other, as well as with the professor who circulates among the groups and talks individually with students. In addition, breaks during 3-hour classes provide students and faculty with more time for one-on-one interaction.

Another way that college leaders can ensure that students feel important and respected is to keep basic college services open during night classes when many students are on campus. As stated previously, community college students rarely identify themselves exclusively as students. They are also parents, family providers, and employees, and they are often unable to come to campus during the day when offices and services are normally open (Bailey et al., 2015).

Faculty in the study know the benefits and rewards of interacting with students. They want mentoring to be a priority at the college and included in the five hours a week of college service that is required per their contract. As stated previously, time constraints and a lack of institutional and departmental support for interacting with students outside of class are potential barriers to student-faculty interaction (Lundberg & Schreiner, 2004). Students are more likely to initiate interaction with faculty who they have been able to get to know and feel comfortable

approaching. Having photos and biographies on the college website helps students get to know faculty. Students want to take classes with faculty who they can relate to and who are passionate about their subjects. When biographical information is not available on the college website, students go to “Rate My Professor” to learn about faculty. To institutionalize informal mentoring behaviors and practices on community college campuses, college leaders need to incentivize strong rapport building and interpersonal communication skills in faculty and staff.

Departmental Recommendations

At the department level, the researcher recommends (a) staffed reception desks; (b) first day of class campus tours; (c) student conference hours open door policy; (d) honest conversations, department meetings; (e) honest conversations, brown bag lunches; (f) observe, learn, and share: culture of collaboration; and (g) be visible on campus.

Every department should have someone at a reception desk at all times. In the interviews for the study, faculty, staff, and students expressed the frustration they feel when they go to department offices and find doors locked or front desks without staff present. It is particularly critical that when students go to a department office—or any office—to get information, that they encounter not a locked door or empty desk but the smiling face of a person who is ready to help them. To ensure that students know where department offices are on campus, it is very helpful—and appreciated by students—when faculty take their classes on campus tours on the first day of each semester. Students also appreciate when faculty are available to meet before and after class. To accommodate this, faculty can allot time, as part of their student conference hours, to be available to students before and after their classes. To encourage students to visit them during their student conference hours, it is helpful for faculty offices to be located in high student traffic areas and for faculty to maintain open door policies.

To improve the campus experience for everyone, faculty, staff, and administrators need to have honest conversations about the dismissive, impersonal, and rude behaviors that students experience, including feeling ignored when they e-mail faculty and do not hear back.

Conversations should also include “old school” Darwinian attitudes and teaching methods. These conversations should be commonplace and be held during department meetings, as well as during informal brown bag lunches. Faculty, staff, and administrators should share with each other their stories and practices regarding informal mentoring, being proactive, and being flexible with students. Periodically, students should be invited to department meetings to share their experiences at the college with faculty, staff, and administrators.

This study highlights many innovative and highly effective practices of individual faculty. All faculty can benefit and learn from observing each other in the classroom. In department meetings, time should be allotted for faculty who are more experienced with active learning strategies to share what practices they have found to be most effective, as well as practices they have found to be ineffective. In other words, there should be a culture of collaboration. This can be accomplished by adopting an informal policy of “observe, learn, and share.” Faculty and staff should also be visible on campus as much as possible to increase opportunities for informal interaction with students. As stated previously, many students rarely see their professors on campus outside of class, and when they do, the professor often appears to be busy or in a rush, giving the student the perception that they are not interested in interacting with them (Cuseo, 2007; Dulabaum, 2016; McClenney & Arnsperger, 2012).

Recommendations for Professional Development

Recommendations for campus-wide professional development include trainings and regular workshops on rapport building and interpersonal communication skills. One full-time

faculty summed up the importance of professional development on rapport building: “We need to focus on the intangibles and train all classified staff, administrators, faculty—pretty much everyone—to recognize that every impression with a student has to be a *good* impression, a helpful impression.” Trainings and workshops on rapport building and interpersonal communication skills should include role-playing, and sometimes they should include students. This way, faculty and staff can experience not only each other’s perspectives but also students’ perspectives of positive and negative interpersonal interactions. It is critical that faculty, staff, and administrators understand the experiences of community college students in order to institutionalize beneficial informal mentoring behaviors and practices.

Everyone benefits when informal mentoring behaviors and practices are institutionalized on community college campuses. Students thrive, faculty enjoy teaching more, and frontline staff have more positive interactions with less-frustrated students. In addition, community college leaders will confer more degrees and certificates and see higher transfer rates. Implementing the above-mentioned recommendations at the institutional and departmental levels along with having regular professional development trainings and workshops on rapport building and interpersonal communication skills, will help institutionalize informal mentoring behaviors and practices on community college campuses and improve the student experience.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study raises a number of opportunities for future research. Currently at community colleges, informal mentoring relationships between faculty, staff, and students are developed and practiced piecemeal and somewhat under the radar. They need to come out of the shadows and be more openly recognized and prioritized by college leadership. As this happens, future research studies should explore the challenges and effects of institutionalizing informal

mentoring behaviors and practices on community college campuses. While a grounded theory approach was appropriate for this study, and the perspectives and lived experiences gathered were highly valuable to the construction of the researcher's *Structural Resiliency Theory*, future studies should explore informal mentoring using other research methods. Studies that fully explore *Structural Resiliency Theory* and informal mentoring relationships, quantitatively, as well as qualitatively, will be of immense value in helping educators and leaders at all levels better understand the role these relationships play in the community college student experience.

Conclusion

Many of the takeaways from the study are really not all that surprising and are actually quite in line with human nature. That is, that we, as people, thrive when we feel cared about, that we are more driven to succeed when that success matters as much to someone else as it does to us, and that we all hunger for connection and community and to be treated with kindness and respect. The purpose of this grounded theory study was to identify the conditions, both positive and negative, that influence the development of informal mentoring relationships between students and faculty and staff at community colleges. These findings equip college leaders to make evidence-based decisions on what conditions to promote on their campuses and what conditions to discourage or eliminate. The researcher believes that informal mentoring relationships are a realistic and mutually rewarding way to provide students at community colleges with the holistic, comprehensive, and personalized support that they need.

While the researcher did identify conditions that help, as well as conditions that hinder the development of informal mentoring relationships, the biggest takeaway from the study was not a theory on the development of these relationships, but rather a theory involving the role they play in students' structural resiliency. *Structural Resiliency Theory* asserts that the ability to

overcome negative interpersonal interactions is reliant on three interdependent factors: (a) the breadth and depth of one's personal support system; (b) the collective level of positivity in one's previous interpersonal interactions; and (c) the combination of one's motivation, self-confidence, and perseverance. If a student has a strong personal support system, including informal mentors, and the majority of their interpersonal interactions at the college have been positive, they will overcome negative interactions much better than a student who has little or no support and has had multiple negative experiences at the college. When a student has an informal mentor who they can go to following a negative experience on campus, the potential harm of that interaction is mitigated by the mentor, and the student is better able to overcome future negative experiences on their own.

Every time a student experiences a positive interpersonal interaction, their structural resiliency is strengthened. Conversely, every time they experience a negative interaction, their structural resiliency is weakened, but much less so when they have a strong support system, even if it is just one person. Earlier in this chapter, the Jenga Effect was offered as an analogy for structural resiliency. Another fitting analogy is to think of structural resiliency as a muscle. The stronger the muscle is, the more effort it takes to weaken it. Think of each informal mentoring interaction with faculty and staff as building student muscle.

The powerful and poignant story of one staff member from Chapter Four, who I will call Lena, reflects the experiences of many participants and illustrates one of the key findings of the study, that community college students are extremely vulnerable. Lena's story also illustrates several points that the researcher hopes to convey: (a) that informal mentoring relationships matter, (b) that they lift students up who might otherwise always stay down, (c) that fragility and resiliency are invisible, and (d) that one negative interaction—one simple and brief interaction—

can set in motion a complex reaction with dire and lasting consequences. Lena's story is a fitting conclusion to the chapter and the study.

When I went to register for my first class at a community college, I remember being met with an angry person on the other side of the desk. And I was so intimidated, as it was, just to walk in there, and then to be met that way. After that, I wanted nothing to do with school. I remember that so clearly, and I remember that feeling so well. About 15 years went by before I went back to a community college.

I was so intimidated by just the thought of going to college for so long. At all the jobs I've ever had, I worked with people who had master's degrees, and I felt very small in comparison. I knew I had the ability to it, I just never did it. I felt very inferior to people who had a higher education. Coming here to this college and working with faculty who treat me with respect and take my opinions into consideration has really boosted my self-esteem. It does seem like we're equal members of a team. It's a very nice feeling. Now, I do have students who share with me how other faculty or staff on campus are rude to them. And it happens enough that you know it's not just the student...

What a student thinks and feels affects their persistence. This adaptation of a famous saying is helpful to keep in mind for all of us who work with community college students: "Every community college student we meet is fighting a battle that we cannot see and know nothing about. So, we need to be kind, always."

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APPENDIX A

Request for Participation in Research Study

Hello [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] I am a doctoral student researching how informal mentoring relationships develop between students and faculty and staff at community colleges. Informal mentoring relationships are loosely defined as supportive friendships that develop organically out of frequent and meaningful interaction between students and faculty and staff within the context of the institution.

If, like me, you have had or currently have an informal mentoring relationship with a student, [REDACTED] I would love to hear from you. While I believe many of us have these beneficial relationships with students, we often don't think of them, or refer to them, as mentoring. I doubt my student thinks of himself as my mentee or that I am his mentor, but informal mentoring essentially describes our relationship. From one brief interaction on campus two years ago to multiple subsequent meetings, a mutually rewarding connection was discovered. Now, our frequent conversations on campus include not only school and his career aspirations, but also his job(s), girlfriend(s), movies, music, joys, and frustrations. He knows that I am here for him and that I care. Wouldn't it be great if every student [REDACTED] had that with someone?

I believe every student [REDACTED] can benefit from having an informal mentor on campus and that every employee [REDACTED] is a potential mentor to at least one student.

If you are an informal mentor to a student currently, or have been in the past, please let me know if you would be willing to meet with me for an interview. Your insights are of immense value to my study and will hopefully help students have more opportunities to develop beneficial informal mentoring relationships with faculty and staff going forward.

Please kindly reply to [REDACTED] if you would like to share your experiences with me.

Thank you so much.

Sharon McMahon
[REDACTED]

APPENDIX B

Consent for Participation in Research Interview *Informal Mentoring at Community Colleges*

I, _____, agree to participate in research conducted by Sharon McMahon.

1. I have received sufficient information about this research project and understand my role. The purpose of my participation as an interviewee in this project and the future processing of my personal data has been explained to me and is clear.
2. My participation as an interviewee in this project is completely voluntary. There is no explicit or implicit coercion whatsoever to participate.
3. Participation involves being interviewed by researcher, Sharon McMahon. The interview will last approximately 60 minutes. I allow the researcher to take notes during the interview. I also allow the recording of the interview and subsequent dialogue by audio tape. It is clear to me that in case I do not want the interview and dialogue to be taped, I am fully entitled to withdraw from participation.
4. I have the right not to answer questions. If I feel uncomfortable in any way during the interview session, I have the right to withdraw from the interview and ask that the data collected prior to the withdrawal be deleted.
5. I have been given the explicit guarantee that the researcher will not identify me by name in any reports using information obtained from this interview, and that my confidentiality as a participant in this study remains secure.
6. I have carefully read and fully understand the points and statements of this form. All of my questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I voluntarily agree to participate in this study.
7. I have obtained a copy of this consent form co-signed by the interviewer.

Participant's Signature

Date

Researcher/Interviewer's Signature

Date

For further information, please contact **Sharon McMahon** at [REDACTED]

APPENDIX C

Interview Protocol - Faculty and Staff

Welcome the participant, thank them for meeting, and begin completion of the consent form. Provide the participant with a written description of the study and a copy of the consent form. Collect the consent form that the participant signs. Review the consent form and ensure they consent to both the participation and digital recording. Introduce the study verbally and thank them for agreeing to participate. Let them know that you look forward to hearing their unique perspective and experiences related to informal mentoring relationships with students at this community college or at another institution. These are just guiding questions.

1. Tell me about the informal mentoring relationships you've developed with students. Describe the conditions and circumstances around the initial interactions. Were they in the classroom, before or after class, or in your office?
2. What behaviors of faculty and staff do you believe help and hinder relationship building?
3. Describe how informal mentoring relationships provide students with holistic, comprehensive, and personalized support.
4. Describe the conditions on campus that are conducive to developing and maintaining informal mentoring relationships with students.
5. Describe the conditions on campus that are *not* conducive to developing and maintaining informal mentoring relationships with students.
6. What are some ways you try to connect with students in your classroom and on campus?
7. What do you believe is important for leaders at this college to know about informal mentoring relationships between students and faculty and staff?
8. Is there anything else you would like to share with me that you think may be helpful to my study?

APPENDIX D

Interview Protocol - Students

Welcome the participant, thank them for meeting, and begin completion of the consent form. Provide the participant with a written description of the study and a copy of the consent form. Collect the consent form that the participant signs. Review the consent form and ensure they consent to both the participation and digital recording. Introduce the study verbally and thank them for agreeing to participate. Let them know that you look forward to hearing their unique perspective and experience regarding informal mentoring relationships with faculty and staff at this community college.

While the questions that will be asked of the students will be similar to the questions asked of the faculty and staff during phase one of the study, the specifics of each student question will be determined after phase one has been completed.

VITA

Sharon McMahon

EDUCATION

2020	Old Dominion University Ph.D., Community College Leadership	Norfolk, VA
1989	California State University, Long Beach Master of Arts in Education, Social and Philosophical Foundations of Education	Long Beach, CA
1988	California State University, Long Beach Multiple Subject Teaching Credential	Long Beach, CA
1986	California State University, Long Beach Bachelor of Arts in Liberal Studies	Long Beach, CA

WORK EXPERIENCE

June 2018 - Present	Long Beach City College Instructional Assistant Foreign Language Department	Long Beach, CA
March - June 2019	Long Beach City College Interim Coordinator Writing and Reading Success Center	Long Beach, CA
February - June 2018	Long Beach City College Interim Instructional Assistant Computer and Office Studies Department	Long Beach, CA
February - June 2017	Long Beach City College Interim Senior Office Assistant Office of the Vice President, Academic Affairs	Long Beach, CA
1985 – 1994	Hoffman House Counselor and Case Worker	Long Beach, CA
1988-1989	Long Beach Unified School District Substitute Teacher	Long Beach, CA