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Title: <u>Cultivating Connection: Successful Relationship Building Strategies for Peer Mentors</u>

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Larry Roper

While it can be said that peer mentor-mentee relationships in college can lead to meaningful connections and interpersonal support, there is a lack of literature about how exactly mentor-relationship connections are made. This study examines the relationship building strategies that peer mentors used to connect with their mentees in the Faculty Student Mentor Program at Oregon State University. The purpose of this thesis is to add to the mentoring narrative and create a "mentoring guidebook" of relationship-building strategies for peer mentors to use to connect with mentees. The research from this study will help peer mentoring programs succeed by offering suggestions on how to intentionally cultivate connections.

Cultivating Connection: Successful Relationship Building Strategies for Peer Mentors

by
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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to any new college student who feels lost and alone. You are

worthy. You are supported. And you belong here.

Cultivating Connection: Successful Relationship Building Strategies for Peer Mentors

Chapter 1

Introduction

College is a time of transformation and discovery. It is a time when young adults experience independence for the first time, often being presented with an array of opportunities and challenges. The first year of college specifically, is a crucial time of identity development. This is the year when students are faced with the first opportunities to explore who they are academically, socially and psychologically. The first year of college is a time of extreme vulnerability; a time when students either find success, taking hold of new opportunities, or falter to the pressures of change. Taking this knowledge into consideration and understanding the pressures that young adults face when they enter college, it is essential for Student Affairs professionals to offer support throughout this transition and time of development. College institutions and Student Affairs professionals must be intentional in their approaches to supporting students and their journey to success.

Mentoring is an approach that can be used to aid in the support and success of college students. Built upon a relationship between a mentor and a mentee, mentoring is a viable tool to form connections between individuals. While an abundant amount of evidence shows that mentoring is a successful tool for relationship building (Bonin, 2016), the literature seems to lack exactly how these mentor-relationships are formed. In other words, although effective mentor-relationships are developing, it is difficult to decipher the specific practices and strategies mentors are using to connect with their mentees.

The Faculty Student Mentor Program (FSMP) is a new mentorship program at Oregon State University that focuses on supporting first-year students with their transition into college.

Finishing up its first year in a two-year pilot, the FSMP matches 1-5 first-year students (mentees) with two mentors: a faculty mentor and a peer mentor (upperclassmen). Based on research stating that well-designed faculty-student mentorship programs help increase retention and graduation rates (Campbell & Campbell, 1997) and reduce the opportunity gap for underrepresented minorities, first generation and Pell eligible students (Crisp, 2017), the purpose of FSMP is to offer students an immediate support system when they enter college. The central focus of the FSMP is to improve the student transition experience ("Faculty-Student Mentor Program", 2018).

Following my involvement with the FSMP and recognizing the impact that mentor-relationships can have on first-year college students, I found a desire to add to the mentoring narrative. Acknowledging the gap in the literature, I wanted to know the exact strategies that mentors, specifically peer mentors, use to connect with their mentees. Thus, my research question developed around my desire to uncover the successful relationship-building strategies peer mentors use to cultivate connections with mentees. To better understand how these connections are made, I studied the peer mentor-mentee relationships within the FSMP as the foundation of my research.

While the FSMP is able to successfully state that relationships have formed within the first year of the pilot, I believe that it is important to note that these relationships formed extemporaneously. I believe that while natural connections are meaningful, there must also be intentionality when building a mentor-relationship. In an attempt to be intentional myself, I approached this study with the deliberate hope that my findings would be able to offer the FSMP, and other mentoring programs, a "mentoring guidebook" of relationship-building strategies. Thus, the results of this study will directly contribute to the Faculty Student Mentor

Program at Oregon State University, as well broaden the mentoring literature by adding tangible

relationship building strategies for peer mentors.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Mentoring is an essential and meaningful tool for student success. "Mentoring has long been considered a developmental and retention strategy for undergraduate students, and research suggests mentoring efforts are positively related to a variety of developmental and academic outcomes" (Crisp, Baker, Griffin, Lunsford & Pifer, 2017). Recently, a variety of mentoring programs have emerged in higher education to aid in student success and development. While many mentoring publications acknowledge the positive concept of mentoring, few sources reference the exact practices mentors use to connect to their mentees. For the purpose of this thesis, this literature review will primarily focus on defining mentoring, peer mentoring, and the strategies peer mentors use to build relationships and cultivate connections.

Mentoring Defined

Before exploring the peer mentoring literature, we must first understand the importance and definition of *mentoring* in general. Simply explained and most importantly, mentoring is a tool for student success by way of offering students a sense of support (Campbell & Campbell, 1997; Crisp et al., 2017; Jacobi, 1991; Miller, 2002). Tinto's (2012) explanation of the importance of mentoring is simple: "For many students, social support in the form of counseling, mentoring, and faculty and peer advising can spell the difference between staying and leaving [college]" (p. 29). A more in-depth overview of the important benefits of mentoring, such as increased academic performance (Bonin, 2016; Campbell & Campbell, 1997), personal development (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh & Whitt, 2005; Miller, 2002), professional development (Kinkel, 2011) and college persistence (Crisp, 2010; Crisp et al., 2017) are addressed in the *Mentoring Benefits* section of this literature review.

Consequently, while the importance of the concept seems straightforward, the task of defining the term is more complex in that there are a variety of diverse definitions of the term *mentoring*. While there is an abundance of research regarding the prominence of mentoring, there is a lack of defining commonality. The numerous definitions and "descriptions of mentoring programs are so diverse that one wonders if they have anything at all in common beyond a sincere desire to help students succeed" (Jacobi, 1999, p. 505).

Dating back to Greek mythology, the concept of "mentor" was born out of *The Odyssey* (Hexter, 1993; Miller, 2002). *The Odyssey*, as told by Miller (2002) weaves the tale of Odysseus and his trusted friend, Mentor, whom he entrusts to counsel and advise his son, Telemachus, through aspects of development. Serving as a trusted adviser, Mentor guides Telemachus through successful transition into society. Following this conception, "mentor too has a proverbial existence as the name of any adviser; indeed, so common is the appellation that in English we no longer even need to capitalize the name" (Hexter, 1993, p. 23). Thus, while the history of a "mentor" is extensive, "there is currently an absence of a widely accepted definition and a lack of theory to explain what roles and functions are involved in a mentoring experience and how these experiences are perceived by college students" (Crisp & Cruz, 2009, p. 527).

Fortunately, acknowledging the lack of cohesion in defining the term *mentoring,* researchers Maryann Jacobi (1991), Gloria Crisp and Irene Cruz (2009) took it upon themselves to synthesize the empirical literature on mentoring and redefine its characteristics. In examining the inconsistencies in the definitions, the researchers noticed that *mentoring* had varying meanings to various industries: academic, business and psychology (Jacobi, 1991; Crisp & Cruz, 2009). Expending this knowledge, this section of the literature review offers an abbreviated review of mentoring definitions.

Baker & Griffin, 2010

Mentorship involves an emotional commitment that extends beyond sharing degree requirements and academic information; mentoring relationships are rooted in a mentor's long-term caring about a student's personal *and* professional development (p. 4).

Campbell & Campbell, 1997

Mentoring refers to a situation in which a more-experienced member of an organization maintains a relationship with a less-experienced, often new member to the organization and provides information, support, and guidance so as to enhance the less experienced member's chances of success in the organization and beyond (p. 727).

Carrad, 2002

A one-to-one, non-judgmental relationship in which an individual mentor voluntarily gives time to support and encourage another. This relationship is typically developed at a time of transition in the mentee's life, and lasts for a significant and sustained period of time *(qtd. in Miller, 2002, p. 28)*

Roberts, 2000

Mentoring is a formalized process whereby a more knowledgeable and experienced person actuates a supportive role of overseeing and encouraging reflection and learning within a less experienced and knowledgably person, so as to facilitate that person's career and personal development (p. 162).

Shandley, 1989

Mentoring is a supportive, often protective process. The mentor can serve as an important guide or reality checker in introducing the protégé to the environment he or she is preparing for (p. 60).

Although this is only a small sample of the numerous mentoring descriptions presented in the literature, the definitions above offer insight into the many ways in which higher education, and society in general, is able to describe one word. Taking this into consideration, it becomes imperative for mentoring programs to define what *mentoring* means to specific programs.

<center>*Mentoring Characteristics*</center>

Considering the inconsistent and varying definitions of *mentoring,* an exhaustive review of all the available definitions have allowed researchers, Jacobi (1991), Crisp and Cruz (2009), and Crisp et al. (2017) to identify four thematic components of the term:

1. "Mentoring relationships are helping relationships usually focused on achievement. The primary dynamic of the mentoring relationship is the assistance and support provided to the protégé (mentee) by the mentor" (Jacobi, 1991, p. 513). This form of a helping relationship deliberately focuses on helping the mentee find growth and success.

2. "A mentoring experience may include broad forms of support including assistance with professional and career development, role modeling, and psychological support" (Crisp & Cruz, 2009, p. 528). In this component, support occurs in broad forms and can include structured or unstructured plans.

3. "Mentoring relationships are personal and reciprocal" (Crisp & Cruz, 2009, p. 528). Understanding that relationships are generally formed from the act of mentoring, the interaction that occurs between mentors and mentees often lead to personal exchanges and shared emotional benefits (Jacobi, 1991).

4. "Relative to their students, mentors have more experience, influence, or achievement within the educational environment" (Crisp et al., 2017, p. 19). In the lens of higher

education, mentors have more knowledge and insight about the educational environment that the mentee is transitioning into.

Recognizing the extensive literature available on mentoring, the key takeaway in understanding this undefined term is that *mentoring* is "a way of enhancing the personal and professional development of students, as well as of smoothing transitions into, and through, university" (Christie, 2014, p. 955).

Mentoring Approaches

Another researcher who acknowledges the broad range of mentoring descriptions is Andrew Miller whom through his publication *Mentoring Students and Young People: A Handbook of Effective Practice* (2002), has identified three significant approaches to understanding mentoring. Following a review of the theoretical literature on mentoring, Miller (2002) recognizes the need for a distinct and comprehensive description of the term and offers three conceptual approaches to mentoring.

The first approach explains the "popular consensus" to defining mentoring which accepts all common descriptions of mentorship (Miller, 2002). According to the popular consensus approach, mentorship (a) "is a deliberate, conscious, voluntary relationship", (b) has no specific time limit, (c) is supported by an organization, (d) exists between an experienced person and other people, (e) generally does not have a "direct, hierarchical or supervisory chain of command", (f) "outcomes are expected to benefit all parties for personal growth, career development, lifestyle enhancement, spiritual fulfilment, goal achievement, and other mutually designated areas", (g) benefits the community, (h) exists through one-to-one relationships or in small groups and (i) "typically focuses on interpersonal support, guidance, mutual exchange, sharing of wisdom, coaching and role modeling (Miller, 2002, p. 29).

Another significant approach to defining mentoring is the "continuum" approach (Miller, 2002). Using Gay's (2000) theory that argues "that mentoring is about helping people in transition", Miller explains that mentoring occurs in a continuum of helping behaviors in conscious and competent states of being (2002, p. 29). In this approach, the mentor relationship occurs through a continuum of helping behaviors: (a) exploring, (b) revealing, (c) guiding, (d) advising, (e) teaching, (f) training, and (g) directing (Gay, 2000). Understanding that mentoring is imperative during times of transition, it is critical for mentors to move through these helping behaviors on a continuum with their mentees.

> The continuum has at one end the 'exploring' behavior, which involves the mentor in supporting the mentee, promoting his or her independence and encouraging risk taking. These behaviors provide encouragement for lifelong learning, and involve mutual personal growth and a learning partnership. At the 'directing' end of the mentoring spectrum, the mentor is confirming, creating greater dependence and encouraging safe options (Miller, 2002, p. 30).

Miller's final approach to understanding mentoring is the "key characteristics" approach (Miller, 2002). According to Miller's (2002) review of Anderson and Shannon's *Toward a Conceptualization of Mentoring* (1995), mentoring is (a) intentional, (b) "a nurturing process to help people grow towards their full potential", (c) "an insightful process involving the acquisition of wisdom by the mentee", (d) supportive, and (e) "involves role modeling" (p. 30). Further, Anderson and Shannon (1995) explain that mentoring encompasses the process of nurturing and uses key functions of encouragement and counselling by focusing on personal development. Through this approach, a mentor creates a caring relationship with the mentee by

assuming the responsibility of a role model (Anderson & Shannon, 1995). Through this relationship the mentor assumes the actions of five functions:

1. *Teaching*, involving modeling, informing and questioning behaviors

2. *Sponsoring,* involving protecting, supporting and promoting behaviors

3. *Encouraging,* involving affirming, inspiring and challenging behaviors

4. *Counseling,* involving listening, advising and problem-solving behaviors

5. *Befriending,* involving relating behaviors (Miller, 2002, p. 31).

Without a clear, singular definition of term *mentoring*, it is a wonder how so many mentoring programs have come into fruition in higher education. Thankfully, with researchers like Jacobi (1999), Miller (2002), Crisp and Cruz (2009), to investigate and develop comprehensive themes, there is an opportunity to advance mentoring as a guided tool for student success.

Mentoring Aims

Understanding that there are numerous ways in which higher education institutions and individual programs can approach mentoring, it is important to note the aims and objectives that mentoring programs should strive for. Miller (2002) explains that there are three overarching aims for mentoring: (1) developmental, (2) work-related, and (3) subject. While these aims are broad, they subjectively encompass most of the possible objectives that college students could achieve from mentoring participation.

Developmental aims include, increasing students' self-esteem, developing students' motivation, developing interpersonal life skills, attitudinal and behavioral adjustment towards positivity, and maturational transitioning (Miller, 2002). *Work-related aims* include, aspirational

development and employability skills, and *subject aims* include, vocational development, increased academic achievement and development of learning skills (Miller, 2002).

While the objectives of developmental aims are noticeably broad, these aims may be the most influential on the overall student experience. The various objectives within developmental aims hope to develop the student personally and socially. The personal and social development of a student is essential in their success in college (Kuh et al., 2005). "Young adults are in search of self-image, belonging, and social bonds both at the personal and professional levels. Good mentors facilitate such processes" (Cramer & Prentice-Dunn, 2007, p. 8). Mentors who are intentional in their mentoring conversations by leading "early discussion of situations that are to be encountered and agreeing on coping strategies can (help the student) build confidence" (Miller, 2002, p. 37). Improving self-esteem and developing concepts of motivation increases the likelihood of overall success and positive outcomes (Miller, 2002).

Further, the motivational objective in developmental aims is essential in a student's collegiate success. Developing a sense of motivation and the importance of the concept early on will increase student performance and encourage to work harder. "Grades are only likely to improve if students are making more effort in class and at home, and the mentor has a role in providing added extrinsic motivation, as well as encouraging students to want to perform better for themselves" (Miller, 2002, p. 37). Instilling the concept of motivation early on in a student's collegiate life will set them up for success, both personally and academically.

The *work-related aims* of mentoring can help students develop future aspirations and goals for themselves. While mentors are not required to be experts in career guidance, one of the primary goals of a mentor is to broaden the horizon for their mentees. "The role should involve helping the students analyze their career preferences and explore possible further education and

work routes that they may not be aware of or have fully considered" (Miller, 2002, p. 38). Much like the work-related aims, the objectives of *subject aims* of mentoring strive to develop the mentees' knowledge and skills regarding their academic subjects. Developing these academic skills increase the possibility of academic achievement (Miller, 2002).

Striving to meet developmental, work-related and subject objectives are essential in the success of mentoring and the overall success of a college student mentee. Without common goals such as developing a mentee's motivation, ambition and academic skills, the purpose of mentoring depletes. Recognizing that the overarching aims of mentoring touch on multiple aspects of human development, it could be said that the purpose of mentoring is to care for the whole person. "Mentors who care for the whole person can provide students with a smile and sense of connection, and at best, become a tremendous springboard for personal and professional development" (Cramer & Prentice-Dunn, 2007, p. 6).

Mentoring Benefits

The positive effects of mentoring are significant and influential. "Mentoring of university students provides clear institutional and individual benefits, including increased retention rates, lower dropout rates, improved academic performance, greater access to academic resources for students, increased post graduate opportunities, and improved personal satisfaction" (Putsche, Storrs, Lewis & Hayle, 2008, p. 513). The benefits of mentoring are so influential that mentoring has been recognized as a national priority "given its positive influence on decision making, aspirations, and outcomes of youth in the United States" (Bruce & Bridgeland, 2014; Crisp et al., 2017, p. 14). This national priority has led to an influx of program implementation in colleges and universities which in turn has allowed higher education institutions to address key issues such as retention and academic achievement (Crisp et al., 2017).

The increased focus on mentoring has simultaneously allowed researchers to study the benefits mentoring has on student success and higher education as a whole. The positive outcomes of mentoring programs are vast and undoubtedly effective. Participation in mentoring programs have led to increased academic performance for both mentees (Campbell & Campbell, 1997) and peer mentors (Bonin, 2016). Research also suggests that mentor-to-mentee contact positively correlates with persistence and lower dropout rates (Campbell & Campbell, 1997; Crisp et al., 2017; Gross, Iverson, Willett, & Manduca, 2015). Personal development (Kuh et al., 2005; Miller, 2002) and professional development (Kinkel, 2011) of a student can also be attributed to mentoring participation. Positive outcomes of personal development include increased self-esteem (Collings, Swanson & Watkins, 2014) and increased motivation (Miller, 2002). Further, "having a mentor can improve the quality of your work and your overall experience as a student" (Casto, Caldwell & Salazar, 2005, p. 333).

Moreover, while this thesis does not focus specifically on the important issues of social justice, it should be noted that mentoring efforts positively influence "underrepresented and underserved groups such as African American, Latino/a, and low-income students" and "may be an effective means to diversify the science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) pipeline and workforce" (Crisp et al., 2017, p. 14).

> Mentoring is especially important for low-income, first generation college students (Crisp & Cruz, 2009; Torres, 2004) as well as for academically underprepared entrants (Salinitri, 2005). It also helps many students of color on predominately white campuses, who sometimes find the environment unsupportive and inhospitable (Fleming, 1984; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Johnson, Matthew, Leonard, Alvarez, Inkelas, Rowan-Keyan & Longerbeam, 2007). For these students, mentoring programs… can contribute to success

by providing social and emotional support for individual students, as well as a safe haven for groups of students who might otherwise find themselves out of pace in a setting where they are a distinct minority (Fleming, 1984; Guiffrida, 2003; Torres, 2004; Tinto, 2012, p. 29).

Engaging underserved students in peer mentoring programs can be a "critical retention and enrichment strategy" (Zevallos & Washburn, 2014, p. 25). Mentoring programs offer underrepresented and underserved students benefits of equity and inclusion in the form of support (Crisp et al., 2017) which presents an exceptionally positive outcome for institutions that are focused on promoting social justice.

Likely one of the most influential benefits of mentoring is that it introduces a sense of belonging, combating "feelings of isolation and marginalization" (Casto et al., 2005, p. 333). With a general understanding that higher education significantly emphasizes retention efforts, the outcomes and benefits of mentoring programs are essential. "Mentoring and advising not only build a sense of belonging, but also play a fundamental role in linking students to academic support and addressing their ability to be prepared" (Gross et al., 2015, p. 106). Instilling a sense of belonging through mentorship early on in a student's collegiate journey can make all the difference in their success and motivation to persist. A student's sense of belonging may come from a number of factors, with some of the most notable being academic and social integration.

Tinto's model of retention, also known as Tinto's model of departure, focuses on the amount of social and academic integration a student has with their institution. This model suggests that students who are more engaged on campus, increase their chances of social and academic integration which consequently leads to an increased chance of retention (Crisp et al., 2017). "The stronger the individual's level of social and academic integration, the greater his or

her subsequent commitment to the institution and to the of goal of college graduation"

(Pascarella, Terenzini & Wolfe, 1986, p. 157). Mentoring programs naturally allow students to

partake in a social activity and receive social support (Tinto, 2012) and therefore, inherently lead

to the benefits of social integration and sense of belonging (Collings et al., 2014; Gross et al.,

2015).

Peer Mentoring

"Peer mentoring programs seek to provide academic, career, and/or psychosocial

development to undergraduate students through the provision of guidance from a more

experienced student" (Crisp et al., 2017, p.44). Upon the success of mentoring and the positive

outcomes of its practice, mentoring in higher education has grown into much more than the

counsel between a faculty member and a student. While the concept of peer mentoring is not new

to higher education, there seems to be a lack of fundamental strategies within the scheme. This

section of the literature review will focus on the basic concepts of peer mentoring and the peer

mentor training strategies found by researchers in the field.

Fundamentally, individuals who assume the role of a peer mentor are of similar status as

their mentee and are able to share their insights from having greater experience than their mentee

(Miller, 2002). Most peer mentoring programs match an upperclassmen student (peer mentor)

with one or more new students (mentees) (Vickers, McCarthy, Zammit, 2017) with the hope that

the peer mentor will ease the transitional experience by offering social and academic support

(Miller, 2002). Recognizing these characteristics, "a commonly acknowledged description of a

peer mentor is a guide who helps freshman navigate through academic, social, and personal

difficulties" (Bonin, 2016, p. 16).

Miller explains that while a majority of the literature regarding peers focuses on *peer tutoring* which "involves educational support through meetings between advanced learners and less advanced learners", some argue that peer tutoring has evolved into "peer helping", an umbrella term that includes, "peer mentoring, peer teaching, peer tutoring, peer facilitation, peer counseling, (and) peer coaching" (2002, p. 125). What began as simple peer-to-peer academic support has developed into something much more substantial. This growth has led many peer mentoring programs to become much more all-encompassing, not only supporting the academic needs of new students but supporting their social, psychological and professional development as well (Miller, 2002). Typically, the relationships that are built in peer mentoring programs demonstrate more experienced students providing advice, support and knowledge to less experienced students (Collier, 2017). Providing such support aims to improve mentees' overall academic performance (Collier, 2017), life skills and adjustment to college (Miller, 2002).

Additionally, while peer mentoring is not a new concept, a majority of the literature available focuses primarily on hierarchical mentoring (Collier, 2017) which asserts that mentoring occurs in "a one-on-one relationship between a student and a faculty member or student affairs professional" (Crisp, 2009, p. 190). Although, many mentoring relationships are often formed between other individuals outside of the hierarchical, professional norm, such as upperclassmen students, peers and family members (Collier, 2017; Zalaquette & Lopez, 2006). Thus, the role of a "mentor" in a mentoring relationship can be performed by various individuals in an educational setting.

Mentoring relationships may be "characterized by the forms or 'sources of mentors' including faculty members, staff members (e.g., academic advisor), graduate students and peers" (Crisp et al., 2017, p. 20). While each "source of mentor" has notable expertise to offer, the

expertise that comes from the source of a *peer mentor* is uniquely influential on a college student's experience. "Due to their closeness in age and college-life experiences, peer mentors relate to the interpersonal challenges and feelings of college students more successfully than a college's faculty and/or staff members" (Jacobi, 1991; Bonin, 2016, p. 20). Peer mentors and mentees share a common identity of being in the college student role (Collier, 2017). For a mentee, sharing a common identity with their mentor, someone who is supportive of the mentee's success, can have a profound influence on the mentee's college experience.

"The common objective of peer mentoring is to transition students from secondary school into college by decreasing stress through informal, caring relationships" (Bonin, 2016, p. 16). For first-year students, the college transition can be intimidating, overwhelming and often difficult to navigate. Understanding this, Tinto (1987) "argued that peer mentoring can provide effective support and guidance for undergraduates entering new intellectual social terrain" (qtd. in Sloane, 2010, p. 11). Therefore, being matched with a peer mentor who has already gone through the college transition experience and whom shares a common identity, can offer first-year students a sense of support by helping to eliminate some of those overwhelming feelings.

There are many benefits to the common identity that is shared between peer mentor and mentee. First, through the shared experience of going through college together, peer mentors often become role models to their mentees (Zevallos & Washburn, 2014). "Peer mentors promote success by helping new students learn the college student role" (Collier, 2017, p. 5). Having completed their first year of college recently, peer mentors are able to offer mentees a perspective that many other mentors cannot. Further, it has been found that peer mentors may have more credibility compared to faculty mentors who participate in hierarchical mentoring programs. While this literature review is not a comparison of mentoring programs, the evidence

that peer mentoring has a different effect on mentees is significant. "Because role modeling is present in peer mentoring relationships but not in hierarchical ones, and importance of similarity on trustworthiness and credibility, peer mentoring may be relatively more effective in mentoring undergraduate students due to student mentees' perceptions of peer mentors being more credible" (Zevallos & Washburn, 2014, p. 15). Simply put, there is a natural sense of trust that is built into peer mentor relationships. Collier (2017) suggests that because of the common identity that is shared between peers, and the absence of hierarchy, mentees are more likely to follow the advice of a peer mentor, ultimately allowing the mentee to succeed.

Peer Mentee Benefits

Building upon the notion that peer mentoring provides increased trustworthiness and credibility, Miller (2002) suggests that mentees "learn more from peer mentors as they find it easier to ask questions and tend to resist less when working with peers than with teachers or adults" (p. 128). Additionally, Miller (2002) proposes that mentees benefit in general due to the simple fact that communication is coming from a peer, rather than an adult. Mentees often "find that what is being communicated is more interesting when taught by peer mentors" and "discover that what is being learned is easier when a peer mentor is involved" (Miller, 2002, p. 128).

Further adding to the *mentoring benefits* previously mentioned in this literature review, other specific benefits for students who are mentored by peers include "increased motivation for academic success, academic skills, familiarity with the college environment" (Crisp et al., 2017, p. 45). Generally speaking, when compared to hierarchical mentoring programs, "the benefits of a peer mentoring scheme appear to offer higher levels of integration to the university and lower levels of intention to leave the university" (Collings et al., 2014, p. 941). Collings and colleagues suggest that the higher levels of integration seen in peer mentoring support Jacobi's (1991)

assessment that peer mentors "promote involvement through role modeling or by demonstrating through their own activities the benefits of involvement" (p. 523). By participating in a peer mentoring program, first-year students become more integrated with the university (Collings et al., 2014) and "are better able to adjust to college life" (Zevallos & Washburn, 2014, p. 29).

Accordingly, it seems that the credibility that is instinctively built into peer mentoring allows peer mentees the benefit of a trustworthy role model (Zevallos & Washburn, 2014; Collier, 2017; Miller, 2002). Therefore, in addition to the benefits mentees receive from mentoring in general, such as increased academic performance (Campbell & Campbell, 1997), personal development (Kuh et al., 2005), and improved motivation (Miller, 2002), mentees receive an added layer of benefits when mentored by their peers.

Peer Mentor Benefits

Further expanding on the perception that peer mentoring programs are "all-encompassing", research suggests that the relationships formed within these programs are mutually beneficial to both the peer mentor and the mentee. "A prime aim of peer mentoring is to also develop the mentor" (Miller, 2002, p. 127). Some researchers even go as far to suggest that the benefits peer mentors receive outweigh the received benefits of mentees (Miller, 2002). This statement is not to say that the benefits of mentee participation are unsubstantial, just that the benefits of peer mentors are significant and noteworthy. Peer mentoring programs and the relationships built within them are valuable for both the peer mentor and the mentee (Crisp et al., 2017).

There are many benefits and positive outcomes for students who embark on the peer mentor role. Peer mentors who participate in mentoring programs often develop a sense of self, demonstrating an increase in self-confidence (Terrion & Philion, 2008), commitment, and

responsibility (Miller, 2002). The development of communication skills such as interpersonal, counseling and mentoring skills are common among peer mentor outcomes (Miller, 2002). Additionally, it has also been found that peer mentors develop professional and leadership skills throughout their participation in peer mentoring programs (Zevallos & Washburn, 2014). "Mentors are building professional skills and gaining confidence by identifying and sharing their academic skills. In their role as mentors, they begin to see themselves as capable leaders and professionals" (Zevallos & Washburn, 2014, p. 29).

Participation in mentoring programs lead peer mentors to experience many powerful and positive impacts. In the act of developing communication and professional skills, peer mentors are engaging in their own identity development and blossoming into leaders (Zevallos & Washburn, 2014). Research has found that many peer mentors get involved with peer mentoring "out of a desire to give back to other students and return the support they received when they were trying to make the adjustment to college" (Collier, 2017, p. 12). In giving back and integrating themselves in a leadership role, peer mentors increase their confidence and embark on identity development (Collier, 2017). Peer mentors begin to internalize their peer mentor role as a helper and a leader. By serving in a role that practices support, communication skills, psychosocial functions and friendship (Crisp et al., 2017), peer mentors are engaging in a full, well-rounded developmental experience. Peer mentors are not only learning skills that they can apply to their education, they are learning life skills that they can use in preparation "for the next stage of their own journeys" (Crisp et al., 2017, p. 52; Miller, 2002; Zevallos & Washburn, 2014).

Peer Mentoring Strategies

Although the literature about peer mentoring provides a plethora of aims and benefits, research regarding the strategies to reach these benefits is limited. "Connecting authentically with peers enriches the learning process" (Kuh et al., 2005, p. 30), leading to positive outcomes such as increased academic performance (Campbell & Campbell, 1997), improved motivation for success (Crisp et al., 2017), personal development (Kuh et al., 2005) and collegiate involvement (Jacobi, 1991). While these outcomes are significant to the first-year experience, the question of how peers connect authentically remains. How exactly do peer mentors reach these positive outcomes? What strategies are peer mentors using to connect with their mentees? What must happen in the peer mentor-mentee relationship to lead mentees to reach these benefits?

Understanding the Role

Research suggests that understanding the role of what it means to be a mentor is important. While understanding the mentoring role sounds simple, the concept may be a bit more complicated. As we reviewed earlier in this chapter, a singular definition of the term mentoring is missing which means that the definition of the mentor role is also missing. These terms are inconsistent in the literature, and while the role of a mentor is invaluable (Cramer & Prentice-Dunn, 2007), a conceptual baseline of mentoring and defining roles are absent (Crisp et al., 2017, p. 28). "Although the need for mentors is clear, the exact role of mentors on college campuses is far more complex" (Cramer & Prentice-Dunn, 2007, p. 2). In order to become an effective mentor, a foundational strategy of understanding the role itself is needed.

"A mentor's role is multifaceted: teacher, counselor, role model, guide, and friend… Depending on the goodness of fit between mentor and mentee and on the mentor's needs at a given time, you may choose to take on some or all aspects of the role" (Casto et al., 2005, p.

334). Without stating that this is a strategy of becoming an effective mentor, a vast amount of research mentions the importance of understanding the role of *mentor*.

In order for the mentee to reach the potential benefits of mentoring, the peer mentor must first understand their role as a mentor. Miller (2002) implies that the aims and goals of a mentoring program will help define the role of a mentor. Depending on the program's approach, the role of mentoring will be distinctive and integrative (Miller, 2002). For instance, if the mentoring program aims to develop emotional intelligence, the role of a mentor participating in that program could be more of a counselor or friend, while a mentoring program that aims to increase academic performance could be more of a teacher or tutor (Miller, 2002).

Collier (2017) suggests that only one role is important in peer mentoring: the shared identity of the college student role. According to Collier (2017), while peer mentors assist with academic and psychosocial development, becoming a role model to the mentee and helping mentees learn the college student role is the most important aspect of the relationship. By becoming a role model, the peer mentor is helping shape the mentees' understanding of college and forming a perspective that they can bond over together (Collier, 2017).

For many researchers, the role of mentor is all-encompassing. Miller (2002) suggests that peer mentors often fill a multitude of roles such as teacher, facilitator, counselor, coach and friend. As previously mentioned in this literature review, peer mentoring falls under the umbrella term of peer helping (Miller, 2002) which implies that the role of a peer mentor has the capacity to take on any role that one deems helpful.

Miller (2002) suggests that that below mentoring behaviors are roles peer mentors take on when stepping into mentoring:

1. *Befriending* is a form of helping and a role that peer mentors often undertake on with their mentees. Peer mentors who step into a befriending role provide emotional and social support to their mentees.

2. *Counseling* is a role that peer mentors may find themselves stepping into regardless of their experience with helping others. A person who assumes a counselor role helps mentees move forward.

3. *Coaching* is a directive form of helping. When helping their mentees with performance issues such as how to prepare for a test, peer mentors often take on the role of a coach, suggesting direct and focused techniques to their mentees.

While these are only a few of the roles that peer mentors could take on when mentoring new students, other researchers relate to the idea that peer mentors adopt multiple roles. "University instructors have a unique opportunity to serve as personal connections, informational resources, and professional role models for young adults" (Cramer & Prentice-Dunn, 2007, p. 1). Additionally, Crisp and colleagues (2017) state that "roles such as modeling, affirming, befriending, and supporting may be best provided by peer mentors" (p. 36). The relationship between a peer mentor and a mentee is not a straightforward teacher-student relationship, it is an all-encompassing relationship in which a peer mentor takes on several roles to guide mentees toward success.

Caring

Researchers, Cramer and Prentice-Dunn (2007) specifically suggest that mentoring should require the "adoption of the notion of 'cura personalis', or caring for the whole person" (p. 2). Acknowledging that most mentorship models focus on academic or professional development, researchers Cramer and Prentice-Dunn (2007) suggest employing a "compassion-

based mentorship model" (p. 3). 'Cura personalis' is a compassion-based mentorship model that allows mentorship to occur on an individual level of development. Rather than solely focusing on developing the mentee academically or professionally, 'cura personalis' allows (peer) mentors to care for their mentee's all-around well-being. The adoption of 'caring for the whole person' allow peer mentors to focus on their mentee's full potential, rather than singular aspects of development.

To employ such a framework, Cramer and Prentice-Dunn (2017) have offered a guideline of qualities for mentors to draw from to effectively build a relationship. If a peer mentor is to successfully 'care for the whole person' (of their mentee), they must be:

1. *Available* – "At a time when many college students have feelings of isolation, face-to-face availability is crucial" (p.3). Peer mentors must demonstrate to their mentees that their time together is important and one way to show this is to show up.

2. *Knowledgeable* – "An effective mentor is cognizant of the variety of unique issues college students face" (p. 3). Peer mentors must be aware of the multitude of issues that may appear in a mentoring session and therefore be knowledgeable of resources that could "aid students in social connection and, in the best instances, improve physical or psychological well-being for young adults" (p. 4).

3. *Educated in Diversity Issues* – Mentorship is a form of support that can help minority and underserved students feel a sense of belonging. Peer mentors who are the same gender or ethnic background of their mentee can "produce higher perceptions of support" (p. 4). And in the case that these similarities are absent, peer mentors "can draw on empirical data and consultation to become educated in issues of diversity.

This process may take time, but the benefits to students will be well worth the energy" (p. 4).

4. *Empathetic* – "By communicating understanding and care, young adults are provided a source of worth and someone to rely on in the framework of a potentially daunting college life" (p. 5). Peer mentors can employ humanistic components of empathy to show their mentees that they care. This "empathetic attunement" is an essential listening tool for peer mentors to show compassion.

5. *Personable* – "Experience has shown us that in many successful mentorship relationships, there is a willingness of the mentor to take a personal interest in the student's life" (p. 5). In order for peer mentors to communicate to their mentees that the relationship is important to them, they must willingly be open and honest. For a successful relationship to exist, peer mentors must engage with their mentees on a personal level.

6. *Encouraging/Supportive* – "Encouragement is especially important to undergraduates because they are usually less independent and emotionally mature" (p. 5). In order to build an effective mentorship relationship, peer mentors must support and encourage their mentees to think crucially. Offering words of affirmation and encouragement gives mentees a sense of support which essentially leads to a sense of belonging.

7. *Passionate* – "Communicating passion in your mentoring relationships with students … spreads positive thinking and galvanizes young adults to action" (p. 6). When peer mentors show a "passion or commitment to the mentorship relationship" (p. 6) mentees are filled with a sense of support and instilled with a desire to pursue goals.

While this seems to be a comprehensive set of guidelines for relationship building, it may be one of the only lists available in the literature. Guidelines and strategies for successful mentorship are limiting. Although implications and suggestions about how to be an effective mentor subtly exist, Cramer and Prentice-Dunn's (2007) compassion-based mentorship model about caring for the whole person may be the most direct list available.

Sharing

Literature regarding successful mentoring programs imply that the ability to relate to mentees and share personal experiences is essential in the success of mentorship relationships (Collier, 2017; Cramer & Prentice-Dunn, 2007; Zevallos & Washburn, 2014). In a recent mentoring program assessment, researchers Zevallos and Washburn (2014) found that "students connected with mentors who shared personal experiences and that connecting with their mentors helped them feel connected to the institution" (p. 29). Through this assessment, peer mentors reflected on their mentorship relationships and revealed the techniques that they thought were successful in relating to their mentees.

Techniques involving sharing, relating and revealing were by far the most effective techniques that peer mentors used to connect with students (Zevallos & Washburn, 2014). Peer mentors "indicated that revealing personal challenges helped to connect with students" (Zevallos & Washburn, 2014, p. 28). Further, Zevallos & Washburn (2017) found that "the most impactful way that [peer mentors] can contribute is through personal stories that reveal and highlight academic strategies relevant to the topics being discussed" (p. 27). By contributing their own personal stories, peer mentors are allowing their mentees to witness their vulnerability and willingness to open up about their own struggles. Introducing this state of vulnerability into a mentorship relationship demonstrates to mentees that peer mentors are credible and reliable

(Zevallos & Washburn, 2014). One peer mentor from Zevallos & Washburn's (2014) program assessment stated that "the students become more engaged when [information] comes from someone like them" (p. 27).

Another important aspect of sharing is listening. Zevallos & Washburn (2014) found that training peer mentors about communication skills such as active listening and asking open-ended questions leads to successful mentorship relationships. By learning how to communicate "both verbally and nonverbally, that they are listening [and practicing] open-ended questions (encourage others to talk and give more detail) rather than close ended questions (solicit only a yes or no answer)" (Zevallos & Washburn, 2014, p. 26), peer mentors are learning how to encourage mutual dialogue with their mentees. This mutual dialogue helps cultivate a relationship built on credibility and leads to the positive outcomes of mentoring.

Chapter 3

Methodology

The purpose of this study is to examine the approaches peer mentors use to connect with their mentees in the Faculty Student Mentor Program (FSMP) based at Oregon State University. To better understand the need for this research, the first two chapters of this thesis reviewed the fundamental terms and benefits of mentoring. This chapter will outline the methodology of the present study including the research perspective, research design and the research methods used to sort through the collected data.

Upon recognizing that a lack of qualitative research regarding relationship building strategies for mentoring programs exists, I sought to explore the approaches peer mentors are currently using to cultivate connections with their mentees. The results of this study will broadly contribute to the mentoring literature, as well as be added to a "mentoring guidebook" of relationship building strategies that I plan to create upon the completion of this thesis. My hope is that the strategies established in this thesis will be directly implemented into the FSMP for the second year of the pilot program.

Research Perspective

In order to fully comprehend the present study, it is important to know the researcher and the worldview that is undoubtedly interwoven into the research. First, it is important to note that as a graduate student studying Higher Education and an active contributor to the FSMP, the conclusions from this study are directly important to me. I am cognizant of the fact that I may be biased in the outcome of this research.

First, I believe that it is essential to understand the worldview and the theoretical structure of my mind and heart. While the present study does not focus on identity, for the

purpose of this section I offer that I self-identify as an educated, biracial woman of comfortable socioeconomic status. I am aware that I am privileged to attend graduate school and to be able to conduct research that will aid in the success of college students. Most importantly, I identify as a positive, optimistic human. I search for the good in people and am motivated by joyful desire. Recognizing this aspect of my identity, I approached this study with a desire-based mindset.

According to Tuck (2009), damage-based research focuses on the pain and negativities of the subject being studied. In direct contrast to this, a desire-based framework focuses on the hopes and visions of the subject being studied (Tuck, 2009). A desire-based framework searches for the strengths within a subject and what is working for that subject, rather than what has not worked in the past (Tuck, 2009). Desire-based frameworks have a mindset focused on reframing how we think about a subject, rather than accepting the history that we have been told (Tuck, 2009).

While damage-based and desire-based frameworks are mostly used for historical theories of change such as explaining the historical context of a community of people, I believe that these frameworks could be extended to most qualitative research, including the current study. "A theory of change helps to operationalize the ethical stance of a project, what are considered data, what constitutes evidence [and] how a finding is identified" (Tuck, 2009, p. 413). The present study ultimately hopes to positively change the ways in which peer mentors build relationships with their mentees. Thus, in the present theory of change (i.e. changing relationship building approaches), using a desire-based framework searches for what is working for peer mentors and the strategies that are having a positive effect on relationships, rather than focusing on the strategies that are not working.

Research Approach

The current study uses a qualitative methodological approach in exploring the relationship building strategies peer mentors use to connect to their mentees in a mentoring program. This methodology was chosen based on the context that this study is focused on constructing a narrative about people and their lived experiences. "Qualitative research is a systematic scientific inquiry which seeks to build a holistic, largely narrative, description to inform the researcher's understanding of a social or cultural phenomenon" (Astalin, 2013, p. 118). Qualitative research attempts to better understand a research problem by collecting evidence from the perspectives of the researched subject (Mack, Woodsong, MacQueen, Guest & Namey, 2005). Data in qualitative research is collected in a variety of ways such as interviews, focus groups and the use of open-ended questions. The data and findings of qualitative research often emerge organically from variables that are studied in a natural setting (Astalin, 2013) and are "especially effective in obtaining culturally specific information about the values, opinions, behaviors, and social contexts of particular populations" (Mack et al., 2005, p.1). The present study attempts to better understand the behaviors of the peer mentor population by using the peer mentors as variables and their mentoring groups as the natural setting.

Whereas quantitative research attempts to gather objective data and removes the investigator from the investigation, qualitative research is "grounded in an 'interpretivist' position… [where the] interviewer is an integral part of the investigation" (Astalin, 2013, p. 118). In this sense, the way in which the interviewer, or researcher interprets the data significantly effects the outcome of the study. Further, qualitative research permits a natural, less formal relationship to form between the researcher and the participants which allows participants

to have "the opportunity to respond more elaborately and in greater detail than is typically the case with quantitative methods" (Mack et al., 2005, p. 4).

Understanding the chosen methodological approach, the current study acknowledges two important facets: first, that I, the researcher, am an essential aspect to this research, and second, that by choosing a qualitative approach I presented an opportunity for greater detail and growth. Further, I acknowledge that the data collected in this research has been interpreted by my own positive, desire-based perspective with the intention of gathering tangible outcomes.

Research Design

The present study uses phenomenology as the design of the qualitative research. "Phenomenology is a way to educate our vision, to define our posture, to broaden the way we look at the world. This is why phenomenology is seen not only as a method for philosophical research, but also as a powerful tool for research in human science" (Tarozzi & Mortari, 2009, p. 10). Understanding this perspective of the design, the present research aims to educate our vision and define how we look at peer mentoring approaches. "Literally we know that phenomenology means the study of phenomena. Phenomena may be events, situations, experiences or concepts" (Astalin, 2013, p. 119). In this context, the phenomena of the current study are the experiences peer mentors have in regard to connecting with their mentees.

In an attempt to explore the present study's phenomena, I chose two qualitative research methods: in-depth interview surveys and focus groups. Choosing two research methods allowed me to gather an abundant amount of data, which enabled me to further explore conclusions.

In-Depth Interview Surveys

While surveys are typically categorized as a quantitative research method, for the purpose of this study, the surveys that were distributed used open-ended questions in an attempt to imitate

in-depth interviews. Typically, researchers using a quantitative survey method would ask participants identical closed-ended questions in the same order (Mack et al., 2005). Asking questions in this way leads to fixed, inflexible answers which leads to less room for interpretation. Qualitative methods are more flexible and typically ask open-ended questions which allows participants to respond with more complex answers, freely and in their own words (Mack et al., 2005).

A qualitative method such as in-depth interviews are "optimal for collecting data on individuals' personal histories, perspectives, and experiences, particularly when sensitive topics are being explored" (Mack et al., 2005, p. 2). An in-depth interview "is a technique designed to elicit a vivid picture of the participant's perspective on the research topic" (Mack et al., 2005, p. 29). Using open-ended questions in an in-depth interview allows participants to respond with rich, explanatory responses which lead to more meaningful reflections about the subject being researched (Mack et al., 2005).

The surveys used in the present study used open-ended questions which allowed the participants (peer mentors) to respond freely and self-reflect on their own experiences. While the surveys did present each participant with identical questions in the same order, the questions were open-ended, rather than closed-ended which gave participants the opportunity to respond candidly. Therefore, these characteristics have led me to name this research method as a qualitative *in-depth interview survey*.

The in-depth interview survey used in the present study was created with Google Forms and distributed via email to all participating peer mentors in the FSMP on November 13, 2018. The questions were formulated by me and a contributing researcher, Matthew Tradewell, who is conducting a separate thesis on the FSMP. While Tradewell and I have separate research

questions, the participants (peer mentors) that we are collecting data from are the same. Acknowledging this similarity, Tradewell and I combined our research questions into one survey, separating our individual research into sections: Peer Mentor and Mentee Questions (my research questions), Peer Mentor and Faculty Mentor Questions (Tradewell's research questions), and Final Feedback (general questions). Appendix A illustrates the in-depth interview survey questions that were distributed to the participating peer mentors.

The in-depth interview survey was voluntary and did not require participation. Following the email distribution of the survey link, participants were able to complete the in-depth interview survey at their leisure. To enact detailed responses, I chose the "paragraph: long answer text" option for participants to type out their answers. This option allowed participants to respond to the questions with an unlimited amount of text which enabled detailed narrative reflections.

Focus Groups

The second qualitative research method used in the present study is focus groups. "Focus groups are effective in eliciting data on the cultural norms of a group and in generating broad overviews of issues of concern to the cultural groups or subgroups represented" (Mack et al., 2005, p. 2).

A focus group is a qualitative data collection method in which one or two researchers and several participants meet as a group to discuss a given research topic. These sessions are usually recorded… One researcher (the moderator) leads the discussion by asking participants to respond to open-ended questions – that is, questions that require in-depth response rather than a single phrase or simple 'yes' or 'no' answer. A second researcher, the note-taker takes detailed notes on the discussion. A principle advantage of focus

groups is that they yield a large amount of information over a relatively short period of time. They are also effective for accessing a broad range of views on a specific topic, as opposed to achieving group consensus (Mack et al., 2005, p. 51).

The data collected from focus groups is often rich in information because the dynamic of group discussions often stimulates conversation and reactions. "Participants influence each other through their presence and their reactions to what other people say" (Mack et al., 2005, p. 52).

To better prepare for focus group facilitation, I participated in a graduate level course, *HDFS 538: Qualitative Research Methods I*, taught by Oregon State University Professor Katherine MacTavish. Professor MacTavish kindly allowed me to audit her specific course highlighting focus groups. Attending *Qualitative Research Methods I* on November 7, 2018 gave me the opportunity to witness a mock focus group and engage in a discussion-based lecture following the mock presentation. The opportunity to take this course and read Professor MacTavish's materials on qualitative focus groups gave me great insight into how to effectively conduct a research focus group.

Acknowledging again that Tradewell and I needed to collect data from the same participant source and knowing that each of us would need another researcher in the room to act as the notetaker, we worked with the Faculty Student Mentor Program to coordinate two focus groups. With the approval of our advisors and thesis committees, we discussed that working together would give each of us the additional researcher that we needed to facilitate a focus group, as well as allow each of us to gather our individual data.

The two focus groups were held during the "FSMP Learning Communities" on November 27 and 28, 2018. "FSMP Learning Communities" are end of term meetings for the participating faculty mentors and peer mentors to meet with the FSMP committee to receive

additional training and discuss their experience in the program. Working with the FSMP coordinators, Tradewell and I requested that an hour of each two-hour Learning Community be reserved for a peer mentor focus group for the purpose of collecting research data. Participants (peer mentors) for the focus group were invited via email through the FSMP. Participation was not required but highly encouraged.

The first focus group was conducted on November 27, 2018 and was moderated by researcher Matthew Tradewell while I participated as the research notetaker. The second focus group was conducted on November 28, 2018 and was moderated by me while Matthew Tradewell participated as the research notetaker. Both focus groups were recorded with the iPhone Voice Memos application and transcribed with the transcription program, ExpressScribe afterwards.

The focus group questions were drafted by me and Matthew Tradewell prior to the Learning Communities. While it was originally planned that both focus groups would be asked identical questions in the same order, the first focus group gave us pause to elaborate on additional experiences. The focus group questions that were asked were semi-structured and required peer mentors to self-reflect on their experience with their mentees (for my research) and faculty mentors (for Tradewell's research). Appendix B details the open-ended questions asked in Focus Group 1. Appendix C details the open-ended questions asked in Focus Group 2.

Each focus group was held in a large meeting room in the Memorial Union at Oregon State University. Researchers and participants sat in a circle of chairs to easily engage in group discussions. Following each focus group, notes and recordings of the conversations were transcribed and analyzed into themes.

Participants

For the present study, I used purposive sampling as a research sampling strategy. Purposive sampling "groups participants to preselected criteria relevant to a particular research question" (Mack et al., 2005, p. 5). Additionally, the sample sizes "depend on the resources and time available, as well as the study's objectives" (Mack et al., 2005, p. 5). As the principle researcher in the present study, the only preselected criteria that I required was that the participants were active peer mentors in the Faculty Student Mentor Program. The sample size varied between the two qualitative research methods used in the study. Figure 1 illustrates the exact participant numbers of the Faculty Student Mentor Program at Oregon State University.

Figure 1 Faculty Student Mentor Program Participants

College	Students	Faculty	Peer Mentors
College of Agricultural Sciences	49	11	11
College of Earth, Ocean, and Atmospheric Sciences	21	11	11
College of Engineering	61	16	16
College of Forestry	13	6	6
College of Liberal Arts	12	11	11
College of Public Health and Human Sciences	66	22	22
College of Science	99	39	39
University Exploratory Studies Program	13	8	8
Totals	334	124	124

As stated in the *Introduction* chapter of this thesis, the FSMP matches 1-5 first-year students (mentees) with two mentors: a faculty mentor and a peer mentor. The number of

mentees within a mentoring group depends on the student to faculty mentor/peer mentor ratio per college. It should be noted that the present study does not take into consideration the specific college that peer mentors are enrolled in. The self-reported reflections of the peer mentor participants taken from the surveys and focus groups are analyzed generally and not according to college.

Data Gathering

The data collected for this research directly comes from the peer mentors participating in the FSMP and their own interpretations of their experiences. Data was collected from two qualitative methods: in-depth interview surveys and focus groups. Prior to the activity of both research methods, I requested informed consent from each participant. The beginning of both the in-depth survey and the focus groups informed the participants the purpose of the research, the expectations and benefits of voluntary participation, and that their confidentiality would be protected (Mack et al., 2005). After receiving all the information needed, participants (peer mentors) gave oral consent in writing for the in-depth interviews and verbally for the focus groups.

The in-depth interview survey was sent to the entire pool (124) of peer mentors participating in the Faculty Student Mentor Program, and 43 peer mentors responded to the survey. The in-depth interview survey consisted of 13 open-ended, essay questions. Upon completion of the survey, responses were collected in an Excel spreadsheet and sorted according to theme.

Additionally, because peer mentors were not required to attend the FSMP Learning Communities, the participant sample size for the focus groups were rather small in comparison to the entire pool of peer mentors participating in the program. In all, 14 peer mentors participated

in *Focus Group 1* on November 27, 2018 and 18 peer mentors participated in *Focus Group 2* on November 28, 2018. Each focus group lasted 30-45 minutes and consisted of 12 semi-structured questions which allowed for a natural exchange between researchers and participants. The use of a semi-structured strategy allowed me to plan a set of open-ended questions while keeping in mind that follow-up questions and probing elaboration could naturally occur. Following each focus group, I transcribed the recordings with ExpressScribe and sorted the responses into themes.

Limitations

To guarantee a greater understanding of the data collected and to improve the analysis of the findings, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of the present study. The main limitation of the present study is the small sample size of participants within each research method. In comparison to the total number of peer mentors (124) participating in the Faculty Student Mentor Program, the number of peer mentors who participated in the in-depth interview surveys (43) and focus groups (32) is limiting. Such a limiting sample size leads to another limitation of generalizability. The results of the present study theorize the perspective of 75 peer mentors, rather than 124 peer mentors, and thus generalize the perspectives of the peer mentors who did not participate in the study. Therefore, it must be acknowledged that the results of this research study may be biased toward the perspectives of the peer mentors who participated in this study.

Data Analysis

Understanding the purpose of the research is essential in analyzing the data collected in the present study. The overarching purpose of the present study is to examine the relationship building strategies that peer mentors use to connect with their mentees. The phenomenological

approach used in the present study allows me as the researcher to find resulting themes by sorting through the collected data (i.e. in-depth interview survey responses; focus group transcriptions).

> Some qualitative studies take a phenomenological approach when the purpose is to come to an intimate awareness and deep understanding of how humans experience something… The primary task is researcher reflection on the data to capture the essence and essentials of the experience that make it what it is (Saldana, Leavy & Beretvas, 2001, p. 8).

It is important to acknowledge this aspect of phenomenology when beginning data analysis. The concluding themes in phenomenological research are captured through reflection of the researcher. Therefore, the themes found in the present study are based on my reflections of the collected data.

My approach in analyzing the collected data was organized and uniform. Acknowledging the vast amount of text that I had to sort through from both the in-depth interview survey responses and the focus group transcriptions, I knew that a structured approach was necessary. In preparation of sorting through the data, I ensured that all text was formatted and organized in their relevant software systems.

In-Depth Interview Surveys

While the in-depth interview survey responses are automatically collected into a Google Sheets file, I reformatted the responses into an organized table in Microsoft Excel. First, since the participants were asked questions about two separate topics, I separated the questions onto separate Excel Sheets categorizing them with *Peer Mentor-Mentee Questions* and *Peer Mentor-Faculty Mentor Questions,* solely focusing on the *Peer Mentor-Mentee Questions* responses

needed for my research. After separating the questions into columns to guarantee a uniformed structure, I read through each response question by question, highlighting the evolving themes. As obvious themes began to emerge, I began to use different highlighting colors to sort the themes into categories. Following the processing of highlighting the thematical categories, I copied and pasted all the relevant quote-responses into a word document, extracting the themes onto separate pages. The resulting themes will be further discussed in Chapter 4.

Focus Groups

In preparation for analyzing the data collected from the focus groups, I transcribed both focus group recordings using ExpressScribe. Using ExpressScribe allowed me to listen to each focus group recording while simultaneously typing what was said into a script in Microsoft Word. Rather than having to listen to the focus group recordings repeatedly, the transcribed script allowed me to easily read through what was said and sort emerging themes. To ensure the confidentiality that was promised in the focus groups, each response was labeled by "Peer Mentor #", rather than by name. Additionally, I took handwritten notes while typing out the transcriptions to ensure that I was reflecting on any themes that I was hearing. After completing the transcriptions, I followed the same thematical sorting structure that I used in my in-depth interview survey data analysis. Reading through each transcription, I used various colors to highlight emerging themes and relevant quotes. Following this step, I then copied and pasted the themes and quotes into a word document, categorizing each theme by page. In-depth analysis of the themes that emerged from the focus groups are discussed in Chapter 4.

Chapter 4

Results

The present study is purposed with exploring the phenomena of peer mentors'

experiences with mentees in a mentoring program. Specifically, this research aims to uncover the

relationship building strategies that peer mentors used to connect to their mentees in the Faculty

Student Mentor Program at Oregon State University. With a desire to interpret this study's

findings in a meaningful way, I have organized the collected data into themes. The present

study's findings resulted in five overarching themes, some of which include subthemes:

Theme One – *Defining: Know Your Roles*

Theme Two – *Sharing: Relate to your Mentee*

      Subtheme – *Share personal experiences*

      Subtheme – *Be relatable*

Theme Three – *Caring: Befriend your Mentee*

      Subtheme – *Explore interests*

Theme Four – *Communicating: Be Present with your Mentee*

      Subtheme – *Honesty*

      Subtheme – *Be available*

      Subtheme – *Ask open-ended questions*

Theme Five – *Supporting: Create a Safe Environment*

These five overarching themes are the most common relationship building strategies that

peer mentors used to connect with their mentees in the Faculty Student Mentor Program in the

Fall 2018 academic term. While it was noticeable that the participating peer mentors shared

many common experiences, the five overarching themes that emerged from the collected data

were the most salient strategies used by peer mentors. I have intentionally named these themes to express the names of relationship building strategies.

Through the data analysis process, it became apparent that the data collected from both research methods could be combined into one large data collection pool. I found that while I was coding and highlighting the themes of the focus group transcriptions, similar themes to the ones that I highlighted in the in-depth interview survey responses were emerging. After coding the data from both research methods, I compared the in-depth interview survey response themes and the focus group transcription themes side by side. Upon comparison, it was clear that the two collections of data matched, resulting in the same themes. This discovery allowed me to combine all the collected data into one pool and present the five overarching themes.

The five overarching themes and relevant subthemes were found through thorough data analysis of the in-depth interview survey responses and focus group transcriptions. The data collected in each of these methods are direct, self-reported reflections of the peer mentors and their experiences with their mentees. Each theme and subtheme originated from direct quotes from these reflections.

Defining: Know Your Roles

One of the central themes that emerged for the present study's data was the need to *define mentoring roles*. Taking into consideration that the Faculty Student Mentor Program is in the first year of a two-year pilot program, this came as no surprise to me as an active contributor to the new program. In both the in-depth interview survey responses and the focus group discussions, many peer mentors mentioned a lack of understanding in expectations. Peer mentors expressed concern that not only did they not know their role in the program but that their mentees also did not know what to expect.

When asked to reflect on their roles in the program, many peer mentors expressed uncertainty in role-expectations, like Megan who said, "I kind of felt like I'd be this go-to hotline of how to get around and how to navigate campus life and I don't feel that way." Explaining her frustrations in one of the focus group discussions, Megan talked about the expectations she had going into the program versus the reality of what she is currently experiencing with her mentees. As a peer mentor, Megan said that she felt a disconnect between what she thought she would be to her mentee and what she actually is. Megan further explained, "It's kind of difficult for me sometimes because I'm just like wow you guys are doing so well, why am I here?"

Supporting Megan's concern, another peer mentor, Tristan stated,

I've also had a hard time connecting to my mentee. Not me connecting to them, but I think them connecting to me and wanting to. I feel like they are apprehensive to sharing but, I don't think they're uncomfortable, but don't know the dynamic of what is going on.

With many peer mentors nodding in agreement, a mutual understanding began to form within the focus group: peer mentors' role-expectations were not being met and mentees did not know what to expect.

Further adding to the realization that expectations were not being met, Aliyah wrote in a survey response that, "Many mentees did not know what to expect and aren't utilizing their peer mentors as much as they could be". Connecting these concerns and experiences, it is obvious that there is some confusion regarding whose role is whose and what each individual's purpose is. It could be theorized that by defining the roles of *peer mentor* and *peer mentee*, and even defining *mentoring* in general, could help with some misperceptions. While this first theme is not a direct strategy that peer mentors specifically used, the confusion surrounding this theme was so salient that *defining your role* should unquestionably be a relationship building strategy.

Sharing: Relate to your Mentee

The most noticeably outstanding theme that emerged from the present study was *sharing* through *relatability*. When asked the question, "What strategies have you specifically used to engage with your mentees?" the leading answer involved some version of "sharing personal experiences" or "being relatable". Because the majority of the peer mentors focused on the important facet of connecting to their mentees through sharing and relatability, two subthemes emerged: *share personal experiences* and *be relatable.*

Subtheme: Share personal experiences

By far the most salient theme of the entire study is that peer mentors connect with their mentees by sharing their own personal experiences. This thematic relationship building strategy was consistent throughout the focus group discussions and in the self-reported surveys. In an engaging discussion about the strategies peer mentors were specifically using to engaging with their mentees, Kamryn stated that,

> For my first couple of meetings, I had an activity where I would ask the mentees to kind of share a freshmen moment they had, I would start off by sharing something that I made a mistake on last year… and I think that made the rest of the mentees kind of comfortable to share their freshmen moments they've made.

By accounting her successful strategy of sharing her personal experiences with her mentees, Kamryn opened the floor for other peer mentors to share their successes. Many other peer mentors had the same strategy. Maria said, "We have begun to reach deeper than surface level. My group only has one mentee and she openly shares about not just school but life in general and I am able to tell her about my experiences and advice." Further adding to this focus

group discussion, Brandon expressed that, "Just talking about my experience really got them to think about you know, what they want to do."

The act of sharing your own experience with another person is an engaging way to connect. When peer mentors share their own personal experiences, they are showing their mentee that it is okay to be vulnerable and that they were once in their shoes. Relating to this in his self-reported survey, Seth said, "I focus on sharing and being vulnerable first because then our mentees can feel more comfortable sharing as well." Being vulnerable opens the door for connection and trust. Similar to Seth, Mikayla recounts, "I've tried connecting with my mentees by sharing about my own personal experiences and struggles." And Megan added, "I'm open to talk and share my stories with them. It helps make a welcoming environment."

Confirmed in both the focus groups and the in-depth interview surveys, many peer mentors said that they were better able to connect to their mentees on a personal level when they shared personal stories. By talking about their own struggles and successes, peer mentors showed their mentees that they're able to understand on a personal level. They expressed that allowing their mentees to see that they were once in the same position of navigating college for the first time, they were able to build an environment of trust and their mentees began to open up more.

Subtheme: Be relatable

Similar to the subtheme of *sharing personal experiences*, many peer mentors also discussed the importance of being able to *relate* to their mentees. A number of peer mentors spoke about their experience connecting to their mentees by being able to relate in some way to what their mentees were going through.

Expanding on his own strategy of sharing his personal experiences, Seth said,

I express my own vulnerabilities or short-comings in school like my own trials and

tribulations. Cause odds are they can probably relate to a lot of them, you know, so I try

to get them to feel more at ease about talking, about maybe some difficulties that their

having in their first year that I did, that I am sure their having, but likely probably didn't

want to talk about it.

While this subtheme is similar to *share personal experiences,* it was clear that being able to

relate to their mentees and say "I know what you're going through" was important to peer

mentors. Like Megan who said, "Being relatable, not being too serious, talking about my

struggles so they feel more comfortable sharing theirs."

Many peer mentors shared that by communicating to their mentees that they can relate to

what they're going through in college made their mentees feel more comfortable to freely talk

about their struggles. Ashleigh shared,

I just am very up front about how I did something or how it went because I think I kind of

tie it back to when somebody said something about [FSMP] being intimidating having

this professor and this older student coming at you, and I think it's important to just really

show them that we're people too, we go through the things. And I think that's been

helpful too with having the mentee be able to open up as well and share and kind of be

like, 'oh, yeah, you all went through this too.'

Upon reflecting on their experiences with sharing and being relatable, many peer mentors in the

focus groups seemed to agree with one another. Adding to the conversation, Mikayla told the

group,

I have two mentees and I feel like I can easily talk to them like they are my peer who I
am giving advice to. I can relate well with them because things they are experiencing
now, I experienced during my first year at OSU.

In the act of sifting through the data, it became apparent that being relatable was a salient strategy for peer mentors. Self-reporting his experience in the in-depth interview survey, Tristan reported, "Asking questions and giving an example of how I have gone about this process to relate and give examples and then opening the floor for the mentees to share." It seems that for peer mentors, being relatable is going one step further than simply sharing personal experiences. Peer mentors expressed that being able to relate to the same feelings and experiences, allowed their mentees to see them as a peer, rather than an intimidating upperclassman.

I believe that it can be stated that being able to relate to another human is a core strategy in building relationships with other humans. The same statement is apparent in relationship strategies for peer mentors and mentees. The ability to relate to similar experiences and find common ground, aids in the connection between peer mentors and mentees.

While the target populations for the Faculty Student Mentor Program are first-generation and underrepresented students, the commonality of ethnic identities or social-class backgrounds between peer mentor and mentee did not emerge as a significant factor of relatability. While identity development is important for overall student success, the success of building peer mentor-mentee relationships in the FSMP was not dependent upon common ethnic or social identities.

Caring: Befriend your Mentee

Another core theme that was discovered in the data collected from the in-depth interview surveys and focus group discussions was *caring*, or more specifically, *befriending.* In speaking

about their peer mentor-mentee relationships, many peer mentors expressed that they had either become close friends with their mentees, or had cultivated comfortable, friendly relationships with their mentees.

Many peer mentors expressed similar experiences of becoming a friend to their mentee. Like Kamryn who shared, "I try to be a friend for my mentee, as well as a resource, so that they feel that they can come to me with their needs." And Eric who said, "It's a very laid-back friendship type relationship. I feel like everyone in the group feels comfortable sharing and feels supported." Most peer mentors in the focus group discussions agreed that befriending their mentees was a successful strategy in building a relationship. One peer mentor, Megan, went as far to say that they began to feel a familial bond with their mentee, saying, "I didn't really know what to expect going into [FSMP] and now I kind of feel like I almost have a younger sibling in a way. Which isn't what I expected." In addition to these reflections, many peer mentors expressed their hope for establishing deeper friendships with their mentees in the future.

Subtheme: Explore interests

To further establish the theme of *caring*, an additional theme of *exploring interests* was created. This subtheme is based on the understanding that caring about another person's interests is an aspect of befriending.

Upon reflecting on their mentor-relationships-turned-friendships, many peer mentors expressed the importance of showing their mentees that they cared about their interests. Like Yasmine who shared, "I ask my mentees lots of personal questions about things that I think the mentee would be interested in." And Eric who said, "I asked them about their interests and catered to those interests through campus tours and hooking students up with good contacts."

Another peer mentor, Emma reported that her strategy to connect with her mentee is, "asking a lot of questions and finding out things they are interested in."

Reading through the in-depth interview survey responses and facilitating the focus groups reaffirmed my belief in mentoring and the relationships that can be built through peer mentoring programs such as the Faculty Student Mentor Program. Listening to the peer mentors' accounts of their mentor relationships-turned-friendships with their mentees and hearing how much they cared for their mentees was a meaningful experience for me as a researcher.

Communicating: Be Present with your Mentee

A significant theme found in the research was that peer mentors commonly agree that *communication* is key. Many peer mentors noted that their presence and active participation in mentoring meetings helps establish relationships. Upon reflecting on the strategies peer mentors used to engage with their mentees, many peer mentors spoke about *honesty*, *availability* and actively *asking open-ended questions*: the resulting subthemes of *communicating*.

Subtheme: Honesty

A commonly noted strategy that peer mentors used to connect with their mentees was *honesty*. Peer mentors expressed that being honest with their mentees gave them a chance to build a real relationship with their mentees. Like Seth who shared that he related to his mentees by trying, "to keep an honest [relationship], making sure that they see that I am also another student with struggles just like them." Reflecting on her relationship with her mentees, Mikayla said, "I just try to be honest with my mentees about my experiences and what I have learned

during my time at OSU." Chiming into the focus group discussion, another peer mentor, Megan, talked about how she and her faculty mentor both use honesty with their mentees,

> We both are really honest, to a fault sometimes, but when they ask us things or they tell us certain things, and they ask for our opinion, we give it to them. But I think they appreciate it because you know certain things, especially as a first-year you need to hear, especially something you don't know. We try to be really honest with what they should expect or what they should do.

Peer mentors also communicated the importance of honesty in the in-depth interview survey responses. In a survey response, Eric reported that his strategy to connect with his mentees was, "being open and honest about my own experiences, and not sugar coating anything." Peer mentors expressed that by being honest with their mentees, they were able to build stronger, more open relationships.

Subtheme: Be available

Separate from a common issue of scheduling mentoring meetings, a positive theme peer mentors attributed to building a relationship with their mentees was being actively available. When reflecting on the successes he has experienced as a peer mentor, Jack said, "One of my biggest successes is having one of my mentees reach out to me to say they needed help and knew I would be there." The importance of being present and available for their mentees to come to for help and advice was a salient theme. In a focus group discussion, Yasmine shared, "I've also tried to make myself really available to my mentees by always offering time outside of the

meetings to get together and hang out or help in any way." And Seth added that, "Just my presence there and talking to them" helped him build stronger relationships with his mentees.

Subtheme: Ask open-ended questions

One of the forefront strategies that emerged in the communicating theme was the action of *asking open-ended questions.* Discussed in length during both focus group discussions, it appeared that asking open-ended questions was an extremely common strategy that peer mentors used to get their mentees to open up. Reflecting on the importance of communication, peer mentors reported that preparing and asking open-ended questions promoted more talking and back and forth conversations. Megan shared,

> The strategy I mainly use is asking questions. From the answers given, I'll either relate to what they say or try to encourage more talking. Then, regarding to the topic on hand, I'll try to relate what I know about the mentees to promote conversation not only mentor-to-mentee, but mentee-to-mentee as well.

Another peer mentor, Ashleigh detailed her in-depth preparation for mentoring meetings, saying,

> Beforehand I come up with open-ended questions to ask them, so, 'what's your favorite memory from high school?' I ask both the faculty mentor and the mentee and then they share funny stories about like, whatever, so just really trying to get the meetings off to a good light-hearted topic.

Jack related to Ashleigh's strategy of preparing ahead of time, explaining, "I have planned out open-ended questions to start our sessions with and I have prepared ahead of time some topics and points that I want to bring up throughout the meeting." It became obvious that the preparation of questions and topics was common among many peer mentors. Nodding in agreement, Megan said,

I try to anticipate some of the things they will be worrying about, for example, midterms, and ask questions about those topics, but I also try to ask very broad, open questions and lead the conversation from there, since I understand that I can't anticipate everything they will deal with.

Adding to the communication strategy of asking questions, Emma talked about how she enjoys when the mentees ask her questions too. Emma shared that her strategy is, "Asking them questions, and also ask if they have any questions for me as well, if there is anything they would like feedback or advice about." Many peer mentors expressed that just communicating and being present with their mentees helped create better connections. Elena shared that she has found success with her mentee by, "Just talking to them and asking them questions. I let them lead as much of the conversation as they feel comfortable and don't move on until they have exhausted the topic they are talking about."

Many peer mentors attribute their connections with their mentees to this communication strategy. By asking open-ended, or simply broad questions, peer mentees have been able to gather more information from their mentees and establish a mutual rapport with one another. Asking open-ended questions creates a space for mentees to feel comfortable and express themselves freely in a safe environment.

Supporting: Create a Safe Environment

The final overarching theme found in the present study regarding relationship building strategies was that peer mentors commonly understood that *creating a safe environment* was essential in supporting mentees. Peer mentors agreed that creating a safe environment is an important step in helping their mentees feel comfortable. The presence of a safe environment

gives mentees the permission to speak freely, engage and connect with their peer mentors on a deeper level. Reflecting on this strategy, Tristan shared,

> I have attempted to bring a welcoming atmosphere for students to communicate freely, such as giving personal stories when students have commented about difficulties in certain situations. So far, this approach has seemingly led to more openness about situations each student is currently facing.

Many peer mentors shared that one of their first goals coming into the FSMP was to create a safe space, like Kamryn who said, "My expectation first term was to foster a comfortable environment, build trusting relationships and friendships first, then academic and research further out." And Jack, who noted that he has "felt more like a facilitator of a supportive environment, as my mentees get a better handle on college and can offer each other advice." Connecting to this strategy, Ashleigh weighed in again about how both her and her faculty mentor create a safe environment together by explaining,

> We want this to be like a safe space, so if our mentee is going through hard things, we want them to be able to open up… In our first meeting it was like, yeah, I had a lot of struggles, it was me personally saying 'yeah, I had a lot of struggles, I still struggle, I'm not a perfect student' and it was like saying, 'you know we are both really proud of you.'

Through expressing the importance of support, peer mentors noted that creating a safe environment for their mentees was one of the most successful strategies in building a relationship with their mentees. It was expressed that the foundation of a safe environment led to more successful connections between peer mentors and mentees.

Results Summary

To summarize the findings of the present study and upon exploration of the data analysis, five overarching themes emerged: (1) Defining: Know Your Roles, (2) Sharing: Relate to your Mentee (Subtheme: Be relatable), (3) Caring: Befriend your Mentee (Subtheme: Explore interests), (4) Communicating: Be Present with your Mentee (Subthemes: Honesty; Be Available; Ask open-ended questions), and (5) Supporting: Create a Safe Environment. These five overarching themes illustrate peer mentors' experiences building relationships with their mentees in the Faculty Student Mentor Program.

The themes found in the present study are five tangible strategies that can be added to the overall mentoring narrative. Additionally, the names of these five principle themes were guided by my personal goal of constructing a "mentoring guidebook" of relationship building strategies for peer mentors. Chapter 5 will further explore the themes and findings of the present study and offer thoughtful considerations for the future of peer mentoring.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

Guided by an overarching motivation to add to the peer mentoring literature and narrative on mentoring, the present study examined the relationship building strategies that peer mentors use to connect to mentees. Specifically examining the experiences of peer mentors currently participating in the Faculty Student Mentor Program at Oregon State University, the present study used a phenomenological framework in exploring the approaches peer mentors use to cultivate connections with their mentees. Following two methods of data collection, this research concluded in five overarching themes. This chapter will thoroughly discuss the broad meaning of those themes and offer thoughtful considerations for the future of peer mentoring.

Discussion

As stated in Chapter 3, the most important and salient identity that I hold is that I am a positive, optimistic human. Acknowledging this quality about myself, I intentionally chose this thesis topic because I want to make a positive impact on the college student experience. Upon reflection of my own first-year in college, I remember feeling lost and wishing that there was someone to help guide me in the right direction. When I heard about the Faculty Student Mentor Program (FSMP) my first thought was, "Wow, I wish I had something like that my first-year of college". After getting involved with the FMSP and seeing the potential it had to help first-year students, I decided to focus my thesis on helping students feel a sense of belonging and eventually landed on researching relationship building strategies for peer mentors.

I believe that the establishment of a relationship or cultivating any kind of connection during your first-year on campus can make all the difference in feeling like you belong. My decision to study the relationship building strategies peer mentors use with their mentees is

guided by this belief. I hoped that by studying this phenomenon, I could construct a "mentoring guidebook" of relationship building strategies for peer mentors to better connect with their mentees which would ultimately lead mentees (first-year students) to feel a sense of belonging in their new college environment.

Guided by this hopeful desire to help first-year students I began this thesis by reviewing the available literature on mentoring. As established in Chapter 2, there is a gap in the literature regarding exact relationship building strategies for peer mentors. Additionally, the definition of *mentoring* is extremely inconsistent, causing confusion among mentoring programs and mentors themselves. Acknowledging these gaps in the literature, I sought to complete the narrative by directly exploring peer mentors' experiences with mentees in a newly established mentoring program.

Grounding the current study in qualitative methodology, I approached this research with a phenological design using two research methods to collect data. By using both in-depth interview surveys and focus groups, I was able to gather a significant amount of data on peer mentors' experiences. Moreover, this research was guided by my own desire-based worldview and aspiration to find the positive strategies that are helping peer mentors connect to their mentees. Following a comprehensive analysis of the data, five overarching themes and relationship building strategies emerged.

Theme One – *Defining: Know Your Roles*

The first theme, *Defining: Know Your Roles* is essential in creating a successful peer mentor-mentee relationship. Mirroring the literature review, one cannot become a successful mentor without first knowing what it means to be a mentor. Both the mentor and mentee must know their roles in the relationship in order to move forward towards a helping relationship. This

theorizing conclusion is supported by the surmounting literature that mentions the importance of understanding the role and purpose of a mentor (Castro et al., 2005; Cramer & Prentice-Dunn, 2007; Crisp et al., 2017). Defining the roles and purposes of peer mentors and mentees will not only resolve confusion, it will establish a fundamental grounding for a relationship to be built upon.

Theme Two – *Sharing: Relate to your Mentee*

Subtheme – *Share personal experiences*

Subtheme – *Be relatable*

The second theme, *Sharing: Relating to your Mentee* may be the most fundamental value behind *Defining: Know Your Roles.* Being able to share personal experiences is an important strategy for peer mentors to use when trying to connect to their mentees. Successful human connections are built on shared experiences and the ability to relate to one another. The subthemes of *share personal experiences* and *be relatable* are interwoven into this core theme. The purpose of a peer mentoring program is to establish peer mentor-mentee connections that can help mentees adjust to the new college environment. Humans, or mentees in this case, are more willing to follow and receive guidance of someone they trust, and trust is a virtue that typically comes from a shared connection. Thus, relationship-building relies on the ability to share experiences with one another to build trust.

The subtheme of *share personal experiences* directly resonates with the available research on mentoring. As reviewed in Chapter 2, researchers Zevallos and Washburn (2014) found that peer mentors build stronger connections with their mentees when they reveal their own personal experiences. Further, the *be relatable* subtheme is supported by Collier's (2017) research on common identities. Because peer mentors and mentees share the common identity of

"college student", peer mentors automatically become relatable to their mentee which in turn has an influential impact on the mentee's collegiate experience (Collier, 2017). Using a strategy of *sharing* and being able to *relate to your mentee* is essential in the relationship building process. Peer mentors who are able to relate to the feelings and interpersonal challenges that their mentee is experiencing are better able to show compassion and support. By sharing personal stories of their own challenges and successes, peer mentors are revealing to their mentees that it's okay to open up and be vulnerable. Through these acts, an establishment of trust begins to build, bringing peer mentors and mentees closer together. *Sharing* is an essential strategy for peer mentors to use when trying to establish relationships with their mentees.

Theme Three – *Caring: Befriend your Mentee*

  Subtheme – *Explore interests*

  The third theme, *Caring: Befriend your Mentee* continues the theme of sharing and relating with one another. The subtheme of *exploring interests* iterates to the mentee that the peer mentor cares about them as an individual and enacts a friendly connection. Stepping into the realm of a friendship, rather than a professional relationship, leads to a trusted connection and successful relationship between peer mentor and mentee.

  Commonly discussed in the available literature, caring is a core component of mentoring. While it has been noted that the definition of mentoring is inconsistent, the term caring is common among the various definitions. Anderson and Shannon (1995), Baker and Griffin (2010), and Cramer and Prentice-Dunn (2007), and Bonin (2016) all discuss the importance of caring in their distinct definitions of mentoring. Specifically, Cramer and Prentice-Dunn (2007) suggest that mentoring is the adoption of 'caring for the whole person' which allows peer mentors to focus on the entirety of their mentee's development. Explaining the emotional

commitment that is involved in mentoring, Baker and Griffin (2010) clarify the emotional commitment that is involved in mentoring, saying that mentoring relationships are nurtured through the act of caring.

Fundamental to establishing a mentoring relationship, peer mentors must show their mentees that they care about them as individuals and about their interests. The act of caring establishes an emotional connection of compassion, trust and support. Stronger human connections are created through compassion. Mentees who feel this compassion will naturally feel more connected to their peer mentor. Peer mentors must employ a strategy of *caring* to build strong, lasting relationships with their mentees.

Theme Four – *Communicating: Be Present with your Mentee*

    Subtheme – *Honesty*

    Subtheme – *Be available*

    Subtheme – *Ask open-ended questions*

The fourth theme, *Communicating: Be Present with your Mentee* is an absolute necessity for peer mentors to build relationships with their mentees. Without active, present communication, the mentee is left wondering if they are supported. Lack of communication leads to lack of support. The subthemes of *honesty, be available* and *ask open-ended questions* are crucial elements of communication. Each of these subthemes are tools that peer mentors can specifically use to communicate and cultivate connections with their mentees.

While communication is a key component in any relationship, strategies of communication are only briefly mentioned in the mentoring literature. Whether this is because researchers are assuming that communication is a natural instinct or because there is a lack of research on communication techniques, future research on mentoring should explore aspects of

communication in mentoring. One study by Zevallos and Washburn (2014) has explored some aspects of communication, finding that mutual dialogue helps cultivate credible relationships. Reflecting the results of the present study, Zevallos and Washburn (2014) found peer mentors who actively listen and ask open-ended questions are more likely to build successful mentoring relationships. In order to establish positive connections and build lasting relationships, peer mentors must engage in active communication with their mentees. Peer mentors must be present, attentive and in the moment with their mentees. Being present further establishes feelings of care and support which leads to honest peer mentor-mentee relationships.

Theme Five – *Supporting: Create a Safe Environment*

The fifth and final theme, *Supporting: Creating a Safe Environment* was the most pleasant surprise among all the emergent themes. I found it extremely profound that peer mentors, who are young college students, knew it to be important to create a safe space for their mentees. Creating a safe environment gives mentees permission to be who they are and feel validated. Feeling safe and comfortable in a new environment is crucial in establishing a trusting connection.

While the available literature on mentoring does not directly speak to this theme, many researchers have discussed the various issues that environmental factors can have on mentees (Fleming, 1984; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Johnson et al., 2007). Briefly discussing the important topic of diversity and inclusion, researchers (Fleming, 1984; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Johnson et al., 2007) suggest that mentoring can help students of color who may feel that their campus is an unsupportive environment. Appreciating that *creating a safe environment* was such an important strategy for FSMP peer mentors, future research would be keen to explore the influence that this approach has on mentoring programs. Creating an environment of safety and support gives

mentees the permission to feel safe and supported. To establish strong, successful connections, peer mentors must cultivate comfortable environments that their mentees feel safe in.

I believe that the five emergent themes of the present study are the fundamental strategies that all peer mentors should be given when stepping into a mentoring role. These themes encompass the basic values needed to become an effective peer mentor. Comprised of support, honesty, and trust, these five themes intrinsically embrace the value of care which is the underlying purpose of mentoring programs. The purpose of mentoring is to guide, help, and care for another person. The utilization of these five emergent themes will lead to more developed, compassionate peer mentors.

Based on the themes found in the present study, I feel proud of the peer mentors that are currently participating in the FSMP. The FSMP peer mentors are college students who have successfully navigated their first-year of college and are guided by the purpose of helping new first-year students succeed. I am proud to know that the peer mentors who participated in this research study have found successful relationship building strategies that helped cultivate connections with their mentees.

Thoughtful Considerations

Understanding that essential features of the literature are missing, it is imperative that researchers continue to explore and establish the phenomena of mentoring. Although this thesis was successful in exploring the phenomena of peer mentors' relationships with their mentees, the present study does not define mentoring, which is still an inconsistency in the literature. Future researchers should consider establishing a singular definition of mentoring and its relevant terms.

While I am unsure that my research in the present study found groundbreaking data on mentoring, I am confident that the themes found in this study are tangible relationship building

strategies that peer mentors can use to connect to their mentees. The five themes found in the present study have been significantly named for the purpose of being added to a future "mentoring guidebook" of relationship building strategies that I plan to create upon the completion of this thesis. The purpose of this "mentoring guidebook" is to give tangible strategies to peer mentors participating in peer mentoring programs. My hope is that this present study and "mentoring guidebook" give peer mentors a foundation of fundamental strategies to begin connecting with their mentees and that future peer mentoring programs consider using these strategies.

Upon reflection of the present research study and its resulting findings, I am hopeful for the future of mentoring and the research that is continually conducted on this important topic. "Mentoring in all its forms is an effort toward communicating to college students from all backgrounds that they belong, are supported, and are capable of being successful" (Crisp et al, 2017, p. 91). In concluding this thesis, I am optimistic that peer mentors are able to cultivate such meaningful connections with their mentees that a sense of belonging is inherently built into the first-year experience.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

In-Depth Interview Survey

Section 1: Peer Mentor and Mentee Questions

1. Have you met with your student mentees?

2. Please describe the quality and frequency of communication with your mentees.

3. Tell us about your mentor-relationship with your mentees.

4. What strategies have you specifically used to engage with your mentees?

5. What successes have you had with mentoring your mentees?

6. What challenges have you had with mentoring your mentees?

Section 2: Peer Mentor and Faculty Mentor Questions

1. Have you met with your faculty mentor?

2. Please describe the quality and frequency of communication with your faculty mentor.

3. Tell us about your mentor-relationship with your faculty mentor.

4. What strategies have you and your faculty mentor used together to engage your mentees?

5. What successes have you had with your faculty mentor in mentoring your students?

6. What challenges have you had with your faculty mentor?

Section 3: Final Feedback

1. Is there anything else you would like to add about the FSMP or your role as a peer mentor?

Appendix B

Focus Group 1: Open-ended Questions

1. Can you tell us about your mentor relationships with your mentees?

2. Do you feel that the mentees know their role as mentees?

3. Can you tell us about your mentor relationships with your faculty mentors?

4. What strategies have you specifically used to engage with your mentees?

5. What strategies have you and your faculty mentor used together to engage your

   mentees?

Appendix C

Focus Group 2: Open-ended Questions

1. What expectations did you have about the relationship you would build with your mentees?

2. What expectations did you have about the relationship you would build with your faculty mentor?

3. Are those expectations being met?

4. What successes have you had with mentoring your mentees?

5. What successes have you had with your faculty mentor in mentoring your mentees together?

6. What challenges have you had with mentoring your mentees?

7. What challenges have you had with your faculty mentor?