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# The Secret Recipe: Unpacking the Mentorship Experience Between the Guardians of Academy and First-Generation Students of Color in Higher Education

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**The Secret Recipe: Unpacking the Mentorship Experience Between the Guardians of  
Academy and First-Generation Students of Color in Higher Education**

David F. Santos Castillo

Action Research Project Prepared for the Degree of  
Master of Arts in Higher Education Leadership

University of San Diego

May 2022

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I would like to express my deep gratitude to my parents for supporting me along this journey. It was because of them that I was able to hear and feel the ancestral knowledge flow within my mind, body, and spirit when I needed it the most. I would like to extend my thanks to my community of Southeast San Diego, a place where I call home. It is a home that has supported me and encouraged me throughout my study by helping me stay grounded in where I come from. My community has shaped me into the person I am today and has painted an image for me when it comes to the work I see myself doing in future. This research is for you, us, and me.

### **Abstract**

Throughout my academic journey, I have noticed the word “mentor” slowly becoming diluted and used on a solely casual basis. Often, people know what the word mentor means, which provides the sense that mentorship is something anyone can achieve or do. As a result, people constantly attempt to learn the fundamentals of this form of practice as if mentorship is something easily attainable. Reflecting on this idea, I was curious to understand why I can only rely on a few people when needed, especially when it involves higher education. My study analyzes the mentorship experiences between professional staff and first-generation students of color. Current research has discussed practical skills and overall benefits of mentoring students, but there is not much research on the mentor-student relationship itself. This analysis explored those relationships, specifically at the University of San Diego (USD), between professional staff (mentors) and students (mentees) when seeking help. My analysis explored this relationship by decolonizing and redefining what mentorship should look like. Therefore, my intention for this study was to incorporate a holistic approach by integrating and looking at the mind, body, and spirit in this form of practice. Six first-generation students of color were selected based on my study criteria. Each participant participated in a 30-minute individual interview, followed by two 45-minute community-building circles with three participants in each group. The major concepts guiding my work are the system of “other mothering” (Hirt et al., 2008), and Yosso’s (2005) community cultural wealth model.

*Keywords:* mentorship, holistic mentor, community cultural wealth model, system of other mothering

## **The Secret Recipe: Unpacking the Mentorship Experience Between the Guardians of Academy and First-Generation Students of Color in Higher Education**

### **Social Location & Introduction**

I was born and raised in southeast San Diego. My hometown has not only shaped and nurtured my current path, but also remains a community I am proud to be a part of. I carry my community with me everywhere I go. Southeast San Diego is a place where I see myself in others and have a strong commitment to service. I grew up in a low-income, Latinx household, and as a first-generation college student, I faced many challenges, social pressures attached to the identities I hold.

Subsequently, social pressure was attached to navigating my educational journey. Society believed that I and many others were going to drop out of high school and never make it to an institution of higher education. I still carry this false perception and advocate for those who were not able to complete their educational journey with me. These lessons are what helps me stay grounded and motivated to keep going.

After completing my undergraduate degree, I started a position in residential education at the University of California of San Diego (UCSD). My new role at UCSD ignited a passion for working in residential life. When I applied for the higher education leadership program at the University of Diego (USD), I was able to land an assistantship in residential life. I decided to leave UCSD because I saw the position at USD having a greater impact on my professional and personal growth.

In my current position as an assistant community director at USD, I focused on my passion of working with students, but I often found myself dreaming and planning about the future. I want to ensure underserved communities have access to opportunities and resources to

succeed. As an undergraduate student, I was able to listen to stories of students who spoke about navigating their college experience, especially when it came to living on campus. For many students, their experiences were, unfortunately, ones where they were not able to fit in. As I started hearing similar, meaningful narratives, I decided I wanted to be a part of this transformative experience, especially for those who come from marginalized communities like me. My goal is to help guide, mentor, and empower students by fostering a familial community while away from home. As a future student affairs professional, I want to commit to help uplift these students and guide them to become the best versions of themselves. I want to serve as the mentor I never had growing up. I want to be the person I wished I had when navigating my personal, professional, and academic journey because I was often left searching for the “secret recipe” to success, which can get tiring over time. This recipe, after all, is one many know but only a few know about. The recipe is so powerful it lays the blueprint for how to navigate higher education but remains something that many try to hide because higher education was not built for students of color. As a result, students of color, myself included, have not only constantly searched for the secret recipe but also tried to create one from scratch.

### **Background Rationale and Literature Review**

I grew tired of seeing or hearing confusion, misguidance, and hopelessness in others. Not only have I experienced these feelings personally, but they have also been recurrent themes I hear quite often from others. I have seen the lack of representation and ratio among professional staff and students of color due to a lack of mentorship, support, and guidance. People are very involved in their positions that they fail to keep grounded in the present when students come to talk to them. Although these people might have master’s or doctoral degrees, it seems that many lack simple qualities of mentorship and serving as a mentor overall. Therefore, I became

interested in studying the professional staff and student relationship experiences in higher education. Specifically, I want to unpack the experiences of first-generation students of color who hold marginalized identities while they seek to find the “secret recipe” and navigate higher education with professional staff. This research topic addresses an observed issue because mentorship is more than just building a relationship and answering questions. For me, mentorship involves a focus on retention and educating the community so it can flourish rather than having students constantly feel they must travel to the “other side” to seek what is needed. Too often, students of color must search and figure things out on their own. Once they encounter professional staff, they are often left misinformed, unheard, or unsupported. I have learned often, people want to see you do well, but they never want to see you do better. For this reason, people hold back from being honest and treat individuals as if they were someone they hold dear to heart. You start to view personal interactions more as transactions and neglect to take the extra mile in support. Mentorship, therefore, involves advocating for students both inside and outside of the office setting. I constantly see staff not truly invested in their work. This often happens when people constantly complain and only work for monetary gain.

Many might already know constantly being left trying to figure out the “secret recipe” can get tiring over time. Unpacking this struggle will not only shed light on this experience, but at the same time, may also bring a sense of healing for many. I intend to fill the missing gaps that first-generation students of color often experience by explaining the “why.” I will develop and connect a framework to describe characteristics in potential mentor-ally relationships. Therefore, I will define what mentorship and coaching could look like for first-generation students of color and build a sense of community among students of color so they can support one another rather than reaching out to people who might not look like them. My goal is to form a collective



through similar narratives. This experience will provide a sense of meaning in my life, and at the same time empower others to become social change agents. At the end of the day, this research journey is for me, you, and us.

Two of the practical themes I deeply think about are the ideas of building a sense of family or looking at the whole self, and the practical benefits when it comes to mentoring. One of the ways that I will approach my literature is by being critical of how the research is being done. Therefore, I want to be able to take into consideration the multiple possible impacts that someone's ecological structure might have on the development of the student experience. My goal is to step away from the dominant forms of research methods that are typically used and incorporate more of a holistic student-centered approach.

### **Family and Whole Self**

One of the central themes unpacked in these articles was restructuring and redefining mentoring as a form of creating a sense of family or unity. By reading Hirt et al. (2008) study, the missing gaps started to become clearer to me. The researchers gathered data from interviews with professionals at historically Black colleges and universities to unpack the relationship between staff and students. The findings of this study highlight my action research because of the concept of “othermothering,” defined as “women who assist blood-mothers by sharing mothering responsibilities” (Collins, 2000, p. 178). This conceptual framework is grounded in three components: ethnic care, cultural advancement, and institutional guardianship (Hirt et al., 2008). Having this framework in mind not only highlights the nature between the mentor and mentee that I am trying to unpack, but it also made me question what about people outside of the “mother” identity?

Ramos (2019) also discussed the idea of family and unity. They mention mentorship was approached through a holistic lens to support first-generation students of color during their transition into college through narrative storytelling. Ramos discussed the holistic perspective by incorporating the role student affairs professionals should be playing as mentors. Ramos (2019) highlighted the idea that mentors should model and balance a system of challenge versus support and cultivate an ethic of care into their mentorship. Additionally, Luedke (2017) also highlighted the unity and support approach. Luedke explored the dynamic of mentoring between staff and first-generation Black, Latinx, and biracial students. White staff were not able to support students holistically (Luedke, 2017). Reasons that this happened was White staff tended to emphasize students' academic experience rather than taking into consideration other factors in the student development process. Therefore, this experience made students seek relationships with people of color instead. The article also revealed that staff of color were able to emphasize various forms of capital, were honest, and made themselves available all the time. Livingstone et al. (2018) continues the approach in seeing students as their whole self but incorporated a multifaceted approach when it comes to mentoring. The authors mention different forms of models such as pastoral, professional, and curriculum. Also, Smith (2007) studied how students were accessing social capital through the process of mentoring. Smith mentions some factors of establishing norms, sanctions, closure, and informational channels. By using these factors, we were able to explore the idea of social capital by seeing students as their whole self.

### **Contexts**

This study was conducted at the University of San Diego (USD). Due to the Covid-19 pandemic the university was in a hybrid learning style, I decided to pursue my action research virtually. USD is a private, non-profit Roman Catholic university located in San Diego,

California north of Interstate 8. According to the university website “Forty-three percent are minority students and 6% are international students” (USD, n.d.). Integrated Postsecondary Education Data (Year) provides specific demographic information of the students:

The enrolled student population at University of San Diego is 49.2% White, 20.6% Hispanic or Latino, 7.97% Asian, 5.76% Two or More Races, 4.17% Black or African American, 0.305% American Indian or Alaska Native, and 0.251% Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islanders. This includes both full-time and part-time students as well as graduate and undergraduates. (Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, 2019)

At the beginning of my action research, I worked at USD in a graduate assistantship as the Assistant Community Director within Residential Education. Toward the end of the Fall 2021 quarter, I was able to land a new position at UC San Diego through the Undergraduate Admissions Office. During my time at USD, I felt uncomfortable, frustrated, and at times lost. This experience to an extent was new to me. I was constantly searching to find my community and people that I can trust, be vulnerable with and at the same time be real with. It was through this journey where I realized the power of mentorship and what it can do, especially when it comes to students from historically marginalized identities. What sparked my curiosity even more was when I realized that I was not alone and that my example was one of many. With this research I was able to incorporate my passion for mentorship overall and emerge myself with lived experiences with my participants. I use the words “guardians of the academy” interchangeably to encompass the variety of titles within the field of higher education such as staff, faculty, and administrators.

I want to be able to co-create a space where first-generation students of color can come together and be heard, empowered, and cared for. Through this research, I want to be able to

unpack emotions and release years of potential suppressed emotions. Questions will be answered such as: Why do I have a small support system when it comes to professional staff? Why is it I do not feel a connection with certain professional staff? Why am I constantly experiencing transactional experiences? We are going to be able to finally take a step back and realize it is not about us being constantly confused and lost, but more about those in power, partially invested in the type of work they do.

### **Research Design**

For my research design, I used a qualitative and quantitative approach. My intention was to use mixed methods to have a rich, multifaceted research experience when analyzing my participants. The conceptual frameworks used throughout my research are intentional to build rapport and a relationship with my participants. I acknowledged and implemented practices of relationships between mentor and mentee often lack. As a result, I will implement a holistic approach inclusive of mind, body, and spirit because I have noticed this opens a new realm in building connections between humans. As people use multiple senses when connecting with food, touching upon different senses in the body opens a new way of connecting with humans. A holistic approach is something that should be taken seriously because of the time and energy with other individuals. I noticed mentoring to me meant something more than just a transactional experience. Mentorship is more than simply having a conversation with a student, especially if they are a first-generation student of color. Mentorship meant paying attention to the multifaceted components of the individual (i.e., mind, body, and spirit) and unpacking the collective needs that students might be experiencing.

The first part of my research was to have 30-minute interviews with six of my research participants using a semi-structured approach. A reason behind the choice of this method was to

ensure the conversations were organic as possible. I wanted to make my participants feel less overwhelmed and more comfortable by helping them feel that this was less an “interview” and more of a conversation. The questions I asked my participants in both the individual sessions and community circles are included in Appendix A. After the individual interviews were conducted, I followed up with my participants by having two 45-minute community circles with three participants in each. The students had the opportunity to listen to one another and hear the different or similar experiences that came up when it came to analyzing the mentorship relationship between professional staff. To ensure rich conversation, I was able to set aside 5 minutes to create “house rules” to highlight inclusivity and create a safe space for my participants. I also made sure consent was addressed at the start of my recruitment by having my participants sign the consent form found in Appendix C. The goal of these circles was to form an informal collective and shape experiences into thoughts, feelings, and actions. Often, first-generation students of color might be afraid to speak up and acknowledge or embrace what they need. These conversations were to guide the metaphorical giant students have within, and hopefully build the courage to call out the guardians of academy and hold them accountable. Through our conversations, my hope was for participants to give themselves the authority to speak up. The purpose of these circles was for participants to build bridges, show solidarity with one another, and have a deeper, richer experience when it comes to unpacking their mentorship journey. Bulman et al. (2011) highlight this by

Spiritual healing is about having a shared vision of the future that creates hope in the hearts of the individuals, groups, and communities. Obviously, no one has hope if the shared vision of the future is lacking in benefits for people (p. 20).

Within this space, I wanted to be able to form an informal collective so that we can share our personal experiences and uplift students who might have similar experiences when it comes to mentorship. In my methodology, I discuss in-depth the questions I asked and how I conducted the focus groups.

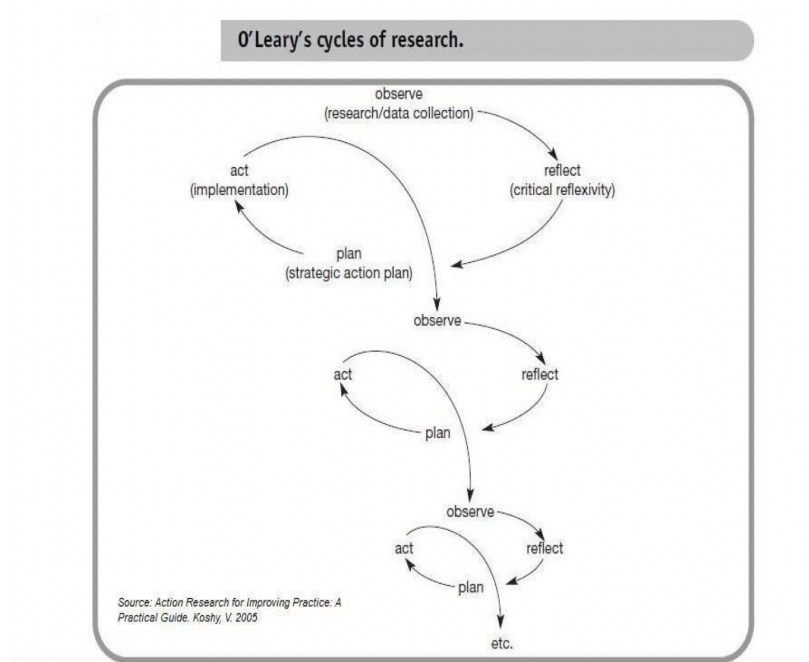
Overall, my intention behind the research design chosen was to take a holistic approach by incorporating mind, body, and spirit into my session. I incorporated a grounding activity at the beginning of each interview and community circles. During the individual interviews, I began with a check-in question followed by a breathing activity. I was able to ask my participants: “What are some things you are bringing into our session today?” After I spent a minute on that topic, I transitioned to a breathing activity. I was able to tell my participants to place their right hand over their hearts and take five deep breaths. The five breaths were facilitated by me. The overall structure of the grounding activity can be found in Appendix B.

For the group circle, I was able to spend the first 3 minutes with a grounding activity. I was able to ask participants beforehand to grab a piece of paper. They were given 2 minutes to write down their concerns and challenges they might have had at that moment. After 2 minutes, I told them to crumple up the paper as tightly and hold it for a second. I asked them to extend their arm out to the side, let the paper drop, and leave it there. After we dropped the papers—and with them, challenges no longer served us—we spent 4 minutes establishing the house rules and expectations. I was able to prepare some examples in advance. Once expectations were finalized and everyone agreed to them, I saved the document to reference them throughout the session if it was needed. I was able to take casual field notes but also incorporated myself into the research and practice. To be more present in the here and now, I recorded the session so I could go back and transcribe if needed. Because of the collaboration with my participants, my goals were

transparent with them throughout the research process. I was able to set a time and space before the recording to address any questions, set a collaborative culture, and reiterate the purpose of our research. After the interview, I made sure to thank participants by sending them a virtual thank-you letter and followed up with them once my paper and findings were completed. My goal was not to just to treat this session as a singular experience but more of a long-term commitment and support system with all those who were involved. This collaborative approach helped me stay authentic to who I am as having intentional conversations was something that I was trying to cultivate with my participants. The methodological approach I chose for my action research project is McNiff and Whitehead's (2011) action-reflection cycle (see Figure 1). This methodological approach consists of four on-going cycles, which are observe, reflect, plan, and act. Although these steps might look like a sequential format, what drew me to use this approach was the ongoing collaborative cyclical approach to it. Having this approach in mind helped us observe our similar and different experiences collectively while at the same time spending time reflecting on those new experiences that were coming up for us at that very moment. This methodological approach helped me stay grounded in my research because I was able to check myself throughout the process and make meaning of the experiences that were happening in each session. Hearing these narratives helped me create collaborative solutions, which led us in gaining hope to act upon those solutions through our personal individual lives. This framework helped me stay grounded with my participants by personally connecting with them and emerging myself within the research as well through similar shared narrative storytelling.

### **Figure 1**

*O'Leary Cycles of Research*



### *O'Leary Cycles (Koshy, 2005)*

### **Yosso's Community Cultural Wealth Model**

On top of using O'Leary Cycles (Koshy, 2005), I also incorporated Yosso's Community Cultural Wealth model to help guide my work related to mentorship. This framework guided my research because it helped me take note of the different forms of capital that each participant brought individually but at the same time as a collective group. I was able to see how each capital can mean something different for everyone. I made sure I was conscious of using this framework as a guide and let my participants do more of the leading related to their own unique experiences revolving around their identities and mentorship. Figure two provides an overview of the six forms of capital that students of color tend to gravitate to, to survive different forms of oppression in a system that was not built with students of color in mind. The six states of capital are aspirational, familial, social, navigational, resistance, and linguistic. This survival mechanism



has the potential to build off one another rather than having them mutually be exclusive. A detailed breakdown on each capital can be found below:

### ***Aspirational Capital***

This form of capital is the resistance that each student has from within as it relates to their vision, aspirations, and dreams, even though there might be multiple different barriers that might come in the way. This form of aspiration is what keeps students of color pushing through. Overall, this is the ability to remain optimistic for a better future.

### ***Familia Capital***

This form of capital puts a lot of emphasis on knowledge gained and relies on the family as a form of support. This understanding focused on family can carry cultural history, ancestral wisdom, or even philosophies tied with a commitment to the community. Considering that family can mean different things for different people, it is essential to let the individual make the interpretation and define what that means for them specifically. As individuals become connected with other people who have similar experiences, it then has the potential to foster and create a communal bond together.

### ***Social Capital***

Social capital is the accessible communal resources that the individual has access to assist them in navigating higher education. This form of capital can also look different regarding the students' needs and vary from informal to formal roles. An example would be having the opportunity to have a diverse portfolio of people within someone's network who they can reach out to for help or having resources for emotional support and guidance whenever needed.

### ***Navigational Capital***

When it comes to navigational capital, it is the set of strategies that one has gained to allow one to navigate social institutions despite the potential macro and micro-overwhelming events that might be happening within a student's life. Family capital would be a great example of helping a student navigate higher education, especially since this institution was not built with historically marginalized identities in mind. Another one can be the power of resilience. (Salaza & Spina, 2000) highlighted this capital by connecting reliance as a form of a resource. They mentioned that

Resilience has been recognized as 'a set of inner resources, social competencies and cultural strategies that permit individuals to not only survive, recover, or even thrive after stressful events, but also to draw from the experience to enhance subsequent functioning. (Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2000, p. 229)

Reclaiming challenges can be a form of motivation in navigating this system and helping others who might be experiencing something similar.

### ***Resistance Capital***

Resistance capital is not only the power not to be affected by the oppressive structure embedded within our system but, most importantly, challenges the oppressive structure when navigating higher education and other institutions. It is to have the opportunity to use the strategies and knowledge learned to advocate for you and the community.

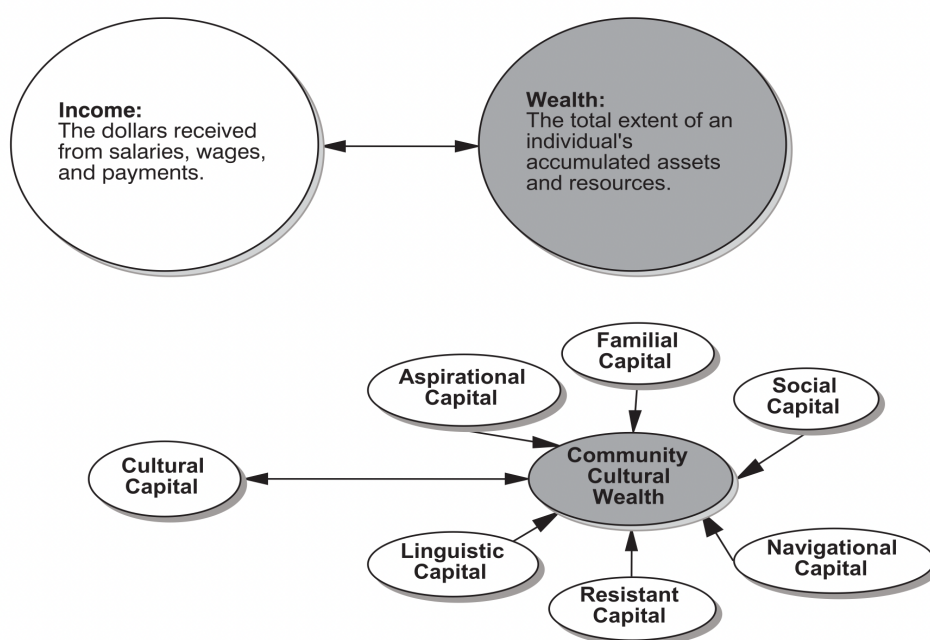
### ***Linguistic Capital***

The last capital would be linguistic, which is the ability to maneuver social institutions through the use of more than one language and other communication styles. This capital dives into unpacking the experience that students of color often use multiple ways of communicating through one conversation, all happening at once. (Yosso, 2005) highlighted this by mentioning,

Linguistic capital reflects the idea that Students of Color arrive at school with multiple languages and communication skills. In addition, these children most often have been engaged participants in a storytelling tradition, that may include listening to and recounting oral histories, parables, stories (cuentos) and proverbs (dichos). (p. 79)

**Figure 2**

*Community Cultural Wealth Model*



(Yosso's, 2005)

### Cycle Results and Findings

I had the opportunity to interview six total USD-affiliated students with diverse backgrounds. All students identified as first-generation college students and students of color. Table 1 provides a general overview of their educational clarification and a pseudonym number for each participant due to confidentiality.

**Table 1***Table for Participants and classification*

Participants	Classification
Pseudonym 1	First year in Master Program
Pseudonym 2	Second year in Master Program
Pseudonym 3	Undergraduate Junior
Pseudonym 4	Alumna
Pseudonym 5	Alumna
Pseudonym 6	Undergraduate Junior

### **Summary and Results of Individual Interviews**

#### **Observation**

The individual interviews were conducted first, and the majority were all scheduled for February 2022 virtually through Zoom. I was able to recruit these participants by reaching out to a variety of multicultural student organizations through email using the template found in Appendix D. At the start, I made sure to communicate with participants through email, but this changed when I noticed that for some participants email was not the most convenient form of communication. Once I pivoted to texting using the number they put down in the google form, I noticed more frequent responses back. The goal of the individual interviews was to connect with my participants on a personal level before the community group circles and hear their experiences when it came to unpacking the mentorship dynamic between them and guardians of the academy. I wanted to compare and contrast what differences popped up in each space. As I began building rapport with my participants throughout our individual sessions, I noticed that every individual had a personal connection with mentorship and was genuinely interested in

being a part of this collaborative research. It was as if the participants wanted to be a part of this research to share their experiences and, most importantly, bring some type of awareness onto our campus regarding this topic. This became visible to me as I started to hear similar themes throughout each individual interview with some type of passion and commitment to some kind of change through their voice. Hearing the vibration change within their voice was a form of motivation for me because it made me realize that I was not alone in this research. It was as if we were speaking the same language because I was able to resonate with many things that were said within each space. The frequent individual interview themes that popped up related to mentorship were representation, commitment, intentionality, and a familial/cultural theme tied with mentorship.

### **Reflection**

As I reflect upon our overall experience within our one-on-one conversations, it became visible that commitment, intentionality, and some familial/cultural influence hit close to home for students of color as they made meaning of their experiences when it came to mentorship. When it came to intentionality, students were able to define mentorship using a collective cultural lens and were intentional that mentorship is more of a "we" rather than an "I." When interviewing Participant 3 they highlighted this by saying,

Coming from a collectivist culture. To me, mentorship is a we and it's not an I, I think in order for someone to mentor someone in having growth or being better. I think that it takes more than just one person to do that. I think it is collective.

This collective approach helps foster more of an ongoing collaborative dynamic that is not just a transactional one but a transformative one with an extended long-term commitment attached to it. It is about building bridges with resources for the student and cultivating capital

that the students might or might now have. This idea made me reflect that having this collective approach can even have the potential to incorporate all the forms of capital that the Cultural Wealth model addresses.

A good example would be being able to foster a network for the student who can potentially blossom into familial capital, which can lead to navigational and social capital as well. This mindset helps us see a student less from a "your student" and more of an "our student" approach. To add on, another participant showcased intentionality but at the same time also incorporated a strong dedication to commitment when it came to their approach to mentorship through a cultural lens as well. When interviewing Participant 5, they stated,

The commitment level is endless. I do not necessarily set limits when it comes to helping others. No set boundaries. My values while growing up. My parents put in me. It is also of me giving back. Throughout life, I have been helped and I love the reciprocity. The fact that I have been helped also emphasizes the values of helping others.

It was clear that these students had a strong devotion for intentionality and giving back in general because of the substantial value that is placed on familial relationships and values. Familial and cultural aspects became more prevalent for students as we were able to gain some sense of awareness as it is connected to the idea of mentorship itself. Participant 1 highlighted that

I feel like I tend to trauma bond a lot. Like I tend to know that a lot of people of color who have been through many obstacles and have faced many things that I feel. Sadly, it has built more resilience. And it's not something to be proud of, because it shouldn't have happened in the first place. But I know that I can go to these professors or faculties, professional staff on campus that understand or have a place within their past generation.

Even current generations, families that have dealt with some kind of experience related to struggles that I feel. I build relationships over those traumas, and like, I feel comfortable sharing those stories.

Through this shared narrative, we were able to see the power of mentorship coming in many different shapes and forms. We were able to see the power of mentorship through the connection of trauma bonding as a survival mechanism for historically marginalized identities as they navigate higher education. It has come as a safety response for students of color to seek those with similar experiences due to the emotional and ancestral struggles that have been part of the experience with the student.

On top of this, participants also revealed a theme of having a strong dedication and commitment when it comes to mentorship. To emphasize this substantial value of commitment, another participant shared their experience in fostering a mentorship relationship with one of their mentees. When interviewing Participant 6, they stated,

To me, mentorship is on a daily basis. I directed him to a resource for how to get a loan to start his business, and then, at the end of the text message, I said I can't stop myself from doing this. I said, if you need any help, let me know. Even though I don't have the time, I can do it. Because it's just the right thing to do.

Hearing Participant 6's point of view touched close to home for me. It felt like mentorship was treated less of an obligation and more of a lifestyle. In a way, it felt like a philosophy when Participant 6 shared their perspective. At that moment, Participant 6 perspectives and the perspectives of all my participants started to resonate with me. It was as if we were speaking the same language as first-generation students of color. Considering that I am a part of the research as well, I made sure to stay curious about the feelings that were popping up

for me and not simply brush them away. Although these feelings slightly drifted me from my participants in the here and now, I realized that I needed to ground myself to present along with my participants. How I would go about grounding myself will be discussed in my plan and action below

### **Plan/Action**

Overall, this cycle was rich for not only my participants but also myself. I believe it was a rich conversation because my participants were able to open up to me by being themselves and sharing intimate personal connections from their experiences. It was eye opening to see that the majority of the participants were eager to share space and revealed some type of advocacy around this topic by shedding light into their narratives. Throughout the individual interviews, I was able to cover all questions in time except with one participant. When I was sharing space with Participant 2, we were not able to make it through the last two questions. I went ahead and made note of this as I began to plan for the community group circle because I was interested in hearing their perspective a bit more. One of the reasons why we were not able to make it through all the questions was because of how genuine our conversation was. As I prepared and planned for my next cycle, I also made sure to set an intention for myself in case my mind began to wander as I resonated with my participants and made a connection with them through my educational journey. My planned intention for the community group circle was to remain curious but redirect my wandering mind back to my participants. My plan was to align my breathing along with my participants as they were speaking to help ground myself at the moment.

### **Summary and Finding of Community Group Circles**

#### **Observer**



Although representation, commitment, intentionality and some familial and cultural aspects were still being highlighted in the Community Group Circles, something that I observed different within this space was a sense of advocacy, having a holistic lens when it comes to mentorship, overall service, and having a complete connection within the relationship.

Participants were able to share their experience regarding their identity and how they navigate it while attending a predominantly White institution in this group setting. They expressed that as students of color they need someone who is able to advocate on behalf of them, and needing a mentor who is going to act as a bridge between them and their campus overall experience. When interviewing Participant 4 they highlighted this by saying

I'm purposely looking for people who are going to make my experience of grad school as easy as possible. Whether that's like a faculty member, or a professional staff member, someone who I can relate to who's going to keep me and makes me feel connected to the campus, because it is important to have a connection and if my connection to the institution comes from my personal relationships such as classmates, with my faculty members, with student affairs professionals, then that's what's gonna keep me engaged and make me feel like I belong in this space because it can feel alienating. Especially, when you go to a campus where you don't see yourself reflected. In the student population, in the curriculum, or even in the design of the whole school. So yeah, for me, it's really about like, that sense of belonging, that sense of inclusion.

Through this shared narrative it is clear that not only should the guardians of the academy be playing the role in which they were hired for but much more. They are there to make students feel like they belong both inside and outside of the classroom or whichever capacity they find themselves working in. It is about providing hope when they feel hopeless and empowering them

to reach their full potential, while at the same time challenging departmental historical ways of thinking. Incorporating advocacy is needed to incorporate inclusivity and amplifying the voices within the political climate we are in. Harris and Lee (2018) mentioned that “Advocate-mentors use their privilege and social status to leverage inclusiveness and are willing to assume the associated risks in creating such institutional change. The need for this kind of mentoring is vital, given our current socio political climate” (p. 111). An advocate is about speaking up for those hiding under the shadows not because they want to make themselves look good, but because it is the right thing to do for our community. According to Harris & Lee (2018),

An advocate-mentor should have compassion and respect for their protégé, which requires exercising racial, professional, and/or intellectual privilege to engage in activism on behalf of their marginalized protégé. Thus, advocate-mentors commit to challenging the department and/or institution to be accountable for and to their increasingly diverse student (and faculty) body, subsequently promoting equity, inclusivity, and systemic change (p. 107).

Hearing the group define what being an advocate meant was powerful. The community group circle were able to come together and share their narratives but at the same time reveal some type of advocacy along with it. It revealed that being an advocate and mentor were synonyms for one another. Through shared narrative storytelling, participants were able to reveal that an advocate needs to be connected with the mentee holistically but at the same time have a strong commitment to service to make them feel supportive and acknowledge that representation is needed. (Participant 5, 2022) was able to share their experience when it comes to a mentor by saying that

A mentor's ability to kind of understand my background, relate to me is important. Let's say, someone is a person of color, or just a person that you know, who has more experience working with students like me, they have a better understanding of what I go through and are able to provide needed support, I think, for me, just understanding that they have experienced in that particular field that I'm interested in or with people who are like me helps me be open to the idea of them helping me and that make me trust them.

If students are being intentional in what they are needing it is important to also reciprocate that same energy back so we can cater to the needs of our students but also our community overall. To find more quotes reflecting on the themes and to unpacked even further please refer to Table 2.

**Table 2**

*Table for Group Themes and Quotes*

<i>Group and Themes</i>	<i>Quotes</i>
<b>Group 1 ( Participants 1 and 2 )</b>	
Advocacy Description	Participant 1 “I was actually on academic probation. And like, after that, like, I was doing really good. And then I thought about graduate school, because that specific professor believed in me, like she told me, she told me to come to office hours, for some reason, I guess she noticed that something was off and I didn't think it was visible you know, like, teachers are there to, you know, teach and show and then all right, like, you need, like assistance with work, just come to my office hours, but she like intentionally reached out one of my papers and commented saying, like, hey, like, something seems off.”
Holistically Description	“Participant 1 I feel like me mentorship for me. It's more like, guided, it's intentional in the way that it's going to be approached. So I feel like when it's not intentional, it's not really mentorship. Because I feel like those are more like organic relationships that like supportive friendships or relationships with other people. And like mentorship, it's intentional, like it's purposeful, like you're trying to reach something.”

Participant 2 “I think mentorship is above just like an average teacher. because obviously your role as the teacher is to guide you through things like content and material. But I think mentorship also is important in guiding you through life-like events or just difficult times in situations that would require a level of trust... So I think the emotional connection is really important.

Participant 1 “I feel like it's important for the mentor to understand where they are and meet them halfway. Because I feel like that's really important when you're trying to help someone or provide support, like you got to know where they're coming from. So I think like the emotional guidance, like tuning in with them first and like understanding them, and then like walking through guiding them, like through mentorship from that lens. So emotions are like really, really, really important and like how people view and their perspective

## **Group 2 (Participant 4, 5 and 6)**

### **Service Description**

Participant 5 “For me, at least, I don't really seek something out of being a mentor. It's simply me doing it just for the sake of helping someone else. But not necessarily for me, like to gain experience or anything like that. It's more so just the service aspect of it.”

“Participant 4 “I think, you know, just mentorship has always been tied to service and that's what makes mentorships a unique relationship. I think that, you know, if there isn't that service component involved, then it's just like any other, you know, friendship that you have with someone else.”

### Connection Description

Participant 6 “we share similar experiences, we understand where we come from, and many of the experiences that we have had in the past are similar to theirs. So it's, I will say, it's just, I don't know, it's just, you just feel more comfortable, you feel right at the moment, when you're talking to that person, you feel that they understand you just by the way, they look at you the way that they give you feedback, the way that they respond to your answer to how you do your questions, and it's just, it's just, it just feels, I don't know how to explain it, it just feels comfortable.”

Participant 4 “ I think the reason why we first gen students look for mentors is because, again, you know, we want to find people who will look like us, right, who, like everyone says, who either have gone either share a similar background and life experience or who understand where we're coming from, right. And these are people who are, you know, in these positions of power, right, or sometimes in positions where they can advocate for us, right, where they can become our allies.”

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### Reflection

As I reflect on the summary and findings of the community group circles, we were able to see that a sense of advocacy, having a holistic lens when it comes to mentorship, overall service, and having an intimate connection is what the students needed. Although these themes might seem like they are all different, throughout our time together they were all treated as if they were interconnected, while at the same time leaving us redefining what mentorship meant to us. I noticed that in the community group circles there was more discussion, which made it seem like having 45 minutes was not enough time because of the engaging conversation we were all having. I noticed that certain questions became more engaging in the group setting than in the individual interviews which led us to have more conversation around those questions itself. The questions that brought more conversation were questions two and four found in Appendix A. I felt like in the communal space our energy fed off from one another because we were, including

myself, were all able to resonate. It was as if we came together and were practicing what everyone was preaching when it came to the qualities of mentorship. There was a sense of advocacy within the space in making our voices be heard, a commitment to service by being present and actively engaging in making connections, while at the same time thinking holistically. I noticed that within this space I felt like I was getting pulled into the overall conversation because of how close to home this overall topic means to me. After our sessions together, I was left with wanting and wishing Participant 3 was with us because I had our individual one-on-one in mind. Although it was difficult in working around everyone's schedule for Group 1, I noticed that I saw myself incorporating the conversation I had with Participant 3 mentally in my mind.

### **Plan/Action**

My previous intention in monitoring my breathing throughout the session and controlling my wandering mind helped me in the community group circle as it was a space that touched my mind, body and spirit even more. As I take a moment to reflect at this very moment, I am curious to know if this came up for some people as well, especially in Group 2 where I did not utilize the grounding activity I had planned. I was not able to use the paper grounding activity I had planned because one of the participants arrived late to our session. I knew that if I would have continued with our grounding activity I would have wasted more time in diving deeper into the questions itself. Please refer to the limitation section for further explanation. Something I would plan for the future would be having a “call time” and a “session time.” Providing a call time will hopefully help with timing by having everyone earlier but at the same time remind those that need it to attend the actual session on time. Another thing that I noticed is that our time together was less of a transactional dialogue and more of a transformative dialogue. At the end, it felt like

our group had a couple of transformative actionable takeaways, which made me curious to know what they were. During the check-out process I was able to ask after our time together what would be one word that comes to you when you think of mentorship? Our group session came with the following: feeling seen, respect, passion, gratitude, and trust. With this in mind, I am curious to know what a planned check-out geared to the future such as, after our session today, what is one take away that you would like to incorporate within your journey as a mentor look like? According to Deetz and Simpson (2004), transformative dialogue

becomes possible when interlocutors find their common-sense beliefs challenged as they encounter differences in interaction with an Other. These differences call into question and challenge otherwise unquestioned assumptions and open up the possibility of generative, productive change (p. 154).

If I was left with inspiration, rejuvenated with energy, and overall grounding to continue this my passion in giving back to my community so wonder if that was the case for the community circle itself.

### **Limitations**

When it came to one of the community circles there was a definite challenge in working around everyone's schedules. Not only did I have to work around all three participants, but also myself. I had to send out three availability schedule polls for one community circle group, which consisted within a 3-week span. There was a pressure inside me wanting to start my community circles because I knew I had the deadline of writing this paper in mind. It was a challenge making the decision in moving forward with only two participants instead of three because it was not the environment I was trying to set. I was able to acknowledge this during the start of my

community group circle because transparency and vulnerability was something that was being fostered within the space.

Another challenge that I found within my action research was not incorporating the grounding activity that I had planned for my second community group circle. One participant arrived late which made me make the call to think of another way of checking in with my participants. Instead of doing the check-in activity I had planned, I used a question as a form of checking in. The question that I asked was the following: “What is something that you all are bringing into our session today that might be beneficial for the group to know?” I went ahead and explained that this can be something that you have been thinking about all day or something that simply is on your mind right now as we ground ourselves in sharing space with one another. Another limitation I had would be during my research was living through a pandemic. My goal was to do my research in person but for the safety of my participants and I everything was held virtually through Zoom.

### **Recommendations**

Through my research there were recurrent themes when it came to analyzing the mentorship dynamic between first-generation students of color and the guardians of the academy. A recommendation that I had in strengthening the relationship between students and higher education professionals would be recognizing the importance of cultural competence when it comes to the students. The fact that some people can work in higher education without necessarily having some type of track record working with students of color is shocking. Mentors need to strive in having difficult conversations and not avoid them. Students of color often experience microaggressions, imposter syndrome, and stereotype treats on a daily basis. Through this research, students were constantly craving mentors who were able to sit alongside



the students' experiences/challenges because it made them feel heard, trusted and at times grounded. One of the participants echoed this by sharing that

When I speak with my mentor I feel grounded. To me this is important because as a first-gen college student there are often times where I doubt the career moves I am making or the educational journey I am on. Having my mentor has been a grounding experience for me because every time I feel like giving up she will give me tough love (Participant 1, 2022).

Guiding students to make meaning out of their experiences by bringing a sense of awareness but at the same time limiting the number of answers being provided can be a powerful tool for the mentorship dynamic. Instead of brushing over topics that historically marginalized identities experience, it is important to dive deeper co-collaboratively and become more comfortable with the “uncomfortable”. Personalizing their needs can help the student bring their true self into the conversation since highlighting their experiences deeply allows them to welcome their whole self into the space. You would think that higher educational professionals would strive for this type of dynamic but that is not always the case, especially if students attend a predominantly White institution where you constantly hear White faculty members often engage with students from a colorblind perspective. According to McCoy et al., (2010)

The faculty members used colorblind language (Bonilla-Silva, 2010) to define their mentoring relationships with Students of Color. Some White faculty members kept referring to treating everyone the same. This seemingly race neutral, colorblind language may actually work to reinforce racial biases and stereotypes (Bonilla-Silva, 2010) because it disallowed the White faculty members from contemplating structural or

institutional barriers that might influence Students' of Color experiences (Bonilla - Silva, 2010, as cited in McCoy, 2010).

Instead of opening the doors for students of color it sounds like White faculty are closing the doors on them instead. This can become a serious concern within academia, especially when it comes to subjects like STEM where we already see a low percentage of students of color enrolled. Faculty not only need to be critical and knowledgeable with the subjects they are teaching, but also be able to strengthen their cultural competence as it relates to mentorship, such as seeing students holistically. Faculty have the power to help combat racial hostility and help students belong into disciplines where they might not see themselves in. Faculty need to be able to check their privilege and bring self-awareness to how their identities might influence their interactions with students. Pope et al. (2004) highlighted that

In order for those who mentor, coach, and advise emerging leaders to achieve cultural competence and facilitate effective leader development, they must comprehend issues of power, privilege, and oppression and be reflective about the ways their social identities and positionality influence their interactions with diverse students (ACPA & NASPA, 2015; Pope et al., 2004).

A recommendation for faculty to continue the cultural competence learning journey would be to require them to show solidarity with multicultural student organizations by attending a few of their events, or workshops that they are hosting. Not only will they support students outside of the classroom but also learn and put themselves into spaces where they might not see themselves in. To add on, it would also be needed if faculty were required to collaborate with on/off campus partners from diverse backgrounds to host workshops or trainings and unpack these experiences further. Participant 2 expressed

I think the way that professors talk about diversity, and these particular racial issues also impacts whether I feel comfortable with them. I've definitely had professors who are able to talk about these issues in a very nuanced and educated yet in a very, like, empathetic way. But I've also had professors who try to be relatable, but it comes off as performative and therefore makes not just me but also everyone else in the room feel really, really uncomfortable.

Students of color are already feeling often uncomfortable in a variety of spaces in higher education, so hearing that they are also feeling this type of way within the classroom is sad. This needs to change and overall needs some type of accountability. Collaboration with other individuals will be able to foster a community-like dynamic and continue the ongoing learning for faculty. Not only is cultural competence needed when it comes to having mentorship at the forefront, and diversifying our directory but also having an institution cultural shift.

Another recommendation that is needed would be making mentorship a part of the university culture itself by interconnecting it into the performance evaluation for the guardian of the academy. Through this research we were able to see the many times students highlighted intentionality when it comes to mentorship. A way to incorporate intentionality within the university culture and when it comes to mentorship would be to become intentional in diversifying the guardians of the academy within the institution. Oftentimes students of color are in spaces where people do not look like them, but importantly do not understand them, especially when it comes to predominantly White institutions. According to Ellis' (2000),

Black students were more dissatisfied with their relationships with their advisor compared to White students and were less likely to have a faculty member in their own department that they considered a mentor. In fact, African American students in this study found

alternative sources of support for finishing their degrees by establishing mentoring relationships with mentors outside of their home departments, and at times outside of their institutions” (Ellis, 2000, as cited in Thomas, 2007).

The fact that students are dissatisfied within their own department when seeking a mentor is alarming. Students of color are constantly seeking this “secret recipe” to be successful college students but yet there seems to be more barriers which makes their college experience only more challenging. Faculty need to do a better job in advocating and pushing for an agenda that requires them to diversify their faculty contact directory. Students are wanting and needing representation so people can not only look like them, but most importantly understand them. Participant 2 also expressed “I 100% think they need to be hiring more, not White staff. Because I've looked at the numbers and frankly, particularly for USD, it's embarrassing as to how little like faculty they have.” As a university, we need to reconstruct and be intentional in how we evaluate the guardians of the academy because they are simply more than just employees working with a specific job role. Every year students are constantly evaluating faculty regarding the quality of teaching and not on the quality of mentorship. According to Thomas et al., (2007)

In order to build a climate for mentoring within institutions, leadership must consider the extent to which effective mentoring, especially of minority students, is a criteria in faculty evaluations and ultimately, tenure, and promotion. Leadership must consider, “How visible are the expectations of faculty to provide effective mentoring and how visible is the institutional value of mentoring?” (p.188).

Redefining how we evaluate the guardians of the academy and incorporating mentorship along the process can be a step forward in prioritizing mentorship. Instead of spending more energy evaluating the number of research journals one publishes or the amount of grants a

faculty receives, we also need to question how we can continue to have more of a mentorship student - centered dynamic?

Another recommendation that was shared within the community group circles that I would like to acknowledge would be revamping the mentorship program through the school of Leadership and Education Sciences (SOLES) at USD. Fifty percent of the participants shared that they have had a bad experience with the mentorship program without it even being asked. The fact that they brought it up to my attention caused me to reflect, because it was at that very moment where I also saw myself being pulled into this conversation because it touched close to home. It was as if I was pulled in mentally, physically and spiritually. Participants felt that the program overall did not support their students and did not reflect the identities that they identified with. They expressed that the mentors in the program did not take their mentees seriously and treated it like another task on their responsibility list. Participant 6 opened up by saying

They need to fix this. And the only way that they're going to know that there is something to be done on the mentorship program, for my program, the leadership and nonprofit management program is through this. Mentors that they have on the program available for people like me, were 0, 0. I answered all the questions in the questionnaire about personal questions, career questions, job questions and, and then they kind of start matching you. I feel like it's like a date app where they match you with other people. Well, I was matched with one person and unfortunately, it never worked out.

To echo this experience even more Participant 3 highlighted this as well by saying that

I know that they do have mentorship programs already, which I was able to use at the undergrad and graduate level, and I did participate in the graduate level. And the mentor

that I got, literally, we met once, and it was super awkward and they ghosted me after.

And I think it was because they weren't prepared to make a deeper, meaningful connection. I think that it was just like, you know, a surface level thing for them and to cross something off their list. And so when I was wanting more, it just wasn't met.

These narratives continue to show the lack of representation, intentionality, advocacy and commitment to services in which this study was able to explore. Incorporating these themes can help with the structure of the mentorship program. Instead of having someone decide which mentor would be best for a student, it would be powerful to have the student decide on their own. They are the ones that know best in what they are seeking out of a mentor. We have explored through this research that students of color are needing people more than just having someone who they can talk to for guidance. Being intentional about who specifically becomes a mentor can also be powerful in incorporating because students are needing people who have a commitment to service and are intentional with their purpose in being a mentor overall. Are we just having mentors enroll into this program because there is a need, or are we being selective and critical along who is a part of this experience? Another tool in fostering the mentorship program is having a semi-structured approach. Although having structure can be intimidating and can lose some of the reasoning that the student might be coming in with, it can also assist those students who might need some structure because they are coming in feeling lost and not knowing where to start. Giving the authority to have the mentee make the decision can assist with their needs but at the same time make the overall relationship less structured and intentional.

## Conclusion

Mentoring is a lifelong journey and a never-ending cycle between the mentor and student. Although there is no wrong or correct answer to how to mentor, through this research, we were able to see what students of color need when it comes to the overall dynamics itself. We were able to hear how students define it, which can help us dance close to the definition and better cater to their needs. First-generation students of color are always searching for a "secret recipe" for navigating college. This search can get tiring over time because these students are always trying to learn independently, especially in lieu of needed guidance and support. Many first-generation students of color, myself included, have experienced bad relationships, even in higher education. We constantly seek to learn from students and have them "do the work." My research was in the hope of helping empower students within our circles and form a sense of unity so they can hold professional staff accountable. This is one reason why I did not want to incorporate professional staff in my study; to an extent, my research is less about them and more about students. Students are constantly silenced at a young age and told not to talk back to older ones. Moreover, we are constantly taught to keep emotions in check; it is time to revolutionize the way we think so we can let our thoughts be free. This research was to align my passion for mentorship, shed light on our experiences and, most importantly, empower us to take action and create change together. Although there is no right or wrong answer to mentoring, there are specific needs that students of color need so the next time we connect with a student, listen, and see how their mind, body, and spirit are communicating. .

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## **Appendix A**

### **Individual Interview and Community Circle Questions**

The questions listed below are the questions that I asked during my individual interviews and within my community group circles.

1. How do you define mentorship and what does the commitment level look like for you?
2. From the professional staff on campus you trust, what is it about those people that make you feel comfortable leaning toward them when seeking professional and/or personal help?
3. When was the last time you had a bad experience with a professional staff member, and what was it that made you feel that way?
4. How have you navigated being a first-generation college student when seeking help considering USD is a predominantly White institution?
5. Walk me through the last time you felt loved, supported, and/or at home when it comes to your campus experience?

## **Appendix B**

### **Individual Interview Grounding Activity**

The questions listed below were the questions that I asked for my grounding activity during my individual interview with the participants

1. With this breath, I want you to try to release any fears you might have regarding your academics at the moment.
2. With this breath, I want you to pay attention to how you are positioned at the moment.
3. With this breath, I want you to pay attention to your heart.
4. With this breath, I want you to pay attention to your feet.
5. With this final breath, I want you to hug yourself and say, “I love you three times in your head.”

## Appendix C

### Recruitment Flier



**PARTICIPANTS NEEDED FOR A  
STUDY ON UNPACKING THE**

**MENTORSHIP EXPERIENCE BETWEEN  
FIRST-GENERATION  
STUDENTS OF COLOR  
AND  
FACULTY/STAFF/ADMINISTRATORS**

Connect with other students and build  
community together by sharing narratives  
through storytelling.

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**CONTACT DAVID SANTOS AT  
(619) 453-7970**

**Time Commitment:**

One individual 30-minute interview and one  
45-minute group community circle with 2  
other participants. The total time commitment  
would be 75 minutes.

**Appendix D**  
**University of San Diego**  
**Institutional Review Board**  
**Research Participant Consent Form**

For the research study entitled:

**The Secret Recipe: Unpacking the Mentorship Experience Between the Guardians of  
Academy and First-Generation Students of Color in Higher Education**

**I. Purpose of the research study**

David Santos is a student in the Higher Education Leadership program at the University of San Diego (USD). You are invited to participate in a research study he is conducting. The purpose of this research study is to unpack the mentorship experience between the “Guardians of Academy” (Professors, Faculty, staff...etc.) and first-generation students of color within USD. Throughout this research “Guardian of Academy” is used interchangeably to incorporate faculty, staff, and administrators.

**II. What you will be asked to do**

If you decide to be in this study, you will be asked to:

*\* Audio recording will be used for data collection and will not be publicly released. Please see additional consent form*

1. Attend a virtual individual 30-minute interview with five questions regarding your experience with mentorship at USD.
  1. Within this interview, there will be a check-in question and a breathing/grounding activity.
2. Attend a 45-minute virtual community group circle with two other students that are also participating in this research. There will be a total of three USD students within our group.
  1. Within this community group circle there will be a three-minute grounding activity. After this activity, we will spend 4 minutes establishing safety rules/expectations for our time together as a group. The questions asked in this group will be the same as the individual interview. The purpose of this is to share our experiences and see what similarities/differences we might have.

Your participation in this study will take a total of **75 Minutes**.

An audio recording will be made of you during your participation in this study. The audio recordings will only be used for data collection purposes and transcript analysis.

### **III. Foreseeable risks or discomforts**

Sometimes when people are asked to think about their feelings, they feel sad or anxious. If you would like to talk to someone about your feelings at any time, you can call toll-free, 24 hours a day: San Diego Mental Health Hotline at 1-800-479-3339



For support at USD: (A counselor-on-call is available to consult about after-hours urgent psychological concerns at all times. The counselor-on call can be reached by calling 619-260-4655 (24 hours a day, 7 days a week). Please contact the Department of Public Safety to access emergency services (x2222 on any campus telephone, otherwise call 619-260-2222).

Please note due to the nature of a focus group, there's a small risk of confidentiality being breached but that I plan to address that with group norms and pseudonyms ahead of the start of the focus group.

#### **IV. Benefits**

While there may be no direct benefit to you from participating in this study, the indirect benefit of participating will be knowing that you helped researchers better understand and help amplify the voices of the students of color experience when navigating higher education at a predominantly White institution.

#### **V. Confidentiality**

Any information provided and/or identifying records will remain confidential and kept in a locked file and/or password-protected computer file in the researcher's office for a minimum of five years. All data collected from you will be coded with a number or pseudonym (fake name). Your real name will not be used. Each participant will be given a name tag before each session to select their own pseudonym. In the case participants' actual name is used during audio recording, the principal investigator will delete that portion of the recording. The results of this research

project may be made public and information quoted in professional journals and meetings, but information from this study will only be reported as a group, and not individually.

The information or materials you provide will be cleansed of all identifiers (like your name) and maybe used in future research. In regard to audio recordings of the sessions, recordings will not be shared beyond the principal investigator and will be deleted upon completion of the project.

During the session you are requested only the pseudonym of those who are involved in the study. Even if you know people outside of the study I request that you only use the pseudonym that participants have chosen for the sake of confidentiality.

## **VII. Voluntary Nature of this Research**

**Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You do not have to do this,** and you can refuse to answer any question or quit at any time. Deciding not to participate or not answering any of the questions will have no effect on any benefits you're entitled to, like your health care, or your employment or grades. **You can withdraw from this study at any time without penalty.**

## **VIII. Contact Information**

**If you have any questions about this research, you may contact either:**

**1) David Santos**

**Email:** [dsantoscastillo@sandiego.edu](mailto:dsantoscastillo@sandiego.edu)

**2) Dr. Kecia Brown**

**Email:** [keciabrown@sandiego.edu](mailto:keciabrown@sandiego.edu)

**Phone:** (619) 260-4538

I have read and understand the overall content form, and consent to the research it describes to me. I have received a copy of this consent form for my records.

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Signature of Participant

Date

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Name of Participant (**Printed**)

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Signature of Investigator

Date

## Appendix E

### Participant Out-Reach Email Template

**Subject Title: [Research Opportunity] First-Generation Experience at USD**

Hi [Insert Name]

I hope this email finds you well this time of the semester. My name is David Santos, and I am currently a second year in the Higher Education Leadership program here at USD.

One of the requirements to finish my program successfully is completing an action research project. My research project is titled *The Secret Recipe: Unpacking the Mentorship Experience Between the Guardians of Academy and First-Generation Students of Color in Higher Education*. This project aims to gain insight into the relationship between first-generation students of color and professional staff in higher education. Many articles discuss the pros and benefits of mentoring first-generation students of color but little on the relationship dynamic itself.

Some questions that sparked an interest were why first-generation students of color feel more comfortable reaching out to the specific people they trust on campus? What about them makes them come back being vulnerable and authentic at the same time?

Although this is a project assigned to me within my program, I cannot do it alone. I am seeking six participants to be a part of this project. The only criteria for this project are that you need to identify as being a first-generation student of color at the University of San Diego (USD).

The time commitment is a 30-minute individual interview with me, followed by a 45-minute group interview with two other students, so in total, there will be three students. The total time commitment would be 75 minutes. We will work around schedules and try to make the best out of this experience together. Please note that this will be a voluntary process, and you can opt out at any time without retaliation or penalties.

An audio recording will be made of you during your participation in this study. The audio recordings will only be used for data collection purposes and transcript analysis. Records will not be shared and deleted upon completion of the project.

Please feel free to share this within your spaces and have anyone interested to please fill out this [google form](#). Thank you once again and I hope to hear from you soon.

Best

- David Santos
  - (dsantoscastillo@sandiego.edu)
- Advisor: Dr. Kecia
  - keciabrown@sandiego.edu
  - Phone: (760) 566-7917