



# **Mentoring for Learner Success**

A “Definition Package” of Mentoring Relationships  
from the  
Final Report of the American Council on Education’s  
Learner Success Laboratory at Elon University

February 18, 2022

## Introduction to the Inaugural Cohort of the American Council on Education Learner Success Lab

In the spring of 2020, the American Council on Education (ACE) launched a new inclusive learning community called the [Learner Success Lab](#) (LSL), supported by the Strada Education Network. With institutional partners, the initiative aims “to create environments conducive to learning in all its forms, developing learners who demonstrate the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and agency necessary to navigate their life course, achieve personal fulfillment, and contribute to civil society” (Turk et al., 2020, p. 3). The COVID-19 pandemic and racial crises that ensued during the spring of 2020 forced higher education to reconsider structures and supports for learner success. In May 2020, ACE re-established the [vision](#) for the LSL as follows:

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, pressures from new economic realities, disruptive technologies, changing student populations, and a broader educational paradigm shift were already mounting. The pandemic has exposed existing inequities and created new challenges that demand resilient institutions that can adapt and innovate.

Also in early spring of 2020, Elon University launched a new strategic plan for 2030, [Boldly Elon](#), developed through an extensive, 18-month planning process. Most of the new initiatives in the plan were paused during the global pandemic. The ACE LSL afforded a timely, structured opportunity for review and reflection on learner success at Elon during this pause. We were honored to be accepted into the inaugural cohort with an institutional focus on “Mentoring for Learner Success.”

The Steering Committee for this initiative was led by Maureen Vandermaas-Peeler, Professor of Psychology, and Director of the Center for Research on Global Engagement (CRGE); Amy Allocco, Associate Professor of Religious Studies and Director of the Multifaith Scholars Program; Nancy Carpenter, Assistant Director of Career Services for Student Employment; and Sylvia Muñoz, Assistant Dean of Students and Director of the Center for Race, Ethnicity, and Diversity Education (CREDE).

This “Definition Package,” excerpted from the committee’s full report, was developed by the Research Working Group: Maureen Vandermaas-Peeler, Professor of Psychology, and Director of the Center for Research on Global Engagement (CRGE); Jessie L. Moore, Director of Center for Engaged Learning and Professor of English; Tim Peeples, Senior Associate Provost for Faculty Affairs and Professor of English; and Joan Ruelle, Dean of the Library and Associate Professor.

## A “Definition Package” of Mentoring Relationships

The Research Working Group, including Jessie Moore, Tim Peeples, Joan Ruelle, and Maureen Vandermaas-Peeler, was charged with defining mentoring in the Elon context. The “definition package” comprises an interrelated set of materials that offer context for the conceptual framework of mentoring constellations. **Considering each of the materials in relation to the other components of the definition package is critical for developing a full picture of mentoring at Elon.**

### Process

We began by identifying and reviewing a core set of resources on mentoring, focusing on comprehensive literature reviews of definitions, conceptual frameworks, characteristics and functions of mentoring and other developmental relationships, and studies in higher education. After a collective review of the core resources, all of which conclude that there is *not one accepted definition of mentoring*, we each began drafting a definition to fit Elon’s context. We engaged two students as partners in this work, Alanis Camacho-Narvaez and Jordan Young, who also reviewed core resources and wrote definitions. We compared our definitions, scrutinized them against the literature to identify overlaps and omissions, and spent the next few months reviewing and refining a short definition as well as accompanying materials in this definition package. We obtained extensive feedback in multiple meetings with others in the campus community (including a campus-wide conversation) and revised accordingly.

The definition package developed by the Research Working Group includes:

- A Definition of Mentoring Relationships in the Elon Context
- An Overview of Relevant Research
- An Annotated Definition
- A Relationship-rich Map of Mentoring
- Composites and Maps of Undergraduate Students’ Mentoring Relationships

## Definition of Mentoring Relationships in the Elon Context

Mentoring relationships are fundamentally developmental and learner-centered. Within Elon's relationship-rich campus environment, mentoring relationships are distinct from other meaningful relationships in that they:

- promote academic, social, personal, cultural, and career-focused learning and development in intentional, sustained, and integrative ways;
- evolve over time, becoming more reciprocal and mutually beneficial; and
- are individualized, attending to mentees' developing strengths and shifting needs, mentors' expertise, and all members' identities.

Although mentoring sometimes is conceptualized as a one-to-one hierarchical relationship, mentoring relationships function within a broader set of relationships known as a mentoring constellation. The number and nature of specific relationships within these mentoring constellations vary across individuals, time, and contexts, with different mentors and peer mentors offering varied forms of support and expertise. As a result, mentors play significant roles serving one or more mentoring functions, though few mentors will serve all mentoring functions.

## Overview of Relevant Research

Mentoring has gained prominence in higher education as a critical component of student success during and after college. Benefits of mentoring relationships include enhanced personal and professional learning and development, as well as greater engagement at work and increased well-being post-graduation (Gallup Inc., 2014; Vandermaas-Peeler et al., 2018). The role of effective, high-quality mentoring has received significant attention with the increasing emphasis on students' participation in high-impact practices designed to facilitate cumulative learning and engagement. Mentoring has been linked to a variety of academic outcomes such as persistence and grades, as well as developmental outcomes contributing to students' academic success such as college adjustment (Crisp et al., 2017). Although seldom studied, there are also benefits for mentors in higher education, including personal satisfaction and fulfillment, professional rejuvenation, and networking (Johnson, 2016). Eby et al. (2008) suggest a developmental lifespan approach to the study of why mentoring matters, to understand the full breadth of mentoring benefits.

What, exactly, does high-quality mentoring entail? Despite over four decades of research on mentoring, there is no universally accepted definition (Mullen & Klimaitis, 2021). Ubiquitous use of the term has not only created definitional and conceptual confusion, but also an “intuitive belief” that mentoring is a panacea for a wide array of personal and professional challenges in a multitude of settings (Eby et al., 2010, p. 7). Without a clear definition, our understanding of what it means to be a mentor becomes obfuscated.

The lack of clarity about the definition and key characteristics of mentoring stems in part from the complex and overlapping nature of developmental relationships in higher education. Indeed, being a mentor is often conflated with other student- and learning-centered relationships such as advising, coaching, tutoring, and supervising, among other roles. To avoid this confusion, Johnson (2016) suggested that mentoring relationships be considered along a continuum rather than as a distinctive category. He encouraged a shift in thinking about mentoring such that “Mentoring is not defined in terms of a formal role assignment, but in terms of the character and quality of the relationship and in terms of the specific functions provided by the mentor” (p. 28).

In order to support high-quality mentoring relationships at Elon University and enact a strategic plan with the ambitious aim for all students to build developmental networks, or mentoring *constellations*, we must elucidate the critical functions and characteristics along the continuum of *mentoring as a developmental relationship*.

### *Supporting research*

Although scholars are not in agreement about a universal definition of mentoring, most incorporate the foundational work of Kathy Kram (1988) on developmental mentoring relationships in the workplace. In her original research, Kram conceptualized two primary

mentor functions as *instrumental*, focused on goal-directed activities, skill mastery and career development, and *psychosocial*, supporting socio-emotional, personal, and identity development (Johnson et al., 2010; Keller, 2010). Crisp and Cruz (2009) applied this framework to mentoring undergraduates in higher education and expanded it to incorporate four types of support, including psychological and emotional support; support for setting goals and choosing a career path; advanced academic subject knowledge in one or more fields; and identification of a role model. In their more recent review of research on mentoring undergraduates, Crisp et al. (2017) identified four cross-cutting tenets: 1) Mentoring relationships are focused on students' growth and development; 2) Mentoring includes professional, career, and personal/emotional supports; 3) Mentoring relationships are reciprocal; and 4) Mentors have more experience, influence and/or achievement as compared to their students (p. 19).

In their recent comprehensive review of the literature, Mullen and Klimaitis (2021) noted the widespread agreement in definitions of mentoring that it is “relational and developmental,” and includes “phases and transitions” (p. 20). It is well-established that mentoring relationships are long-term, promote holistic growth through guided reflection, and shift over time to adapt to new contexts, skills, and identities (Irby, 2013; Johnson, 2016; Mullen & Klimaitis, 2021). Because of these dynamic interpersonal and contextual dimensions, mentoring relationships are complex and can be challenging to identify, interpret, and assess. A mentoring relationship “emerges from a series of interdependent, reciprocal interactions over time” (Keller, 2010, p. 31). Who is a mentor? The answer may vary depending on who is asked and when. A person may not be identified as a mentor until the relationship has progressed over time, particularly when developed organically, or in the absence of a formal structure. Additionally, designating someone as a mentor does not guarantee that an authentic mentoring relationship will evolve that is tailored to members' expertise, identities, and needs. The mentees' contributions to the relationships are also critical (Mullen & Klimaitis, 2021).

Although various models of mentoring take interpersonal differences into account, they seldom consider marginalized identities as a factor, despite the salience of racial, ethnic, cultural, gendered, and sexual identities for students' experiences and well-being in higher educational contexts (Harris & Lee, 2019). Longmire-Avital (2020a, 2020b) explores the need to tailor mentoring to historically underrepresented minority students, noting that critical mentoring is most transformative when it recognizes and nurtures students' existing capital (2019) and centers the identity-related needs, experiences, and strengths of learners. High-quality mentoring requires significant commitment, open communication, mutual respect, and acknowledgement of privileges and limitations (Phillips & Adams, 2019). However, classical mentoring can be seen as “unresponsive to dynamics of privilege and oppression in excluding historically underserved populations from purposeful mentoring,” and mentoring opportunities may not be inclusive of all identities, particularly in predominantly White institutions (Mullen & Klimaitis, 2021, p. 21).

Traditionally, mentoring has been conceptualized as a hierarchical relationship between an older, more experienced mentor and a younger, less experienced mentee or protégé (Johnson, 2016; Mullen & Klimaitis, 2021). However, more recent, relational models of mentoring acknowledge the interdependent, mutually beneficial relationships between mentors and mentees and include a broader range of processes, mechanisms and outcomes (Fletcher & Ragins, 2007; Ketcham et al., 2018). Relational qualities of mentoring relationships include *mutual engagement*, defined as shared involvement and commitment; *authenticity*, or developing self-knowledge and feeling the relationship is genuine; and *empowerment*, feeling personally encouraged to take action (Liang et al., 2002).

In relational models, mentoring relationships are conceptualized within developmental networks or constellations (Sorcinelli & Yun, 2007; Vandermaas-Peeler, 2021a). Recent research on mentoring constellations and developmental networks supports the utility and benefits of multiple mentors for personal and professional development (Felten & Lambert, 2021; Higgins & Thomas, 2001; McCabe, 2016; Yip & Kram, 2017). Higgins and Kram (2001) developed a typology of mentoring networks based on the diversity of social systems represented within the network and the strength of the relationship. Mentors in networks with greater diversity and strength facilitate access to a broad range of information, often resulting in significant personal learning for the mentee.

A constellation model, in which students have multiple meaningful relationships, including mentoring relationships, with peers, staff and faculty, among others who provide multi-faceted support and guidance, acknowledges the complex realities of developmental relationships and the continuum along which mentoring occurs (Vandermaas-Peeler, 2021b). However, the ambitious aims of Boldly Elon, that *all* students will develop multiple meaningful relationships in a mentoring constellation, have not yet been enacted in practice in higher education. Further exploration of this framework is critical.

## An Annotated Definition





## Relationship-rich Mentoring Map

### *Mentoring Relationships and a Relationship-rich Environment*

In a relationship-rich model of education, relationships of many kinds matter. As Felten and Lambert (2020) argue, “Key is not tasking each student with identifying a single mentor who will meet all of their needs, but rather creating a relationship-rich environment where students will have frequent opportunities to connect with many peers, faculty, staff, and others on and off campus” (p. 6). In this model and from this perspective, mentoring relationships become one of many kinds of meaningful relationships that, together, provide a supportive context for learning and development: a mentoring constellation.

As Ragins and Kram (2007) articulate, “We now recognize that mentoring relationships exist within the context of developmental networks” (p. 9). Mentoring relationships are, therefore, helpfully understood within a broader context of supportive, developmental relationships: a relationship-rich environment. They do not form whole immediately. Mentoring relationships develop over time, emanating out of other forms of relationships and contexts.

For instance, the mentoring relationships faculty and students develop frequently begin within the classroom, wherein the faculty serve in the role of teachers not mentors, at least initially. Those teacher-student relationships that develop into mentoring relationships do so over time and, often, outside the classroom context in which their relationships have the opportunity to germinate.

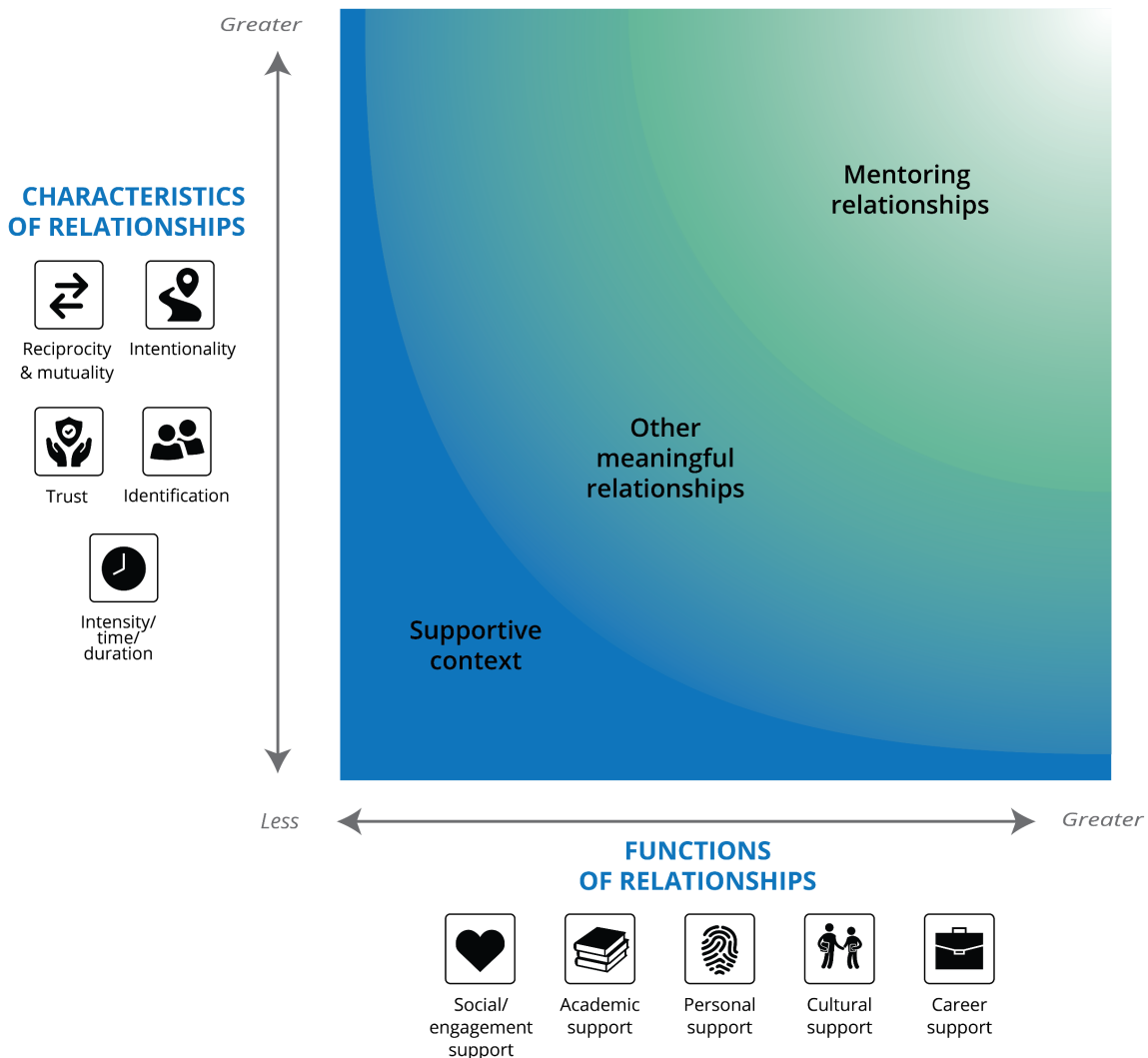
Of course, mentoring relationships form across a variety of contexts beyond the classroom, with on-campus employment functioning as a significant location for such relationship development. Though initially serving in the role of supervisor, staff across campus are often identified by students as key mentors, with the “office” context, understood broadly, serving as a locale out of which mentoring relationships have an opportunity to develop.

Teacher and supervisor are two kinds of meaningful relationships that reside within a broader relationship-rich higher education context. They are two among many, including advisor, RA, classmate, coach, teammate, librarian, and tutor. These relationships hold *potential* for developing into mentoring relationships, but they are distinct from them. Mentoring relationships require time to develop, and they do so out of other meaningful relationships.

These initial relationships and the contexts out of which they form are, thus, critical to the *possibility* of mentoring relationships. The development of mentoring relationships relies on this broader context and set of relationships. Put another way, the full range of meaningful relationships is not only significant but critical.

The Relationship-rich Mentoring Map below represents one way to understand, identify, analyze, measure, assess, and plan the development of a relationship-rich environment that recognizes the multiplicity and value of many relationships, including mentoring relationships. It draws salient relational characteristics and functions from the literature on mentors and mentoring to construct sliding measures that map out various kinds of relationships that support student learning and development.

## Relationship-Rich Mentoring Map



The graphic depicts **three kinds of valued relationship spaces** (mentoring relationships, other meaningful relationships, and supportive context) defined by a set of relational

measures (mentoring characteristics and functions), each depicted on a sliding scale from less to greater.

1. The upper-right of the graphic marks the space of **mentoring relationships**. In that space, there could be a variety of relationships, but all would be marked by individual relational measures that tended, in general, towards the “greater” end of the scale.
2. Moving toward the bottom-left away from the mentoring relationship space, the graphic marks the spaces of **other meaningful relationships**. These spaces recognize a variety of other important relationships within the relationship-rich educational environment that aid student development and offer important forms of support.
3. Finally, the bottom-left of the graphic marks relationships that may be less significant independently but are part of a broader, **supportive context**. Much of the literature on mentors and mentoring addresses the value of (a) a broader institutional culture that values relationships, (b) the individuals that make up and activate those cultures, and (c) the opportunities for and development of the individuals within, as well as the institution as a whole. This third relationship space may include less well-developed relationships, but as in the case of a residence hall, they can provide a broad supportive context.

Relationships matter, across the board. The Relationship-rich Mentoring Map helps us understand, value, and differentiate the wide range of meaningful relationships that characterize a relationship-rich educational environment, while also distinguishing mentoring relationships as special and significant among other meaningful relationships.

### *Why “Mentoring Relationships”?*

A great deal of the literature focuses on “mentors” or “mentoring” as a primary construct and unit of analysis. These orientations tend to lift up a single individual with exceptional characteristics (a mentor) who serves deeply and holistically a wide range of functions (mentoring). As a result, they tend to lead toward three problematic trajectories:

- an all-or-nothing end, whereby one is either a mentor or is not
- an overloading of expectations, whereby one has to serve excellently across a wide range of roles and functions
- a diminishing of other meaningful relationships, whereby those who offer important supportive and developmental relationships are considered less valuable or are not recognized or valued at all because they do not meet the criteria of the singularly valued mentor.

As a foil to these problematic trajectories and in a democratizing effort to recognize a wide range of valued relationships and functions, institutional practices often lean toward overly broad,

inclusive definitions that erase significant differences between kinds of relationships: everything and nothing becomes mentoring.

The construct of *mentoring relationships*, rather than mentors or mentoring, frames a differently powerful orientation. Approaching mentors and mentoring from the construct of *mentoring relationships* does not deny that there are such individuals – mentors – serving others in exceptional ways – mentoring – and through very deep and broad relationships. Instead, it places those kinds of relationships – mentoring relationships – within a broader set of relationships that are different but of great value and even critical to the possibility of mentoring relationship development.

## Composites and Maps of Mentoring Relationships

Composite cases, developed from the interview and survey data, illustrate different pathways to forming mentoring relationships, the functions and roles mentors serve, and the relationship-rich campus climate in which a constellation of meaningful relationships are formed. Each case begins with a brief description, includes quotes from different interview participants, and is illustrated by a map of the constellation of mentors. The case included below represents a student's development of a mentoring constellation in his first and third year. The additional composites can be found in Appendix F.

### *Composite of Undergraduate Student Brian (White student, he/him/his, 1st year)*

*This composite case illustrates the development of a constellation over time.*

Before coming to Elon, Brian was matched with a peer mentor in the major and this mentoring relationship continues even after the mentor's graduation the following year. In his first year, he identifies his Elon 101 advisor as a mentor, and the teaching assistant and orientation leader as peer mentors. The academic, social, and personal supports provided by these mentors facilitate Brian's transition and first-year experience, but these relationships are not sustained beyond the first year. In his second semester, Brian joins a campus organization and hopes some of the new relationships with peers will develop into mentoring relationships. In his first year at Elon, Brian feels intimidated by some of the faculty teaching his courses and does not know how to communicate with them. Given Elon's "relationship-rich" educational model, he thought this would be easier.

*From survey data (all of the following responses are from first-years)*

- "Elon needs to work more on helping students acclimate to college life when they first arrive. They also need to work more on helping people meet others and develop relationships."
- "Allow easier access to mentors if one is seeking."
- "Make it easier to reach out for help, as it can be intimidating."

*From interview data*

#### **Challenges communicating with faculty**

UG6: I remember my IR professor freshman year, he's really cool and really nice. I remember just being so overwhelmed by how intelligent he was ... I feel like I can't

approach him as a freshman who took AP Gov and high school as my background versus what he's coming to.

UG19: For me, it was difficult to ... create that relationship because I saw them as a professor and my idea of professor was very, very narrowed. I've never had that one-on-one relationship with them. And ... they're pretty intimidating individuals to go and talk to. And I didn't find my other mentors to be intimidating people, even though they commanded that respect and that confidence, but that teacher or that professor-student dynamic has always been one that I've struggled with to create those personal bonds.

### **Peer mentoring relationships are particularly important in the first year**

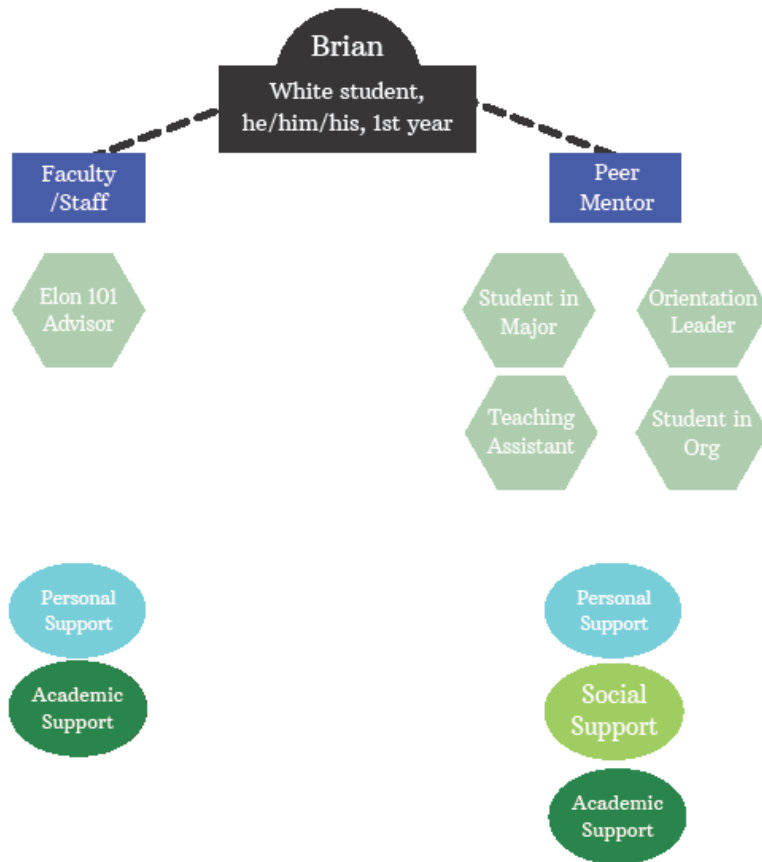
UG33: Well, the structure of orientation is built on the relationship with your orientation leader. And to me, that is a mentor. And then ... your [relationship with your] TA. So you're already diving into Elon with an informal relationship with mentorship because it's a student and you see them as only a year or maybe three years older than you.

UG13: And then a mentor I had ... she was a senior, and she really was a mentor for a lot of people in the program. She helped run the new student orientation stuff for us and she is still in my life today because she's so important. So I ask her questions about the industry now, because she's graduated ... She's been really good as a social kind of mentor, to teach me when to move on from things, what classes to take, what events to go to and kind of as a good college life guide, would say, she's been incredible with that. ... Our first year in college, she was helpful in that transition.




### **The need to develop agency and find supports early**

UG30: And so I think incorporating it into your Elon 101, your orientation, those first kind of moments in classes you're here at Elon, those foundational things, really encouraging students to know that professors here are very much working in your best interest. Go to office hours, utilize these things that you may not think to use to get closer with your professors, because it can really serve you, especially within your particular major if that's something you're interested in too.

UG 67: I know, my friends who aren't involved [in fellows/scholars programs], they have a harder time figuring out, okay, where do I start? Do I just reach out to a professor or a faculty member? How does this work? I don't really know what to do. And maybe having that key person, who's able to facilitate all of that and tell them like, hey, these are the step-by-steps that you should be doing and providing advice on the overall mentor process on campus, would be helpful.



The Key

-  — Represent mentoring relationships
-  - - - - Represent developmental, non-mentoring relationships
-  ..... Represent desired, but absent, mentoring relationships

*Composite of Undergraduate Student Brian  
(White student, he/him/his, 3rd year)*

*This composite case illustrates the development of a constellation over time.*

Over the next three years, Brian increasingly develops agency in the process of finding mentors. Through on-campus employment, Brian's supervisor becomes an important mentor, as are peers in the major and in campus organizations. Through a campus leadership position, he is developing a relationship with a staff member in an administrative office. She provides important career-focused, social and personal support, including connecting him to a community partner who becomes his internship supervisor. Brian and the internship supervisor develop a mentoring relationship with career-focused development and personal support. Brian has not yet identified a faculty mentor but is talking with a professor he's had in several courses about the possibility of working in that field.

*From survey of alumni*

- 35% of alumni who had mentoring relationships with a staff member that developed over time indicated their staff mentor provided support making social connections and 48% indicated their staff mentor (developed over time) supported their planning and preparing for life after Elon.
- “Encourage students to seek out help from professors and older students within their major or in a class they really enjoy. I found mentors even in spending a lot of time in the music building and meeting people that I created strong, meaningful connections with.”
- “Career services was critical as well as work study. These prepared me most for the workplace where I would seek out and develop new mentoring relationships.”

*From interview data*

**Work and internship supervisors are mentors**

UG68: My boss from campus recreation and wellness, [name], he's just amazing. ...he really lets us explore things on our own and ask questions. There were so many things that I wanted to do when I came into the [coordinator] role and he never was like, “You can't do that.” Or, “I want you to do these five things instead.” He'll just say, “Cool, do that and these other things.” And we get to meet, it's very informal and I get to talk through my process and what I've been working on, and he'll take a look at it and give me feedback and send me articles and books to read. ...And I really appreciate that he really believes in me in a way that I don't know I've experienced before ... And it really



lets me feel like... I'm like, "Oh, maybe I can do this job." Like, "Maybe I do know how to do things." And that just feels great.

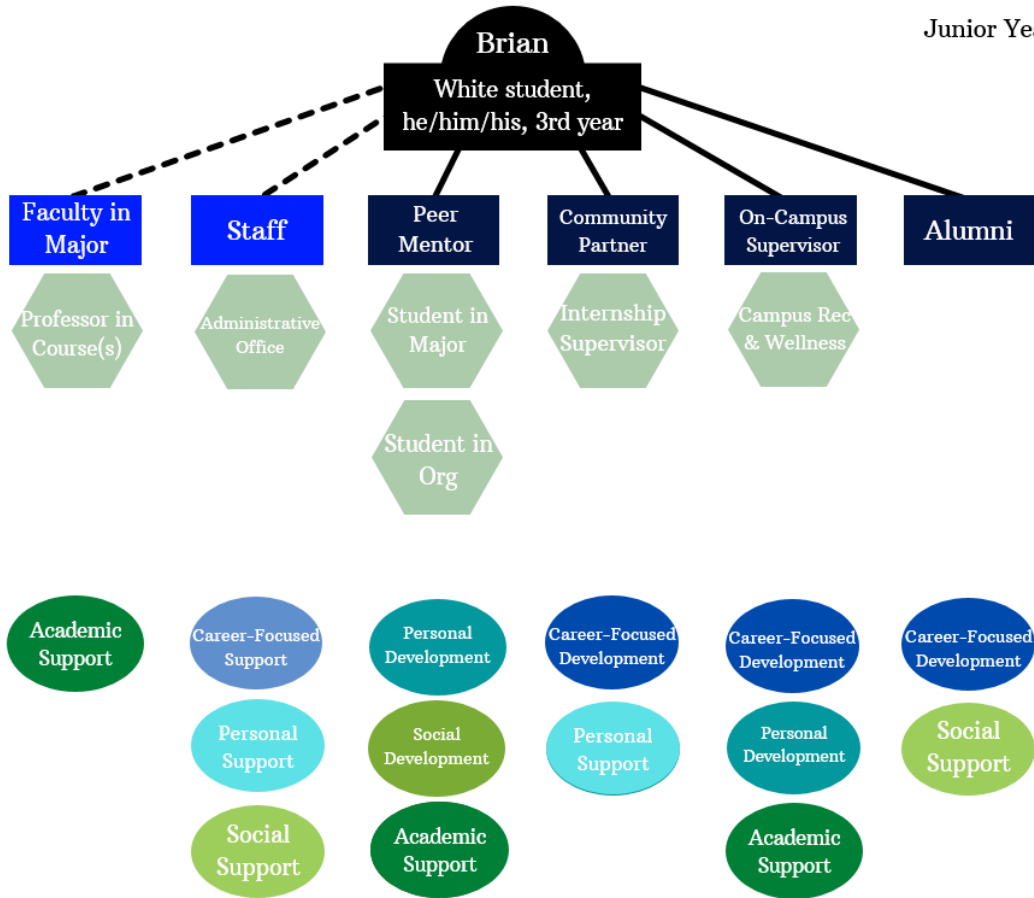
UG55: I think the most about my mentoring relationships in the office I work in just because those are the people I'm communicating with the most, but I do think I have a much wider network of mentors. ... And I'm interacting with people [outside of Elon] and building relationships with those adults and also community members. And that gives me a very different perspective, which I'm really glad I have ... I had an internship over the summer and ... I feel like I really started to build relationships with my superiors in that nonprofit. And then they did hire me as a contracted employee for six months afterwards ... I started shaping my idea on what I wanted my professional career to look like based on these [relationships].

### **A developmental relationship**

UG8: I've got the privilege to work with the [administrative office] and I got to meet [name redacted] and like ... she's so cool and ... the thing that's not making her a mentor quite yet is just the longevity of the relationship, you know I've met her and I've [only] known her for a while. And I have respect for her, and I trust her but like it's just like, almost- it's just not there yet, you know. ... I would stop by her office, we would maybe go out and get lunch together and then ... it slowly evolved and grew into something that's more mentorship and then she helped me, like, I'm having struggles with internships- "Oh, let me point you to this office, and you can go into this office and here's that. Oh, you're having issues"- so it's like it's someone who I can come to specifically, especially if I have an issue at Elon, she can immediately help.

### **Who is missing in your constellation?**

UG32: I would like one of my professors, [name redacted, to be a mentor], he's a really good professor. ... just getting his perspective of things and just seeing what his advice would be for a post-career and maybe [working in the field]. Yeah, I have a class with him now and I'm talking to him about it.



The Key

- Represent mentoring relationships
- Represent developmental, non-mentoring relationships
- Represent desired, but absent, mentoring relationships

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