

Limed: Teaching with a Twist

Season 4, Episode 3 – Student Scholar Perspectives on Mentoring Relationships

Matt Wittstein (00:11):

You are listening to Limed Teaching with a Twist, a podcast that plays with pedagogy. In this episode, we turn the mic towards student perspectives, guests, Azul Bellot and Tiffanie Grant. Both senior scholars at Elon share how mentorship has shaped their confidence, sense of belonging and academic journeys through their experiences. We explore the balance of responsibility between students and faculty, the difference between transactional and transformational mentorship and how open authentic relationships can empower growth on both sides. Along the way, Azul and Tiffanie remind us that students aren't just recipients of mentorship. They're active contributors to the process, offering lessons that mentors would do well to learn. Enjoy the episode. I'm Matt Wittstein. Hi Azul. Hi Tiffanie. I am so excited to have you on the show today and get your perspectives on mentoring relationships as students and as sort of researchers on a mentoring relationship research team. Before we get started with our conversation, I would love for you to share with our audience just your name, your major, since you're both seniors currently, what maybe your plans are for after graduation. And then finally, when you think of your own awesome mentors, what are some of the characteristics or features that stand out across those people?

Azul Bellot (02:01):

Hello, my name is Azul Bellot. I am a rising senior here at Elon University. I am a psychology and sociolinguistics double major, and some plans for after undergrad is probably grad school. I'm thinking of continuing my work in linguistics and doing research in linguistics. And so when I think about my mentoring experiences from freshman year up until senior year, I think a common thing that my mentors have done is definitely advocate for me. I think using their power and their privileges in that partnership, they have allowed me to pursue opportunities that I probably would've not been aware of had they not proposed those opportunities. Yeah.

Tiffanie Grant (02:54):

Hi there. My name is Tiffanie Grant. I'm a current senior at Elon University. I'm majoring in exercise science with minors in neuroscience and psychology. After college, I plan on taking a gap year in hopes to obtain clinical hours and after that in hopes to go to PA school. And then one characteristic that I noticed in my mentoring relationships is the shared experiences through my mentors and then the trust that was built through those shared experiences and being able to connect with my mentor has been a great experience as well when it comes to growing the mentor relationship.

Matt Wittstein (03:28):

That's great. And both of you were Center for Engaged Learning Student Scholars and supported a three summer seminar on mentoring meaningful learning experiences. That's a mouthful that I was also a part of, and you all did excellent work, but you're actually kind of become scholars in the mentoring world, which is super cool. And I want to ask you one question before we get more into our conversation about practical tips for mentoring for students and for faculty and staff. I want you to think back to who you were when you first decided to come to Elon and who you are now. I'm making the assumption that

you've maybe changed and developed in some ways as most college students do over their time in college and university. In what ways have mentoring relationships shifted how you think about yourself?

Tiffanie Grant (04:27):

I would say for me, it would be my confidence in a sense. When I came in, I was really unsure of what to take for college. I didn't know the experience that I would be coming into and having that mentor right at the pinnacle moment of me entering in to college helped a lot with navigating the academics, navigating the social life, navigating what exactly to expect from college, and seeing how far I've grown in that and being able to understand myself as well as understand who I want to be after college, in a sense has really helped me and also allowed me support into others and also support into others to mentor them. So yeah,

Azul Bellot (05:12):

I think mentoring has shaped me to be more assertive and use my voice a lot more. As a first generation student, when I was coming into Elon, I didn't know the ropes, I didn't know the ladders. I was confused and I was scared. And so allowing myself to enter these mentoring relationships have really given me the strength and the confidence to again, speak up when I don't understand something or speak up when I feel like there is an inclusive language happening or speak up for other underserved students as well. And so in a way, I've developed a passion for speaking up. Yeah.

Matt Wittstein (06:00):

So you both alluded to having some mentors sort of early on in your transition to Elon University as first year students. And one of the things I think about from especially some of our previous conversations and some of the research that we've all done as a group in those summer seminars is who's actually responsible for creating mentoring relationships? Does it fall on the students? Does it fall on the faculty? Does it fall on some student life or academic life staff member? Does it fall on a culture of people? And maybe another way to phrase this is in practice, how do students actually find mentors? And in theory, how should they be finding their mentors? How should those connections be happening?

Tiffanie Grant (06:49):

I believe that's a great question in mentorship, just because of the fact that it is oftentimes assumed that either the faculty is the one to say because they are in the academic arena in a sense where they should know exactly how to mentor and they've been in the process, so they should be the one to reach out to the students. And then there's also an assumption to say that, oh, the students are the ones responsible for reaching out because they know what they want in a mentor and they should reach out. But I personally believe that it is both the student and the faculty where the faculty needs to make themselves available to say, for instance, students wants a mentor, but also students should come and reach out to say, Hey, I'm actually looking for a mentor. But I would say as well, when it comes to ways that students can find mentors, one of the ways is the programs that are offered on campus and how well it is advertised in the first year. So students are able to note and be able to find those mentoring programs without going their entire year without knowing that there were mentor programs that could help them professionally, academically, and so on.

Azul Bellot (08:00):

You pointed out great points, Tiffanie, and I just kind of want to reemphasize again, when we're talking about students, we also have to be mindful of what type of students, are we talking about historically underserved students or are we talking about first year students transfer students because different students have different needs. And so specifically when we're talking about underserved populations and underserved students, it's important to acknowledge that some of these students are coming into these spaces brand new, they don't know what to do, they don't know. They have no idea of what higher ed could be and it should be. And so allowing programs like first generation programs or just different groups that can allow for those mentoring relationships to happen can introduce them to what mentoring can be. And then from there, I think then students would feel more confident and more affirmative of like, oh, I actually really do enjoy this. And then from there they could potentially look for professors or for teachers that they would like to work with synonymously. I think faculty and staff should also be looking for students to do research with or students who they think can benefit from a class or such. Like Tiffanie was saying, I think it goes both ways and it's important to highlight that it doesn't necessarily fall too much on the faculty, but at the same time, it doesn't necessarily fall too much on the student.

Tiffanie Grant (09:32):

I definitely agree as well as we're both Odyssey scholars and if mentorship is made the norm in the program, it also helps the students know that, okay, this is what is offered in the program and this is an opportunity for me to connect to either my peers or faculty members or even connect to what the students or the peer mentors and their network of people of who they know as well. So especially coming in as a freshman and being a part of that program and being first a mentee and a mentor, it has showed me exactly how transformative mentorship is and how necessary it is. Understanding also that it was a mandatory summer. I know it's initially whenever I was coming in, I didn't know exactly what I was coming into for college and just all of that and just understanding that we were all coming from backgrounds that we had that mentor with our peer mentor and a student who we can actually connect with who's like an upperclassman. And having that network of people also helped when it came to navigating college. So I do think that especially when mentorship is made the norm in the program, it helps students also find great mentoring relationships.

Matt Wittstein (10:46):

So you both bring up really good points. You talked about the importance of that each student has different needs and is coming from different contexts and may not come with everything. And Tiffanie, you shared a little bit about Elon's Odyssey program. Can you tell us a little bit more just about what the Odyssey program is for context and how they've been successful in meeting the needs of individuals while still serving a group of students?

Tiffanie Grant (11:17):

Absolutely. So the Odyssey program is a program for students who are in high financial need, but also excel academically. And in that it's a program that opens us up to a whole bunch of networks. They help us and prepare us financially with different sessions. And also the Odyssey program is a great way as well. They provide mentorship for our students as well when it comes to peer mentorship and also faculty mentorship. But yeah, am I missing anything from Odyssey?

Azul Bellot (11:53):

I think we also have retreats where different classmates, or not different classmates, but different class groups come together and kind of bond together, really get to know each other. I think it's the sophomores and the first years and then the seniors and the juniors junior to just talk about their full experience here at Elon, but also what they've learned, what they've gained. Again, this word of mouth,

Matt Wittstein (12:21):

It sounds like an absolutely great program, and I think it stresses the infrastructure piece of these mentoring that it is a part of the program to have supports that are personalized and individual and built on relationships and trust. It sounds really cool. So I want to build on that just a little bit. We know from the literature that mentoring relationships require developing trust. They require being ongoing. They're not just a quick chat and a lot of other characteristics that often take time to sort of develop. And so I wonder as students, are there times when you realized mentoring relationships were suddenly becoming more deep and more mentoring than say other typical supports, maybe a transactional experience with a professor that is not a mentor, but they're certainly supporting your learning? How did you know when it was becoming like, oh, this is a person that can really help me get to where I want to be?

Tiffanie Grant (13:24):

I've definitely experienced both transactional mentorship and also relational mentorship in a sense where my mentor and I think one of the key things that showed me that the mentorship was growing to be deeper was consistency in how consistent my mentor was with checking in on clinical moments of the college career and also building trust as in talking about things that I would just open up on. And I've also experienced transactional relationships where in a sense I knew for sure that they had to check in on us so that they would get the point that, okay, I checked in on my mentee, but the moment that I noticed that my mentor was actually for real was more over whenever she kept checking up on me and making sure that I was good and connecting me with people who she knew who could help me in situations that I may not have known about.

Matt Wittstein (14:25):

Are you willing to share a little bit more about those experiences and maybe what are the types of things that they were mentoring you through what they were checking up on at the time?

Tiffanie Grant (14:36):

I would say definitely coming in as a first year bio major, it was a little bit rough just because it was very different than high school. And I came in with the mindset that, okay, yes, I got this. I excelled in all my sciences in high school. This is going to be an easy breeze when I get to college. And even when people were just saying and warning me about how biology was hard, and you definitely got to log in and study, although I did study, I found a difficulty with connecting with the terminology and jargon in biology and talking with my mentor about it and how she was a biochemistry. She was just saying, Hey, it's okay. People do struggle in the first year and it's okay to note that maybe you can pivot and say maybe this is not where you want to be, but if you really want to pursue sciences, look into another major, look into certain things. And then also for her to put me on to different professors that worked for her and seeing if it would work for me as well helps. So providing that connection and also being able to talk to some of the faculty members as well. For Odyssey, not just my mentor that was given for that program, but the directors that are in charge of the program also helped a lot when it came to navigating academics.

Azul Bellot (15:52):

I think Tiffanie highlighted two big kind of themes that I kind of hear again, what is transactional mentoring versus what I'd like to consider transformative mentoring. Again, transactional mentoring, being on that transaction where it's like, okay, I really only go for this person for these needs and then I move on. I don't really reach out. We don't really get lunch. They're maybe helping me maneuver higher ed and such. Whereas transformative mentoring where Tiffanie was kind of alluding to was the professor reaching out, making time to have conversations, making time to, if you see that your student is struggling, kind of okay, figuring out an action or a plan to move forward, and how can that benefit the student instead of just focusing on, okay, I'm just here to give the student what they need and then that's it. Instead, they're kind of pursuing that relationship a lot more in depth as well as the student being more comfortable, more confident being in that relationship.

Matt Wittstein (17:06):

So one of the things we think about in really solid mentoring relationships is the idea of reciprocity that both the student and the mentor is somehow benefiting from that. And I'd love to hear your thoughts and maybe some shared thoughts of what your peers might be thinking, especially peers at different institution. I'm sure you have friends at other colleges and stuff. What are the most important takeaways and benefits that you've experienced from a mentoring relationship? And on the flip side of that is what do you think your mentors are getting out of it?

Azul Bellot (17:43):

I think reciprocity is very, very huge, and I think us students sometimes we feel like we give a lot more in the relationship than we receive, and I think it's important to highlight that both parties are receiving some sort of benefit. So there is that sense, but it might look different. So when we think about these relationships and reciprocity, sometimes students can think, okay, well, I'm going to put in this amount effort and I expect this amount effort back. But all relationships, sometimes you might put a little bit more effort than the other person, but that doesn't make the relationship any different or not different, but that's not a bad thing in the relationship. I guess sometimes when students come into these relationships and ask faculty for mentoring advice and mentoring, just advice and such, they are often gifted with the tools that they need.

(18:48):

And so sometimes students don't think about, okay, what can I give to the relationship? And so it's important to highlight that as students, we kind of provide that student perspective, that kind of what it is to be a student and what our students' needs currently. And to kind of converse that with the faculty and just be like, Hey, this is how it feels to be a student, and because I'm so busy, I'm not able to maybe meet up twice a week or three times a week. And so having that conversation and creating those boundaries for that relationship in order for that reciprocity to grow and flourish,

Tiffanie Grant (19:27):

I honestly love that just because, like you said, creating boundaries. I think also with creating boundaries comes also with setting clear expectations and defining the role of the mentor relationship because even so, again, oftentimes it can seem transactional as in, oh, only the mentor is supposed to mentor or mentor the mentee, so they must be doing the work or the mentee needs to do the work because the mentor doesn't really know much about mentee. But in that, at first, if we define the mentoring

relationship in a sense where we have the mentee understanding what is their role in the mentoring relationship and also what the mentor is bringing to the mentoring relationship, so it doesn't seem that anything is lacking. And then from the clear expectations that are being placed in, then the mentor should also not put all the pressure on the mentee to say, okay, this is what I want, or how do I get that? And trying to have the mentee more over carry the relationship in a sense, whereas maybe even when it comes to cultural things or having the mentee explain their identity or explain why they do certain things or why they have barriers, but moreover, allowing the mentor to do the work in a sense where I realize that this mentee may be different than my other mentees. So also not treating the mentees as just one person and they're just different people. So we also want to take in mind of that as well.

(21:03):

Then also creating a safe space for honesty and conversation that also helps the mentor relationship feel a little bit more less transactional.

Matt Wittstein (21:13):

Azul, when you responded, you said something really interesting that I don't think it's crossed my mind before as a faculty member that you said students often feel like they give a lot more than they receive. I think from a faculty side, a lot of times I feel the other way. I'm trying so hard to help a student along, but they're not necessarily putting in the work to actually help themselves along. Why do you all think that there's, I don't know if it's a miscommunication, a disagreement, but it definitely feels different for me as a mentor than what you just expressed at Azul as a student.

Azul Bellot (21:51):

No, I think you bring up a good point. I think oftentimes there is a lack of communication and a lack of conversation. So we see a lot of students, specifically underserved students, kind of come into mentoring relationships, but are having difficulty defining the mentoring relationships, kind of what Tiffanie was pointing out. And so sometimes through a student's perspective, we might feel like we're putting in more time, or we might be meeting maybe two, three times a week while also taking classes, while also managing clubs and extracurriculars. And so sometimes because we're so kind of focused in ourselves, we often forget that faculty and staff are also busy with other projects and other deeds and such. And so because of the lack of conversation, sometimes students feel like, okay, so I'm coming in here, I'm coming in the hours that you told me to do and we're having conversations, but I'm not maybe getting tested intellectually, maybe not tested the right word, but challenged intellectually.

(23:09):

Or maybe I'm coming in and maybe I have one question and that's it. And so sometimes students may feel that faculty aren't putting a lot of effort in that relationship, but then on the flip side, you can also see how faculty and staff maybe might have more than a couple of mentors and that maybe that might affect the relationship with the mentorship and that could maybe make the relationship not be as strong as you'd like it to be. And so we have keep in mind that both of us have different lives. And again, having that conversation, creating those boundaries. And then from there, hopefully that will diminish, not imposter syndrome, but the feel the field that we put in a lot more than we're taking.

Tiffanie Grant (24:05):

Could it also be that the students themselves see the titles that the mentors are carrying and those that they have to work as hard to meet up to the doctor or the professor in a sense, and they feel

emotionally or physically in a sense where I have to do this or my mentor is already this and I'm trying to get to where that mentor is, but I see the title and everything and I got to get to where I need to be. So maybe that could also, that imposter syndrome can also stress out the mentee in a sense mindset. Oh my goodness. Because you do know some professors, they're very particular if you say professor, and they're just like, no, it's doctor actually. It's just like, oh goodness, they got their doctorate. It's not a master, it's not a bachelor. So I think also imposter syndrome can't creep in. So mentally the mentee can also feel overwhelmed or pressured to do more to either please a mentor or even just feel the stress about maybe I'm not doing enough or I really truly want to get to this place academically or professionally, but I need to make sure that I'm hitting all the keynotes. And I think that's also that thing where it's just that one pathway as well that students kind of feel as I'm learning and growing. That's another thing too, that there are multiple pathways to getting to that end goal, what a student wants.

Matt Wittstein (25:30):

There's something resonant about what both of you said that Azul, you kind of started off with students sort of feeling overwhelmed by the transition to college where they have a lot more control over their schedule. I see it a lot of developing your time management skills of balancing classes with work, with having some fun with clubs that you might want to be involved in with research, and it does take time to develop those skills. But then Tiffanie, you sort of described a kind of different type of stress and anxiety of fear about not being good enough, and I wonder if it's one of those things where we think about mentoring and wellness as this combined opportunity to make sure that all of our students thrive. So I really appreciate those two different, but somehow connected for me responses. So we've talked mostly on the positive side and benefits of mentoring relationships. In this conversation, have either of you experienced clear limitations in mentoring relationships? And how did you actually handle that? Did you find new mentors? Did that mentor become better? Did you change something about yourself to avoid that limitation or improve that challenge?

Azul Bellot (26:50):

I think personally with my mentoring relationships, I haven't had that issue, but that's very much like a people person. And I'm very much like I will try to make time to schedule meetings or schedule coffees and catch up. And so in a way, kind of in order to combat the limitations of maybe not feeling seen or heard or feeling like you matter in the relationship, I kind of advocate for more conversations or even in situations I'm like, oh, I didn't think about that. Do you have any articles or any advice that you'd like to pass over? And so because of that and because of those experiences, I have had really good mentoring relationships where again, I was saying I am getting challenged intellectually, which I really enjoy from. And so on the flip side, I have had mentors earlier on where it was more transactional and I wasn't really getting challenged.

(27:58):

It was kind of like I was coming in and instead of a mentoring relationship, it kind of felt more like advisory type of relationship where I was coming in and I was asking for help and they were directing me to other people, but then that was it. There was no, oh, did you want to get coffee sometime? Or, oh, what are you studying? Oh, have you thought about what to do with that career? It was just kind of more like a point of contact where if I had a question, I would reach out to them, they had an answer, and I'd be like, okay, thank you so much. Have a nice day.

Tiffanie Grant (28:32):

I really liked that just because nowadays everybody is naming, whenever you're getting advice from somebody, it's mentorship in a sense. And I feel like for me, whenever I had that transactional mentorship relationship, it was more over advising in a sense where it was career oriented and professional and academic oriented where it's like, what are you doing in your major? What can I do? What classes should I take? And although those questions can be asked in mentorship, the way that the relationship was structured for that specific relationship, it was more of obtaining advice from someone who had already taken and done that path before. So I do recognize that there are a lot of limitations in mentorship in a sense where the word mentorship can be used a lot and maybe out of place in certain arenas in the world of academia. And then also, one limitation that I have experienced is flexibility with mentorship and being able to try to meet with my mentor for the transactional mentorship that is, and the flexibility with that where class schedules would clash because it's a student or whether we just can't meet at this day because it's our just schedules did not coordinate all together.

(30:00):

So I realized as well that flexibility was another limitation in my mentoring relationships.

Azul Bellot (30:07):

I think another point to highlight is open-mindedness and being okay with admitting when you're wrong or being okay to admit when maybe you might not know. And I think that's what truly defined my definition of what is a mentoring relationship versus what is just advising or a different type of relationship. I think it's having those moments of like, Hey, I actually don't know what that might be, or, Hey, actually I think I know another professor who might be able to answer this question a lot better than I will. Having those moments of just vulnerability is just extremely important because as students, sometimes we kind of see faculty and mentors as these perfect images. They know everything they're here to guide us through, but even them, they're also still kind of learning and they have their own individual mentoring relationships. So having those moments where as students, Hey, I need help. And the faculty just helping, or even the faculty just being like, Hey, I actually don't know, but I could direct you to somebody who might know makes that relationship a lot stronger. And so previously I've had relationships where we were bumping heads because they were right and they were always right, and there was no room for them to kind of grow or see my side. And so because of that, I had to lead the relationship. I just felt like I wasn't being understood as a student or as a mentee.

Tiffanie Grant (31:43):

Wait, Azul, I have a question then. Do you think that hierarchy could also be a limitation then?

Azul Bellot (31:50):

I think hierarchy is definitely a factor in mentoring relationships, and I think allowing yourself to kind of break that hierarchy and kind of become more of a mentorship partnership, because at the end of the day, both sides are gaining something from the relationship. Yes. Did you want to add anything else, Tiffanie?

Tiffanie Grant (32:11):

No, I honestly agree with everything that you said.

Matt Wittstein (32:19):

I think from my perspective too, there's also times where that hierarchy is actually a strength because you are able to say, oh, no, I have been through this. I am in a different place. And as a mentor, be able to say, Hey, if you really want this, this is what you need to do. And if there weren't that hierarchy, you may not be taken as seriously. You may not be necessarily thought of in that way. So I've absolutely loved this conversation. I would love to wrap real quick with just what's one piece of advice you have for mentors and one piece of advice that you have for students that are seeking better mentoring relationships for students?

Tiffanie Grant (32:59):

I would say to let the mentor know exactly your expectations for the mentoring relationship, but also for the mentors to leave room to grow themselves and the mentoring relationships. So I think it's very important for the mentees to also put themselves out there in a sense, but also for the mentors to receive and to also receive correction and also be able to grow in the mentoring relationship in a way that they can help

(33:33):

Meet the mentee's goals in mentoring relationship.

Azul Bellot (33:43):

Good point, Tiffanie. I think for students using your voice speak, talk to your professors. Maybe stay five minutes after class and be like, hi, are you working on anything? And just, I know it can feel daunting, but like Tiffanie was saying, you really do have to kind of advocate for yourself. And so again, students use your voice, stay after class, try to see if you can get lunch or coffee, explore your options as well. Don't feel limited or tied down to one professor or even one career field. I have mentors who are outside of my majors, and I think they are both important and beneficial in my growth as a student. And for mentors. I think acknowledging your privileges and your power and just recognizing that, okay, these are students. What can I do in my authority, in my power to help the student improve? Or who can I direct the student that I think might be a better mentor than me? Or how can I kind of help the student maybe take classes that they might need for their major?

Tiffanie Grant (34:58):

One thing I would also add for the students would be the mere fact of just asking their peers to see what exactly they're doing. So in that, oftentimes someone will know somebody who knows somebody who's doing something that you may be interested in. So just communicating with your friends and maybe those who are in your classes to just ask 'em to say like, Hey, what are you passionate about? What are you doing? And who's helping you get to where you are? So they don't necessarily have to be your peer mentor, but just use the peers around you and ask them, and they'll lead you into the way that they're going, and possibly you'll get connected to a mentor. Well,

Matt Wittstein (35:38):

Tiffanie and Azul, thank you so much for your wisdom. I really appreciate it. If you want to shout out to any of your mentors, this is your chance as we say goodbye to this conversation. But thank you so much.

Tiffanie Grant (35:50):

Shout out to Genesis from Odyssey.

Azul Bellot (35:53):

Shout out to Dr. Crowley

Matt Wittstein (36:06):

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