

## 60-Second SoTL

### Episode 74 – Learning Contracts as Equity Blueprints in Undergraduate Research Mentoring

#### Featured Article

McSweeney, Jill M., and Eric E. Hall. 2026. “The Use of Learning Contracts as Potential Equity Blueprints in Undergraduate Research Mentorship.” *Teaching & Learning Inquiry* 14: 1–10.

<https://doi.org/10.20343/teachlearningqu.14.4>

#### Transcript

(Music)

0:10

#### Jessie L. Moore:

How can learning contracts support more equitable undergraduate research mentoring? That’s the focus of this week’s 60-second SoTL from Elon University’s Center for Engaged Learning. I’m Jessie Moore.

(Music)

0:26

In “The Use of Learning Contracts as Potential Equity Blueprints in Undergraduate Research Mentorship,” Jill McSweeney and Eric Hall explore how learning contracts might serve as equity-minded blueprints for mentoring. Their article appears in *Teaching & Learning Inquiry*, an open access journal.

0:44

Undergraduate research is widely recognized as a high-impact educational practice. When students engage in meaningful research with faculty mentors, they develop intellectual confidence, collaborative skills, professional identity, and clarity about future careers. Faculty benefit, too—through stronger integration of research and teaching, renewed scholarly energy, and increased job satisfaction.

But high-quality mentoring doesn’t simply happen. Many faculty are never formally trained as research mentors. While frameworks like Shanahan and colleagues’ “ten salient practices” offer guidance for effective mentoring, McSweeney and Hall ask a practical question: What concrete pedagogical tools can faculty use to embed equity into their mentoring relationships?

Their answer? Learning contracts.

1:33

Learning contracts—agreements co-created between mentor and mentee—typically outline expectations, learning outcomes, timelines, and processes for feedback and assessment. While they've been discussed in classroom settings, they've received limited scholarly attention in the context of undergraduate research. McSweeney and Hall set out to explore whether learning contracts might offer an equity-minded structure for mentoring outside the traditional classroom.

2:00

The authors conducted an exploratory survey of faculty who self-identified as undergraduate research mentors. Participants were recruited through professional networks associated with undergraduate research and educational development.

The survey asked both structured and open-ended questions. Quantitative items explored what components mentors included in their contracts and which components were easiest or most difficult to develop. Qualitative responses probed how mentors perceived learning contracts as tools for equity and inclusion.

Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the quantitative data, while open-ended responses were analyzed through descriptive content analysis. One researcher conducted initial inductive coding, and the second confirmed the themes.

2:45

Fifty mentors completed the survey. The participants were primarily female, and most were associate professors working in teaching-focused positions. Participants represented a range of disciplines, with STEM fields comprising the largest group, followed by humanities and social sciences.

Seventy percent reported already using learning contracts or research syllabi in their mentoring.

In terms of structure, all mentors who used contracts included expectations for students. Most also incorporated timelines, learning objectives, expectations of the mentor, and assessment processes. Fewer included elements like codes of conduct or mentoring philosophies. And notably, none included an explicit definition of undergraduate research itself.

3:31

Focusing on the qualitative data, six interconnected themes emerged as pillars for equitable learning contracts in undergraduate research:

- First, learning contracts can offer a roadmap to students, helping them understand research processes and how their work relates to larger research contexts.
- Second, learning contracts should be individualized to the student, mentor, and research process.
- Third, learning contracts add transparency, unmasking hidden curriculum and culture.

- Fourth, this transparency can support accountability for both the undergraduate researcher and the mentor.
- Fifth, learning contracts can reduce potential miscommunication and integrate both student and mentor perspectives.
- Sixth, learning contracts reduce stress and anxiety about how students are being assessed.

4:20

Across all themes, one idea surfaced repeatedly: students as partners. Mentors who viewed learning contracts as co-created documents—not top-down syllabi—were more likely to describe them as equity-minded tools.

Ultimately, McSweeney and Hall argue that learning contracts can operationalize equity in undergraduate research mentoring by centering shared expectations, partnership, and transparency. In a relational context like undergraduate research, these structures may help transform mentorship from an informal apprenticeship into an intentional, inclusive collaboration.

4:56

To learn more about this study, visit our show notes for a link to the open access article.

(Music)

5:06

**Jessie L. Moore:**

Join us for our next episode of 60-second SoTL from Elon University's Center for Engaged Learning for another snapshot of recent scholarship of teaching and learning. Learn more about the Center at [www.CenterForEngagedLearning.org](http://www.CenterForEngagedLearning.org).

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