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A Constellation Model for Mentoring Undergraduates During COVID-19

ABSTRACT

Conceptualizing mentoring beyond a traditional one-to-one mentor-mentee model, we utilized a constellation framework with collaborative co-mentoring among faculty, staff, near-peers, and community partners. We conducted a multi-method study to examine faculty, staff, and students' perceptions of mentoring relationships, and we focus in this article on participants' perceptions of how the global pandemic changed their mentoring relationships. Analyses of the study's surveys and interviews yielded four primary themes: 1) scaffolded, developmental programming and a diverse set of mentors in an interconnected constellation positively impacts students' and mentors' experiences during unexpected challenges like a pandemic; 2) skilled mentoring requires a dynamic, individualized balance of instrumental, psychosocial, and reciprocal mentoring practices, taking into account unique aspects of students' identities; 3) reduction of in-person relational mentoring was associated with significant challenges, but occasionally offset by opportunities; and 4) gaps exist in the campus ecosystem, especially for students with minoritized identities and students who are not participants in cohorted programs. A case study of a multi-year, experientially rich, and academically rigorous program highlights the potential of collaborative, interconnected, globally oriented mentoring constellations to support students' personal, academic, and professional development, particularly when mentors were agile and adapted to new contexts. Challenges incurred in implementing a constellation model for undergraduate mentoring included scalability and capacity, particularly during the pandemic and when forming new relationships.

KEYWORDS

mentoring, mentoring constellation, COVID-19 pandemic, relationship-rich education

INTRODUCTION

How did the global pandemic impact meaningful relationships—particularly mentoring relationships—for university students? Mentoring is a highly salient professional activity in higher education, and mentoring relationships frequently yield significant positive outcomes for students and mentors, including professional socialization, career development and satisfaction, and stronger personal and emotional well-being, among others (Hall et al. 2018; Johnson 2016; Vandermaas-Peeler, Miller, and Moore 2018). In an undergraduate educational context, high-quality mentoring relationships are characterized as intentional, sustained, and developmental (Allen and Eby 2007; Crisp et al. 2017; Vandermaas-Peeler and Moore 2022). They are also dynamic, shifting over time to adapt to students' emergent identities, knowledge, and skills, as well as the varying social and cultural contexts in which mentoring occurs (Allocco et al. 2022; Johnson 2016; Longmire-Avital 2020; McKinsey 2016;

Vandermaas-Peeler 2021). In both structured and informal mentoring initiatives for college students, the functions of these evolving mentoring relationships may loosely follow three stages: mentoring into college life, mentoring through development of advanced skills and knowledge, and mentoring onward to life after college (McKinsey 2016). Students, staff, and faculty (i.e., academic staff) all can serve as mentors, although they may support different functions; for example, near-peers (e.g., a college senior in relation to a first-year student or a recent alumnus in relation to a college junior) often provide effective mentoring in, contributing to students' sense of belonging as they transition into college life and improving retention (Crisp et al. 2017; Hall, Serafin, and Lundgren 2020).

The pandemic of 2020 triggered a sudden, dramatic pivot away from physical campus environments to virtual contexts and an increased dependence on technology. Relationships in higher education in the United States (and elsewhere) were reimagined amidst the global health and race crises (Felten and Lambert 2020). Globally, students found it difficult to form meaningful relationships while physically distanced, and this challenge was amplified for first-year students transitioning to higher education (Inglis, Combrinck, and Simpson 2022). As part of a larger study of mentoring relationships, this article examines how mentoring relationships fared during these extraordinary circumstances, both campus-wide and in a program we highlight as a case study. Specifically, the research focused on the impact of the pandemic on students' mentoring relationships with near-peers, staff, and faculty at Elon University in North Carolina (USA) and is characterized by a culture of "relationship-rich" engaged learning and student success (Felten and Lambert 2020, 75). Did necessary adjustments made by the institution and individual community members continue to support all phases of mentoring relationships—connection, collaboration, and mutual commitment (McKinsey 2016)? And what could our institution—and others—learn from the successes and challenges of intentional efforts to sustain mentoring relationships during this challenging period?

Institutional context

Elon University is a residential campus, classified as a doctoral/professional university. Lacking substantial endowment funding, the university is tuition-driven, but it continually ranks among the most affordable private universities in the U.S. It enrolls approximately 7,000 students in over 70 undergraduate degree programs and nine graduate programs. Historically, all classes have been held in-person, on campus, except for a small subset of online courses offered during summer. In March 2020, all classes moved online in response to the pandemic, and during the 2020–2021 academic year, most classes were in-person or hybrid, but other campus events were modified to limit group gatherings and promote social distancing.

Engaged learning has been part of the institutional ethos for nearly five decades, and relationships are developed and supported within and beyond the university community in myriad ways (Felten and Lambert 2020). Incentives for social interactions, such as a weekly university-wide coffee break and a "take a student to lunch" program, sustain the relationship-rich culture. During the pandemic, the coffee break was modified from a large-group gathering to online or small, physically distanced groups. Mentoring occurs in the curriculum (e.g., undergraduate research and capstone seminars) as well as through co-curricular initiatives (e.g., student life peer mentoring programs) and includes faculty, staff, and near-peers as well as local and global community partners and alumni. Students can apply to several cohorted programs, typically at the time of admission to the university (e.g., Honors Fellows, Leadership Fellows, residential learning communities) or through lateral entry in

their first or second year (e.g., Multifaith Scholars, Periclean Scholars). These cohorted programs scaffold near-peer, faculty, and staff mentoring in various ways, such as matching first-year students with second-, third-, or fourth-year students in the cohort, or identifying a faculty mentor for a sustained, in-depth undergraduate research project conducted over two to three years. Our case study of one cohorted program offers a detailed analysis of the multiple mentoring opportunities afforded to students.

While mentoring is already a well-supported activity that is enfranchised in Elon University's teacher-scholar model, recognized with annual awards, and supported with ample funding structures, the university recently articulated a new vision that would establish mentoring as a signature experience for all students. In its new strategic plan, mentoring is conceptualized as a complex web of relationships with multiple mentors rather than a more traditional one-to-one hierarchical model. The strategic plan (Elon University n.d.) leads with an ambitious agenda:

> Through a groundbreaking mentoring model, students will learn to build developmental networks that include peers, staff and faculty, as well as others beyond the university.
>
> This lifelong constellation of mentors will emerge as a hallmark of an Elon education, engaging **all students** in developing essential skills and fluencies – writing, speaking, creative problem solving, collaboration, intercultural learning, data competency, media literacy, ethics and personal and professional agility.

The institution participated in an American Council on Education's (ACE) Learner Success Lab to conduct a comprehensive self-study of existing mentoring practices on campus and to develop preliminary recommendations to support this agenda.

Defining mentoring

Within this institutional context, a working group co-led by two of the authors reviewed current literature on mentoring, drafted a definition of mentoring relationships, and revised the definition iteratively during listening sessions and interviews with community members as part of the self-study research. We discuss the self-study in more detail elsewhere (Vandermaas-Peeler and Moore, in review), but summarize it here to frame our focus on mentoring during the pandemic. As Figure 1 illustrates, we used surveys, interviews, and campus listening sessions to triangulate campus members' perceptions of mentoring, which also allowed us to test our developing definition of mentoring relationships.

Figure 1. Triangulation of self-study data and development of definition

Briefly, a developmental mentoring constellation has been defined as "the set of relationships an individual has with people who take an active interest in and action to advance the individual's career by assisting with his or her personal and professional development" (Higgins and Thomas 2001, 224). Within constellations, mentors employ strategies such as collaborative co-mentoring with intentional, iterative engagement in salient mentoring practices that balance challenge and support of student learning and development (Allocco et al. 2022; Allocco and Fredsell 2018; Hall, Abbott, and Bellwoar 2019; Ketcham, Hall, and Miller 2017; Shanahan et al. 2015; Vandermaas-Peeler 2021). Scholars of mentoring in the business sector have conceptualized two key facets of mentoring constellations, including the diversity of the network, defined by the roles and social spheres of the mentors, and the strength of the relationships, including communication, reciprocity, and emotional closeness (Higgins and Kram 2001).

Drawing from this and other mentoring literature, we drafted a definition of "mentoring relationships" and iteratively revised the definition based on triangulated data from the self-study:

> 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. (Elon University n.d.)

This definition positions mentoring as a specific type of relationship within a relationship-rich environment, recognizing that students may have many meaningful relationships on campus, but not all of them develop into mentoring relationships. Reflecting the research we report below, the definition also positions mentoring relationships as potentially developing in and across multiple campus activities and spaces, not solely within one campus sphere (i.e., mentored undergraduate research).

Given the timing of our campus self-study, the global pandemic's impact on mentoring relationships emerged as a recurring theme, which is unsurprising since many mentoring relationships had to adapt to online-only or hybrid interactions. Like others (e.g. Czerniewicz et al. 2020; Inglis, Combrinck, and Simpson 2022), though, we believe that understanding community experiences of this disruption better prepares us to address issues of equity and quality not only in future moments of challenge, but also during more stable academic years. The mentoring constellation model offered us a framework to examine the impact of the pandemic on students' multiple mentoring relationships.

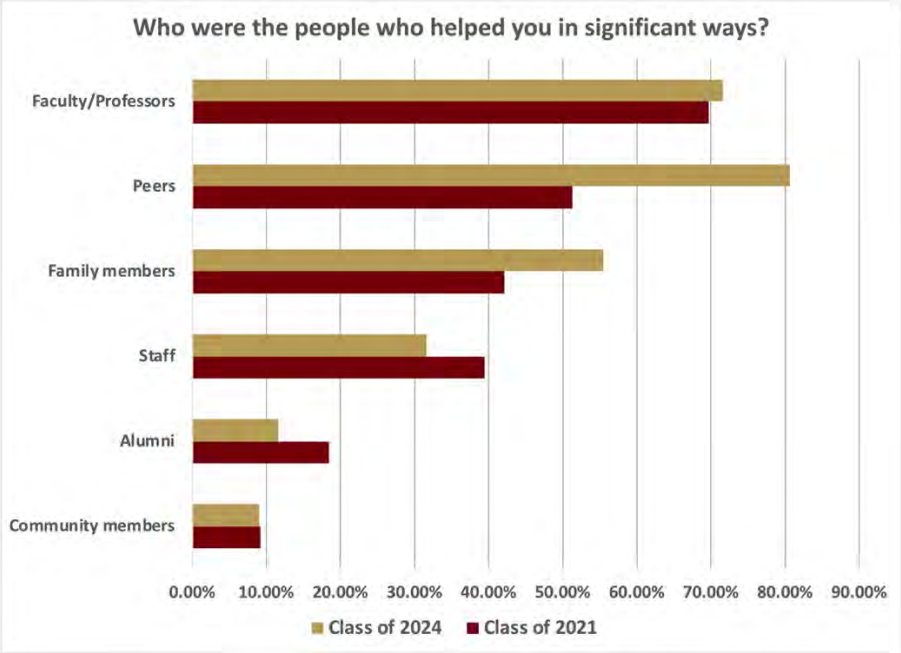
RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

The research was approved by the Elon University Institutional Review Board and all participants completed an informed consent in advance of their participation in the surveys, interviews, and program assessments. A mixed-methods approach was utilized to develop in-depth analyses of the mentoring constellation framework; mixed-methods approaches "combine[s] elements of qualitative and quantitative research approaches (e. g., use of qualitative and quantitative viewpoints, data collection, analysis, inference techniques) for the broad purposes of breadth and depth of understanding and corroboration" (Johnson, Onwuegbuzie, and Turner 2007, 123). Drawing from the self-study, a comprehensive survey of first- and fourth-year students offered breadth for understanding students' perceptions, and qualitative interviews with undergraduates, faculty mentors, and staff mentors offered depth of understanding the perceptions across a fairly representative sample of the campus community. A case study analysis of one academic program in which students' mentoring constellations include near-peers, faculty, and local and international community partners afforded additional depth with greater detail for examining the impact of the pandemic on mentoring constellations.

Institutional survey

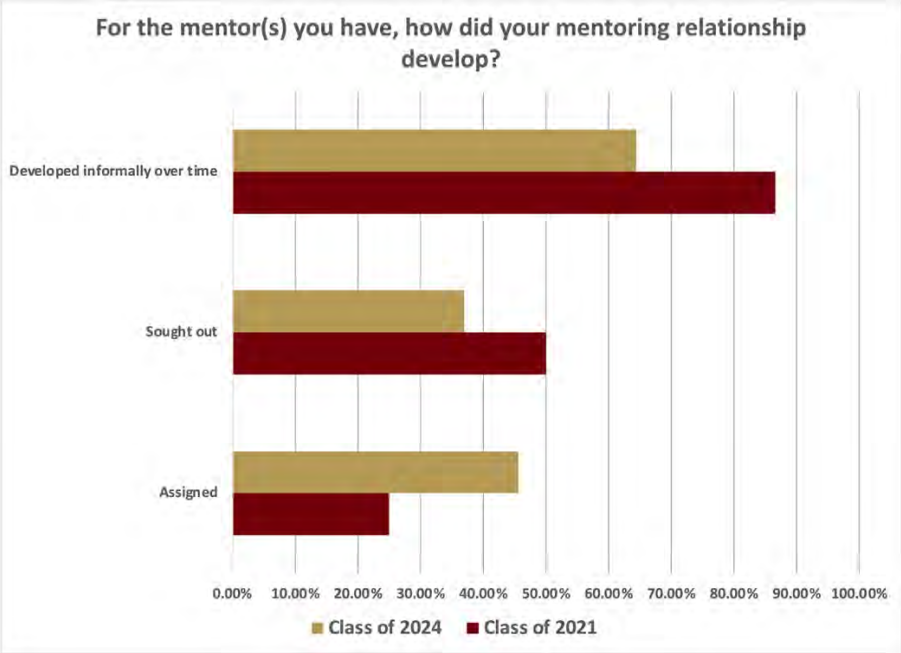
In April 2021, first- and fourth-year students (class of 2024 and class of 2021) were invited to participate in an 18-item survey about their experiences with mentoring on campus. While not the focus of this article, we share excerpts from this data set that most directly inform our examination of mentoring relationships during the pandemic. Forty-seven first-year students and 76 fourth-year students completed the survey. In November 2021, an additional 135 second-year students (class of 2024) who had not taken the previous survey completed the question set as part of a larger institutional survey. Further information is drawn from their pandemic-related open-ended responses below, but as a general frame for this data source, 84% of participants from the class of 2024 and 94% of fourth-year students reported having one or more mentors during their time at Elon. While these mentors occupy varied roles, students most frequently identify faculty and peers as the people who helped them in significant ways, as illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Roles of people on campus who supported students in significant ways



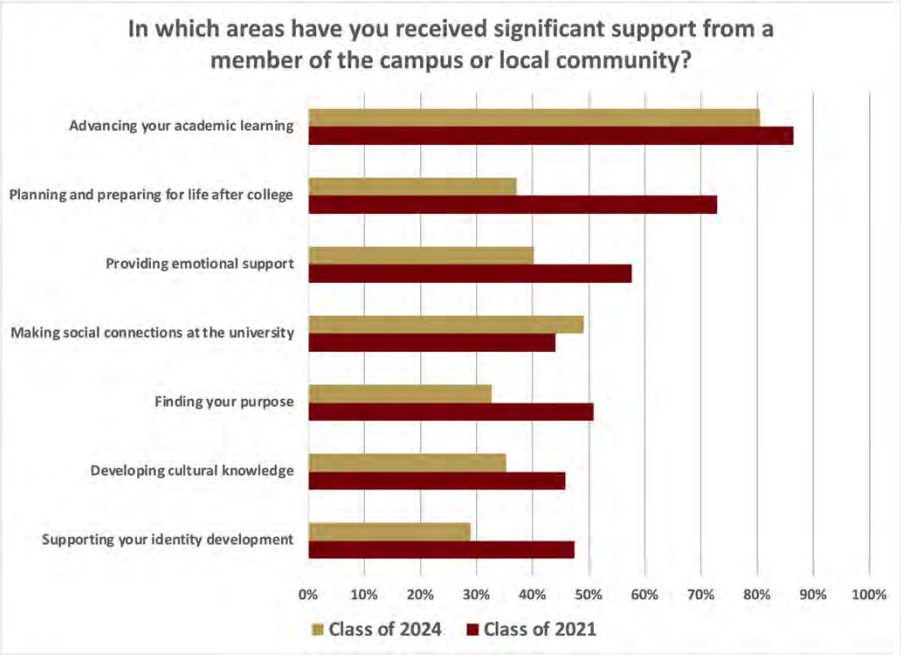
Several first-year programs at Elon University assign mentors to entering students, thereby facilitating "formal" or "planned" mentoring (McKinsey 2016). This trend is particularly prevalent in cohorted programs, which group students based on shared interests, goals, areas of study, or identity characteristics. Nevertheless, participants from both the class of 2021 and the class of 2024 indicated that most of their mentoring relationships (with faculty, staff, peers, alumni, and community members) developed informally over time (see Figure 3), reinforcing McKinsey's (2016) observation about the prevalence of "informal" or "natural" mentoring. Of course, to develop a mentoring relationship (as defined above) informally over time, students need opportunities for meaningful relationships to evolve, with attention to mentees' developing strengths and shifting needs, mentors' expertise, and all members' identities. On our residential campus, the sudden move to remote, online learning in March 2020 and the prevalence of hybrid learning during the 2020–2021 academic year had the potential to compromise how students (particularly first-year students) met others on campus and developed meaningful relationships that had the potential to evolve into mentoring relationships.

Figure 3. Pathway to mentoring relationship



Mentors served varied functions in students' lives at different stages and in ways that are developmentally appropriate (see Figure 4). Not surprisingly, mentors were most likely to support students' advancement of their academic learning. Participants from the class of 2024, who were earlier in their college career, identified mentors' second-most-common function as helping them make social connections at the university, while seniors were more likely to attribute support for planning and preparing for life after college to their mentors.

Figure 4. Mentoring functions in mentoring relationships



Fifty-three percent of participants from the class of 2024 felt prepared to identify potential mentors during their continued studies, while 81% of fourth-year students felt prepared to identify potential mentors after they graduated. Sixty-four percent of participants from the class of 2024 felt prepared to connect with mentors, while 86% of fourth-year students felt similarly prepared. As noted above, first-years most likely experienced in-person or hybrid learning during the 2020–2021 academic year, but the pandemic still impacted their ability to form relationships by limiting opportunities for group gatherings other than classes, likely decreasing their confidence in their ability to identify mentors.

An open-ended question invited first-year students to comment on ways the institution could help them feel prepared to develop mentoring relationships, and we include responses to that question in our analysis below.

Interviews

Using a snowball sampling technique, we emailed invitations to students, faculty, and staff to participate in one 30- to 45-minute interview in March 2021. Over the next six months, 62 undergraduates and 49 faculty and staff members participated in one 30- to 45-minute interview on Zoom. In the student sample, a diversity of majors and all years in school were represented, although a majority were in their third year. Most participants were in a cohorted fellows or scholars program (68%) and continuing generation students (89%). Selected demographic characteristics of the student sample are compared to the entire institution in Table 1. Through our networks, additional undergraduates were invited to augment the numbers of students with minoritized identities, those in a fellows or scholars cohort, those not in a cohort-based program, and from diverse majors, among other groups.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics for undergraduate study participants and the institution

Undergraduate students	Study participants	Institution
Affiliated with Greek life	31%	42%
Female-identified	79%	59.8%
White	66%	80%
Two or more races	12%	2.8%
African-American/Black	10%	5.7%
Hispanic/LatinX	7%	6.3%
Asian	5%	2.3%

The faculty (51%) and staff (49%) sample represented 35 different departments and units from across the campus. The time they worked at the institution ranged from 1 to 5 years (31%), 6 to 10 years (40%) and over 10 years (29%). Demographic characteristics of the faculty and staff study participants are compared to the institution in Table 2.

Table 2. Demographic characteristics for faculty and staff study participants and the institution

	Faculty and staff study participants	Full-time faculty at the institution (2021)	Full-time staff at the institution (2021)
Female-identified	63%	51.3%	56.4%
White	78%	74.1%	72.8%
African-American/Black	18%	7.9%	17.8%
Hispanic/LatinX	2%	3.1%	3.2%
Asian	2%	6.4%	< 1%

The interviews were semi-structured, with a series of open-ended questions followed by structured prompts. All interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed by a professional transcription company. The present study focuses on responses to the question, "Has the pandemic influenced your mentoring relationships?"

Case study of the Multifaith Scholars program

The present study also draws from a case study of a cohorted program in which students routinely identify mentoring constellations with multiple mentors. Although reflective of our institutional context, characteristics of the program could be strategically adapted to other potential student cohorts, like degree programs. The Multifaith Scholars program (https://www.elon.edu/u/academics/csrcs/multifaith-scholars/) was established at Elon University in 2017 as one aspect of the university's broader multifaith initiative and commitment to intercultural and interfaith learning. The program offers a two-year, closely mentored, experientially rich, and academically rigorous educational pathway for intellectually curious juniors and seniors to develop into socially engaged multifaith leaders. Students from any major are eligible to apply in their second year, distinguishing this program from cohorted programs open only during the university admission process. The multidisciplinary program has four key components to support students' academic and personal growth and to prepare them for diverse career paths in a globalized world (Allocco 2022). The first is academic coursework, as every scholar either majors in religious studies or minors in the interdisciplinary interreligious studies program. The second, faculty-mentored undergraduate research, is the program's centerpiece. Examples of recent undergraduate research projects include documenting refugees' religious experiences in Tanzania, assessing the role of religion in sexual decision-making among college-age South Asians in the United States, researching myths and practices among communities living on a sacred mountain in Cambodia, and understanding the effects of resettlement on Muslim immigrants in North Carolina. The third component of the program is community partnerships, such as the relationship with the local mosque. Finally, as part of the campus leadership component, senior scholars share their learning with the campus community in diverse venues.

The 10 students in the program deliberately function as a cohort, an ethos which is built through shared intellectual values and pursuits, focused exchange around the rewards and challenges of the research process, regular gatherings over meals and for campus lectures, and the common experience of being mentored by the program's director. Near-peer mentoring is an explicit focus in the cohort, as seniors take pride in assisting and supporting the junior scholars and juniors report being inspired by their more advanced peers. At all levels, the program foregrounds mentoring opportunities to support and deepen student learning and engages with the salient practices framework outlined by Shanahan et

al. (2015) to incorporate evidence-based mentoring practices and to assess their effectiveness (Allocco and Pennington 2022).

On seven occasions during the 2020–2021 academic year, students in the Multifaith Scholars program completed brief open-ended reflections, reports on their academic and research progress, and program assessments. On each of these occasions they were asked to reflect on their mentoring experiences in the program, particularly in terms of their own unique constellation of mentors. This network of mentoring supports includes the individual faculty mentor(s) who supervise scholars' undergraduate research projects, the program director who frequently meets with scholars individually and as a group, and the near-peer mentoring that takes place within the cohort. Because most Multifaith Scholars conduct their research projects in community settings with diverse global contexts, many also identify individuals from their local and international research settings as key members of their particular mentoring networks. In their reports and assessments, students provided reflections on how pandemic exigencies shaped their experiences in the program and the ways that their mentoring relationships were deepened, constrained, and sustained in this challenging period.

Data coding and analysis

Using an iterative, inductive process (e.g., Maietta et al. 2021), open coding of all data sources yielded four categories, including 1) ways the mentoring relationships improved during the pandemic; 2) specific mentoring strategies and/or mentoring qualities that helped overcome challenges; 3) challenges to the mentoring relationships during the pandemic; and 4) opportunities missed and/or qualities that were lacking or declined.

RESULTS

Analyses of the surveys, interviews, and the case study yielded four primary themes, reflecting convergence among approaches in the mixed-methods design. We present these themes below with supporting data and transcript examples.

Theme 1: Scaffolded programming and a diverse set of mentors in an interconnected constellation positively impacted students' and mentors' experiences during the pandemic.

Given Elon University's focus on student engagement, students typically have multiple opportunities to identify and connect with mentors. One student commented during his interview, "The pandemic was a prime example of how deeply the professors care about us, and that's just been incredible . . . the faculty . . . care so deeply and want to mentor you and want to see you succeed." In the surveys, seniors identified courses, experiences in their majors, participation in Elon Experiences (e.g., undergraduate research, internships, and service-learning), involvement in campus organizations, on-campus student employment, and participation in programs with cohorts of fellows or scholars as experiences that prepared them to connect with possible mentors.

During the interviews, many juniors and seniors with well-established mentoring constellations reported that, in some ways, the pandemic strengthened their existing relationships. For example, a senior in the Multifaith Scholars program, the focus of the case study, commented:

> I think I was blessed in the fact that when the pandemic hit, all of my mentors went the extra mile to make sure that I felt supported, and that I felt calm and that I was going to be okay, and

> that I could recenter some research that needs to be fixed, and that I was still going to be on the right path.

Another senior in a cohort-based program who identifies as a first-generation college student seized the opportunity to enact some of the strategies she had learned from her mentors.

> I think that they [mentors] taught me a lot that I didn't have a chance to implement the first two and a half years. And then the pandemic hit. And then I was like, oh, wait, I can use all the things that they taught me. This is a moment for me to put it into action. And so that was really cool. And then also, now looking for jobs, talking to them, being like, . . . How am I supposed to articulate what I want, or what do I want? I know I changed what I wanted to do. And now I have a narrowed vision for what I want because of their conversations.

While these quotes are representative of students in cohort programs that utilize and scaffold mentoring in a constellation model with near-peers, faculty, and staff mentors, for other students it was difficult to forge new relationships during the pandemic. One junior commented, "Now the pandemic has kind of forced us to be closer together, so it's definitely built my mentor relationships up that way, but not necessarily allowed me to go out and search for new ones as much."

For first- and second-year students, many of the relational activities typical on our campus were curtailed by the pandemic, reducing their opportunities to develop meaningful mentoring relationships. When asked if she had mentors at Elon, one first-year student said, "There's no name that immediately pops into my head. I have felt supported by faculty in a certain way and by my peers as well, but it's just been hard forming that type of connection this year." Another first-year honors student reported, "Because of COVID and other obstacles, I haven't really gotten the chance to meet enough people that I know are looking for mentees . . . I don't really know who I would ask to be my mentor yet." It appears, then, that forging new relationships during the pandemic was particularly challenging for new students.

Theme 2: Skilled mentoring during the pandemic required a dynamic, individualized balance of mentoring practices, taking into account unique aspects of students' identities.

In her foundational research, Kram (1985) identified two primary functions that mentors fulfill: 1) career-focused, instrumental mentoring (e.g., building professional skills) and 2) psychosocial, emotionally supportive mentoring (e.g., exploring relationships between personal and professional identity development). Recent research also highlights the importance of reciprocity in mentoring relationships and identifies how relational mentoring is characterized by interdependence, mutual empathy, trust, and empowerment (Johnson 2016). Students' need for supplemental psychosocial and relational mentoring during the pandemic was a prominent theme in the interviews and the case study data. In interviews, students relayed the ways their mentors helped them adapt not only to the changing academic context, but also supported their personal and emotional well-being in the midst of shifting social contexts catalyzed by the discourse around racial justice. One faculty mentor highlighted the ways the stress of the pandemic and the racial conflicts strengthened her mentoring relationships and identification with students of color:

> For me, the pandemic, I think might have made mentoring relationships closer . . . because everyone was at a more stressed capacity, I found my students sharing. . . even in my classes, my students sharing more than I would have expected . . .
>
> And so, with my mentoring relationships, it became . . . people reacting to news. Like, we were in a pandemic, but we were in another pandemic, too, of all of the racial conflicts that were going on. And I mentor primarily women of color, primarily Black women, and so there's a lot of those conversations which, I don't think would be happening, if it wasn't so much in our faces every day. And they felt comfortable talking to me because I'm also a woman of color, and so I think that that made our relationships definitely closer. And then also, the work we're doing is tied to racial justice in a lot of ways, so you pour it into the work as well, and you're jointly excited about it and talking about it.
>
> And so, I think with Zoom, it can feel so much like you're very close. I mean, you are close when you're in person, too, but . . . You know, like I would be taking meetings, and I'd be in my kid's playroom or something, and they'd notice something and say, "Oh, what's that? That toy, right? I had that toy when I was little."

This mentor's strategies of providing students with opportunities for connection through discussion of the news, participation in sustained research related to racial justice, and even observation of her child's toys in a Zoom meeting alleviated some stress and fostered relational mentoring. Echoing the theme of connection, a staff supervisor highlighted intentionally building team connections as a strategy for building relationships in the workplace during the pandemic, by "encouraging student leaders to develop different ways to bond with the team, because we know that it's important to develop a team and to have a team that trusts each other to move the goals and the projects of your department at hand."

Assessment data from the Multifaith Scholars program demonstrate that through rigorous, immersive, and closely mentored research, students develop powerful skills for the negotiation of religious diversity and other forms of difference. Intellectual and academic pathways, carefully designed and mentored by expert, committed faculty, can themselves offer highly effective modes of interreligious learning that are essential to the cultivation of graduates who are globally minded and civically engaged. These data also powerfully attest to the value of blended mentoring and the ways that instrumental and psychosocial support work in tandem to produce students who are agentive, academically accomplished, confident in their self-efficacy, and able to take ownership over the projects. As one student in this case study commented:

> I became so much closer with my mentor when my project had to be radically re-envisioned. If it were not for the strong, inspiring relationships I have with my multiple mentors, my project could not and would not have been successful. I was able to connect deeply about personal beliefs, concerns, and difficulties when transitioning from my planned project to the research that was possible during the pandemic. My mentors helped me find and grow my sense of resilience and made me feel confident at times when I did not believe in myself. They taught me that things I may consider to be failures often lead to outcomes that are far more significant than I could have imagined.

A faculty mentor with a student in the Multifaith Scholars program reflected on the ways the pandemic influenced his mentoring practices, leading him to incorporate additional opportunities to check in with students informally and privilege relationship-building. He reported:

> I think that it deepens the intentional kind of check-ins I do with students. Again, as I mentioned before, one of the practices or elements of mentoring is just checking on students' wellbeing. I always saw that as being particularly true when students are in the field or doing work abroad because students can experience cultural shock and things like that. And the pandemic has certainly heightened my awareness of that and, probably forced is the wrong word, but prompted me to continue that kind of checking in even while just in normal times or not in the field, because we certainly weren't in normal times. And so, I scheduled more agenda-free casual check-ins with my mentees, often in a group or a pair so that we would just not be expected to talk about updates to our research, but we could share that. And we would just talk about other things. So, much more of the informal relational work this year.

Balancing students' increased needs for relational mentoring with the stress and additional responsibilities incurred by the pandemic was significant, challenging work for mentors. High-quality mentoring relationships are time-intensive and require considerable resources in normal times, much less during a global crisis. In order to scale a constellation model to include more students, the challenges of mentor capacity and time must be considered carefully.

Theme 3: The significant reduction of in-person relational mentoring was associated with considerable challenges, occasionally offset by opportunities to deepen existing relationships and expand the constellation.

In the interviews, over 60% of students reported experiencing challenges in their mentoring relationships due to the pandemic. The most frequent obstacles concerned developing and sustaining mentoring relationships in hybrid and virtual contexts, as well as the COVID-19 restrictions on in-person gatherings. One student expressed her frustrations not only with the virtual environment but also the lack of structure she experienced with her mentor:

> I think that not being able to meet with people in person can sort of detract from the personal side of the mentoring relationship, which is something that is important to me. And not having as structured of a meeting schedule and without that structure not being able to cross paths on a regular basis because everyone was in different places and not really on campus much. So, with that, if there wasn't any structure, then often there wouldn't be any contact at all.

The following comment by a senior exemplifies the feelings of isolation, stress, and fatigue that were exacerbated during the pandemic:

> I would say I've probably grown a bit distant from some people. I talked about my "big" (sorority peer mentor) and my Teaching Fellows mentor: I haven't really talked to them in a while partly because I don't necessarily need as much of their guidance anymore, but also partly because it's

> just so much harder. I've just cut off, not intentionally cut off contact, but I get so fatigued of being on a screen all day that I have no energy to engage socially online.

Many faculty and staff mentors also noted the costs associated with pivoting from an in-person environment to an entirely virtual one. As one faculty member explained:

> I think the pandemic has significantly impacted my mentoring relationships in a negative way. We have all tried so hard to sustain and create varying alternatives to connect and to show connect and be able to show empathy. That's so hard on Zoom, and to convey caring. And also, I've learned just recently that I have a lot of fun during the mentoring and I try to infuse that with students. And what's been going on lately is I've noticed we're missing fun. So, the void of lightness, fun and the opportunity to sort of go off purpose . . . This is the work we're supposed to do, we have an hour on Zoom, we're behind masks and we're meeting six feet apart, let's get the work done. And we've also not had the [physical] spaces that I normally can mentor in.

As noted previously, survey data from the first-year students indicated the unique challenges they faced in forming new connections with others that might eventually develop into mentoring relationships. One first-year student wrote, "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." A second-year student reported in her interview, "I think it's just been hard for me to reach out to people who I don't know personally. Seeing someone through a Zoom screen is really different than being in a classroom or being in a space together physically." One staff mentor also reflected on the paucity of first-year students' experiences with mentors and contrasted their situation with students who have already formed mentoring relationships on campus, saying:

> The ones I have spoken with don't have mentoring relationships. They don't. There's no way to do that on Zoom . . . those casual conversations are just not happening. It's interesting, though. Some students who already had them perceive that they're stronger now.

On a more optimistic note, many first-year students did anticipate more frequent in-person social interactions and the potential for mentoring in the coming years. In open-ended survey responses, one student wrote, "Elon brings you closer to people and as you go on you will develop the skills for mentoring relationships" and another commented, "Due to the circumstances of Covid-19, I feel as though Elon helped as best they could to make each of us feel prepared to develop mentor relationships."

Assessment data for the Multifaith Scholars program reveal that our changed pandemic learning contexts impacted students' sense of cohort and community within the program and materially affected their ability to engage in community-based learning and globally focused undergraduate research. So, too, it shaped their mentoring experiences with every member of their constellation. One junior in the program expressed the highs and lows of the year this way in her year-end reflection:

> I have really enjoyed being part of the Multifaith Scholars program this year. For one, I love having a community that promotes and fosters intellectual curiosity and it has been a joy

> watching the seniors flourish and plan their next steps and getting to know my cohort and similarly witness their progress. Despite these highs though, this was undoubtedly a hard year both emotionally and academically. My course load was extremely heavy, along with the unsurprising mental burdens of a pandemic, resulting in a very busy and tiring year. Overall, though, Multifaith Scholars was a positive addition to my year. This includes my relationship with my mentor. I am extremely grateful for his support and flexibility.

Another student in the program emphasized the important role of community partners in her mentoring constellation, noting "While the world around me is constantly changing, the smiles on the faces of the youth at the masjid [mosque] have not. This community partnership has been a sustained source of joy for me in this hard year."

Theme 4: Gaps exist in the campus ecosystem, especially for students with minoritized identities and students who are not in cohorted programs.

When asked in the survey how the university could help students feel prepared to develop mentoring relationships, a member of the class of 2024 suggested:

> Give more opportunities for non-fellows or non-Honors students to meet with potential undergraduate research faculty mentors from your respective major department. I know the Honors program does something similar, but it would be nice if students not involved in a program like that also had opportunities to connect with potential research mentors.

Although the student specifically mentions undergraduate research mentoring, their comment highlights that the campus ecosystem builds in opportunities for mentoring relationships for some students—but not all.

The interviews and prior research demonstrated that one of the noteworthy benefits of the constellation model is the diversity of mentors' perspectives and experiences (Higgins and Kram 2001). Finding identity-linked mentors was important to students, but this desire also draws attention to a significant gap in the ecosystem. Although this challenge existed before the pandemic, it was exacerbated for some students during the stress and uncertainties they experienced in 2020. In the following quotes from their interviews, two students articulated the value of identifying with multiple mentors on key characteristics of their identities.

> I feel like there's somebody who is an expert on every area of my life. There's like a big intersectionality with all parts of my identity. So that's very, very important because I may not understand all the aspects of all the things that I am, but at least there's somebody that knows enough stuff about one aspect, and I can ask somebody specifically about another one and they might each have something different to say, but I at least know that they're an expert on one thing.

> I found myself interested in people with similar experiences as myself. I would say most of my mentors are women. I don't know. I have a trust for people who identify in the same way, gender-wise, and then just also people who . . . have a social justice lens or have kind of an

> inclusion, equity-based focus. Because it's something that I care about. And I think I identify in some ways that are marginalized, I would say my sexuality. So, looking for someone who kind of is accepting or understanding of that.

Another student relayed her concerns about students with minoritized identities becoming increasingly marginalized at the institution:

> I think [there needs] to be a greater increase in diversity among faculty and staff at Elon, particularly for students like myself that are seeking those kinds of relationships . . . It just saddens me to think about other students, whether of, you know, marginalized racial or ethnic identities . . . who don't have that kind of programming and who are stuck in a lot of these margins, like majoritized spaces that often get a little toxically privileged sometimes. And particularly when we don't have professors that are well-trained in how to navigate difficult conversations or how to support students with marginalized identity, that can be a really difficult and isolating experience.

In addition to concerns about themselves and their peers, some students also noted the burden placed on faculty and staff mentors.

> I think with that, faculty and staff of marginalized identities, they usually are mentors to like billions of students. So, I feel like that also is really burdensome on them and they're wonderful individuals, but they're these mentorship figures to 100 students when it's unofficial, it's not in their job title, and it's something that they're willing and able and participating [in] because they want to, but it's just like, that should not be. They should not be in that position where they're the only person that looks like this or has this specific identity.

Thus, findings from the interviews strongly suggest that institutional initiatives related to mentoring must attend to the identities of students and mentors, and these initiatives must seriously consider the capacities of all mentors, particularly those with historically marginalized identities.

CONCLUSION

Findings highlight the potential of collaborative, interconnected mentoring constellations to support students' personal and professional development during a global health crisis. Within multi-year, scaffolded programs, students benefited from mentoring support, particularly when mentors were agile and adapted to new contexts. Students' and mentors' reports of augmented relational and academic mentoring contributed to the perceived positive academic outcomes as well as increased resilience, confidence, and gratitude for the relationships. We acknowledge that mentoring relationships at our institution are cultivated within the context of a relationship-rich culture in which mentoring is a highly valued activity. Even during the pandemic, most students felt prepared to connect (McKinsey's initial phase of mentoring relationships), although the pandemic amplified connection challenges for students earlier in their college careers, those with minoritized identities, and those not in cohorted programs. Collaboration and mutual commitment required strategic adjustments to mentoring relationship practices. Widespread implementation of the mentoring constellation model means that institutional

resources must be dedicated to supporting students' agency to build meaningful mentoring constellations and to sustaining opportunities for mentor development. Ongoing challenges at our predominantly white institution include scalability of and access to sustained, in-depth mentoring experiences and mentoring capacity, especially for students, faculty, and staff with minoritized identities.

While this article reports on an institutional self-study at a university that is making a concerted effort to support students' development of mentoring constellations, the themes are applicable to other institutional contexts. As we discuss in the introduction, mentoring yields significant positive outcomes for students and mentors, and mentoring relationships span across activity spheres within (and beyond) a university. The results of this study suggest that during times of uncertainty and challenge, universities can strive to sustain mentoring constellations by:

- Conceptualizing and defining relationships in multiple ways on a relationship-rich campus, so that everyone sees the importance of meaningful relationships as valuable unto themselves, and possible precursors to sustained, in-depth mentoring relationships. (Theme 1)
- Scaffolding multiple opportunities across curricular and co-curricular spaces to ensure that students have multiple pathways of support. During times of disruption, this is particularly critical for students who have not (yet) identified multiple mentors in a constellation model, such as first-year and transfer students. (Theme 1)
- Recognizing that in a constellation model, not every mentor is expected to serve every function. Identifying mentors with varying expertise, experiences, and identities is a potential benefit of the model. Although duplication could be seen as a challenge, mentoring relationships are dynamic, and as they evolve, mentors within a mentoring constellation may serve different functions at different times. (Theme 2)
- Supporting professional development for mentoring across identities. (Morales, Grineski, and Collins 2021; Theme 2)
- Structuring in-person, where possible, and virtual social engagement opportunities for establishing and deepening connections during times of disruption. In support of mentor development for hybrid/flex and online mentoring, Elon University's Center for Engaged Learning curated publications and online resources (https://www.centerforengagedlearning.org/category/covid-19/). (Theme 3)
- Connecting mentors within and across constellations by having at least one lead mentor facilitating conversations about who is in students' mentoring constellations and the functions they serve. (Theme 4)
- Adapting characteristics of cohorted programs (e.g., integrated opportunities to connect with others in the program, near-peer mentoring, recurring celebrations of student success) to other existing subgroups within the university community (e.g., degree programs, student employment groups, etc.). (Theme 4)

There are ample opportunities for future research to examine the benefits and challenges of mentoring constellations to support students' learning and well-being during times of disruption and challenge in diverse institutional contexts. For example, how might the role of peer mentors address scalability challenges so that more students can benefit from significant support structures during times of uncertainty? What constitutes the role of a "connector" in a mentoring constellation and how can they best co-facilitate connections with and for students? What professional development is needed to

develop and sustain constellation models in different institutional contexts? Further research on mentoring constellation frameworks in higher education contexts is warranted.

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