

Equitable Mentorship within the Health Behavior Department at UNC Gillings

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This work was completed as part of the research assistantship position with the Health Behavior Equity Task Force in Spring, 2021.

Description of Work

This work comes largely from the Equity Action and Accountability Plan (EAAP) drafted by the Equity Task Force (ETF), which was developed in response to student organizing. Specifically, this work is motivated by the action step in strategy 2 of the EAAP which states, “Review mentoring practices, structures, and processes to better center the needs of BIPOC students and draft recommendations/guidelines that incorporate student input and best practices from the field.”

In order to draft such recommendations and guidelines, research was conducted to locate best practices in the mentoring of graduate students, with a focus on Black Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) students. In order to zero in on the most important recommendations, focus groups were conducted with first year students (1 focus group) and second year students (1 focus group) to gauge their experience with mentorship received by their assigned faculty mentors within the Health Behavior Department. In addition to this, a question guide was sent to several BIPOC students to gather their thoughts on the mentorship structure within the department, and further inform the work. The intention was to conduct a focus group solely comprised of BIPOC students to gather this feedback, however given that the time of recruitment was near finals season, it was not possible to recruit students for a focus group. In addition to this, only one BIPOC student responded to the email with a filled question guide.

In addition to this work, research was conducted to determine the efficacy of group mentorship. Several meetings were held with faculty who have implemented a similar model in the Epidemiology (EPI) Department and who plan on implementing this model in the EQUITY concentration of the Health Behavior Department. After these meetings, the EPI student evaluations were examined to determine if this group model would be useful for improving mentorship across the department. Unfortunately, no questions specifically pertaining to group mentorship were included on the focus group guide. After examination by students in the Equity Collective, it was determined that the scope of the focus groups should be focused on individual mentoring.

This report synthesizes the findings from both the best practices research and student focus groups, which form the basis of the recommendations made in this document.

Defining Mentorship

Mentorship can take many different forms and depends on the personalities, expectations, and needs of both the mentor and mentee. Mentorship has been described in the following ways:

“a close and individualized relationship that develops over a graduate career and could include academic, personal, and scholarly guidance as well as professional development” – [University of Washington Graduate School](#)

“focus of mentoring can include a range of goals, including skills or competency development, psychosocial or socioemotional support, and career development” – Montgomery B., 2017

“mentors are individuals who take an interest in developing another person’s career and well-being, advance academic and professional goals in directions most desired by the individual., and tailor mentoring styles and content to the individual, including adjustments due to differences in culture, ethnicity, gender, and differences in student experience.” – Rackham Graduate School, University of Michigan

As is evident from these excerpts, there is no one way to provide mentorship or to structure a mentorship experience, however there are many resources and tools available for mentors and mentees alike that can help create a beneficial mentorship experience for both parties. The best way to create a mentorship experience is to tailor the mentorship according to the needs of those involved. The following section will discuss the main findings and key takeaways from the focus groups conducted with students within the Health Behavior Department.

Group Mentoring Findings

In order to research the efficacy of group mentoring, a meeting was held with Dr. Karin Yeatts to discuss the group mentorship model in place within the EPI department within Gillings. In this model, 3-4 faculty mentors oversee the full cohort of students (12) and provide mentoring to the cohort as a whole. This model includes monthly group seminars with material that includes practitioners from the field discussing their work, how to perform a practicum search, and second years discussing their experiences in the program. This model also includes weekly office hours held by faculty mentors. This discussion led to another meeting with Dr. Geni Eng to discuss a similar model to be used in the EQUITY concentration within the Health Behavior Department. Student evaluations from the EPI model were reviewed in follow up to these meetings.

Group mentoring was not formally researched, however, as the department continues to grow, it may be prudent for the ETF to perform more research into a group mentorship structure. According to feedback from students within the Equity Collective, research into group mentorship did not fall within the scope of this work, particularly for the focus groups, so this research was not pursued as rigorously. It is important to note that students in the Equity Collective only make up a small percentage of students within the department, so that feedback about group mentorship may not be representative of students in the department as a whole.

Evaluations of the group mentorship structure within the EPI department demonstrated that students seemed to enjoy the benefits of receiving group mentorship, while noting that their group was comprised of only 12 students. From these findings, it may be that the benefits of

the group mentoring were due to the small group size. In addition to this, according to Dr. Yeatts, students within the cohort did not utilize the weekly office hours offered by the faculty mentors. Further evaluation of this model must be performed to determine the efficacy of group mentoring in the HB department. Any implementation of this model should keep in mind and center the needs of BIPOC students, who are the focus of this work.

Focus Group Methods and Findings

Methods

In order to gather feedback about mentorship received from faculty mentors in the department directly from students, focus groups were conducted with different student groups, first year students and second year students. In addition to this, a question guide was sent to several BIPOC students within the department for them to complete asynchronously and provide feedback about their experience with mentorship from faculty mentors in the department.

Focus group guides were drafted through an iterative and reflective process. A first draft was constructed by reviewing research on focus group facilitation and best practices in mentoring. This draft was then sent to various sources such as the ETF, the Equity Collective, and the Health Behavior Concentration Lead, Liz Chen, for feedback and revision. After several drafts and cycles of revision, the final guides were constructed and ready for use during focus groups (see Appendix A).

Students were recruited by sending invitation messages to group chats (GroupMe, WhatsApp, etc.) and email listservs. The first- and second-year focus groups were conducted via zoom and lasted an hour. Groups were not recorded, to preserve anonymity of students, however a notetaker was present for the duration of both groups. Although the BIPOC focus group was not able to take place synchronously over zoom, similarly developed guides were sent out to students to respond to and provide feedback through email.

Findings

1st year Feedback

- Positive feedback about mentoring in the department.
 - Students appreciated it when their mentors:
 - Opened meetings with check-ins
 - Took initiative at the beginning of the semester to reach out to student and set a time to meet, rather than requiring the student to make that initial contact
 - Demonstrated their experience with mentoring
 - Discussed working and communication styles and preferences early on
 - Set weekly/bi-weekly meetings for check-ins and to facilitate relationship-building

- Laid out what they usually do with mentees in order to discuss and establish expectations at the beginning
- Less positive feedback about mentoring in the department.
 - Students expressed concern and disappointment when their mentors:
 - Did not have much knowledge of the MPH program and can't help with many questions
 - Go on leave so that the student is without a faculty mentor for weeks to months
 - Look to the students to initiate contact within the mentor-mentee relationship. Note: this was especially a concern among first-gen students and we recognize that this is a department set "professional development" opportunity as it is now structured
 - Do not or the relationship does not lead to an authentic, organic connection either because there are few opportunities to connect or because the relationship feels forced with mentors (seeming like they don't want to mentor)
 - Are not responsive as a source of support, especially in regard to the practicum experience if they have not spoken to their mentor all semester
- Students are looking for strong, enduring relationships with their mentors, both during their MPH program and after, seeking to stay in contact after graduation and recognizing the importance of asking for letters of recommendation from mentors. Students wished the following things were more fully covered in the mentorship program offered through the department:
 - Informal academic advising
 - Support with practicum and job searches
 - Support with networking, especially in the virtual world
 - Clear expectations for what services the mentors should provide
- Ideal mentor was described as a faculty member who had undergone specific and uniform UNC training and who had a passion for imparting knowledge, advice, and support to students
- Faculty should only be recruited if they actually want to mentor to make it more of a consistent experience for students across the board
- Mentoring should be considered in the hiring process
- Good mentoring should be rewarded and the knowledge of how to mentor should be shared
- An accountability/evaluation system should be in place so mentors can be evaluated
 - But concern about anonymity (students may not feel comfortable giving negative feedback)
- Overall suggestions for improving the mentoring process include:

- Set/increase expectation for the number of times mentors and mentees meet
- Change the expectation so that the mentor reaches out first and establishes relationship (burden on mentee isn't equitable)
- Disseminate best practices by mentors who are recognized as great mentors
- Increase transparency around mentor and mentee matching
- Consider offering an opportunity to rank potential mentors for incoming students
- Establish process so that students can request a switch in faculty mentors in cases of poor fit or problematic behavior

2nd Year Feedback

- Positive feedback about mentoring in the department.
 - Students appreciated when their mentors:
 - Served as a resource for academic planning and career discussions
 - Set agendas during meetings which is helpful for guiding the conversation and helping the mentor understand the students' needs
 - Directed students to resources when they didn't know or couldn't help with that need
 - Asked guiding questions to steer conversations and jump start mentoring relationships
- Less positive feedback about mentoring in the department.
 - Students expressed concern and disappointment when their mentors:
 - Only met with their students twice a semester which they report isn't very helpful for relationship building
 - They further report that most conversations were based on practicum searches and course selection
 - Didn't provide clear instruction for what meetings should consist of
 - Didn't provide clear expectations for the mentoring relationships
 - No clear explanation of the role of a faculty mentor
 - Made students feel as if they were simply checking off their meeting twice a semester
- Students wished there was a focus or goal for meetings (beforehand) that would make meetings less awkward
- More formal mentoring had to be found outside of their faculty mentor
 - Students using careers services to fill the gaps from faculty mentoring
 - Finding more formal mentoring in research assistantships
- Public health interests change while in graduate school and meeting only twice a semester doesn't allow the mentor to keep up with budding interests and tune mentoring to those changes
- Students expected:
 - To hear about more opportunities (job, course, awards, etc.)

- To be able to learn public health roles from their mentor
- A vulnerable space to be able to grow and not feel like they had to always have it together for mentor-mentee meetings

BIPOC Feedback

- Organic connection and relationship building has suffered likely because of the virtual environment
- Expected more initiative from their mentor
- Would have appreciated more moral and mental support throughout the academic year, especially as a BIPOC student given how difficult it's been particularly socially and politically
- Would feel comfortable approaching their faculty mentor about micro/macroaggressions and issues of equity and inclusion if they had a better relationship with them
- Wishes they had a better relationship with their mentor overall because they still do not know all the resources available in Gillings and tributes that to the lack of relationship
- Expect a mentor to help navigate new areas whether it be academia or the workforce while also finding opportunities to help them grow
- Suggestions for improving the mentoring process include:
 - Bi-monthly meetings just to check in with each other
 - Sending check in emails to mentees, particularly around hard times throughout the year would help them feel less isolated
 - Be assertive and take initiative to build a relationship with their students
 - Provide a listening ear and suggest opportunities that will help their mentee grow when they come across it
 - Including networking, job opportunities, practicum opportunities
 - The program should hold both mentors and mentees accountable in keeping up with each other throughout the year

Key Takeaways

- Students feel a discomfort initiating contact and reaching out to mentors at the beginning of the semester; particularly for first-generation and BIPOC students
- Students assert that expectation setting is important for a successful mentorship experience
- Students need a clear definition of the roles and what the faculty mentor is willing to provide support with
- Students express frustration when their relationships with their mentors seem forced and inorganic
- Students want more opportunity sharing to take place in their mentorship relationship (i.e., jobs, awards, etc.)
- Students see then need for an accountability system to hold faculty mentors responsible for their mentoring
- BIPOC students need additional support from their mentors given the isolation they feel politically and socially

Research Findings

Research was conducted at the start of the Spring 2021 semester to identify best practices in mentoring graduate students, with a focus on BIPOC students. However, after discovering a plethora of information, focus groups were designed to hone in on the key areas of improvement for the mentorship that takes place in the Health Behavior Department. After reviewing the findings from the focus groups, research findings were revisited and tailored to fit with the key themes brought up during the groups. The sources for this work included a combination of peer-reviewed as well as grey literature.

Key Findings

- Create tools for mentors and mentees to set clear guidelines for their mentorship relationship ([NAP](#))
 - This could include individual development plans, [mentoring compacts](#), or [mentor maps](#)
- Provide mentorship education curricula and tools for mentors: this could include guided group discussions on mentorship practices
- Mentors should keep in mind that they can benefit from mentorships in the following ways:
 - Keep abreast with new research questions, knowledge, paradigms, and techniques
 - Cultivate collaborators for current or future projects
 - Prepare the next generation of intellectual leaders in the disciplines and in society
- Mentors should work to foster strong relationships with mentees through dialogue and building trust
- Mentors should help connect students to other supports/resources/mentors to build their network
- Create an accountability mechanism for mentoring
 - Reward effective mentoring: factor this into things such as promotions, tenure, performance appraisals
- Recommendations for mentoring BIPOC students
 - Initiate contact with BIPOC students and ensure they feel welcomed to begin building a relationship
 - Reach out when you don't hear from your mentee instead of waiting for them to reach out to you
 - Create and maintain a safe space to discuss topics such as imposter syndrome, micro/macro-aggressions, and stereotype threat with students as these are issues often faced by BIPOC students in predominantly white institutions

- Consider positionality and identity and be aware of your privilege when mentoring BIPOC students
- Build a network of mentors and facilitate the student's connection to them
- Ask for feedback from the students, specifically on the type of support they need

Limitations

The research performed this semester has some limitations. Focus groups were largely comprised of EQUITY and HB students. Lack of perspective from Global Health students may skew the findings. In addition to this, although BIPOC students were included in both the 1st and 2nd year focus groups, no focus group was able to be held specifically for BIPOC students. This is a limitation because the focus of this work was primarily on improving mentorship outcomes for BIPOC students. Finally, group mentoring was not able to be included on the focus group guides which leaves a gap in understanding student interest within the department in this model. Any changes to the mentorship structure and future research performed on mentorship should keep these limitations in mind.

Recommendations

The combination of focus groups and research on best practices in mentoring has formed several key recommendations for restructuring how mentoring is carried out within the Health Behavior Department. These recommendations include:

- Establishing a procedure for faculty mentors to initiate the first meeting with students.
- Establishing a procedure for faculty mentors and mentees to construct an agreement at the start of each academic year that discusses work styles, communication styles, and meeting dates throughout the semester.
- Establishing a process for faculty mentors and students to set roles and expectations for their mentoring relationship that may include, what each party wants to receive from the relationship and what the faculty mentor is expected to provide support with.
- Creating transparency with the matching process and sharing with mentors and mentees how they are matched.
- Defining mentorship as a part of a faculty's job description to be evaluated along with other metrics for performance evaluation. If a faculty member is expected to mentor, then mentoring should be evaluated and factored into performance reviews.
- Establish a repository of resources and tools for use by mentors to provide effective mentorship to student mentees.
- Establishing a two-pronged accountability system: (1) for mentees to report feedback about their mentorship experience. This evaluation should be factored into faculty mentor's performance evaluations. (2) For the department to hold mentees and mentors accountable for keeping up with each other and relationship building.

- Establishing a system for mentors identified by their student mentees as effective mentors, to share the strategies and tools they use to provide effective mentorship to students.
- Performing more research into the efficacy of a group mentoring model and how it may be implemented in the department.

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Appendix A – Focus Group Guides

1st Year Focus Group Guide

RQ1: How do students feel about how mentorship is currently being carried out in the department?

This question is specifically about the mentoring experience structure (what the mentees are receiving in terms of professional development, networking, practicum support, etc.).

How do you feel about the way in which mentoring is carried out in the department currently?

- What are your general thoughts about the mentorship you are receiving?
- How, if at all, has the online format impacted your mentorship experience?

What expectations did you have for your faculty mentor coming into the program?

- What preparation or tools do you think a mentor and mentee should receive to engage in a successful mentoring experience?

These questions are about the mentee's relationship and connection with the faculty mentor outside of professional development.

What are your interactions like with your current faculty mentor?

- What do you like about their mentoring style? Are your specific needs being met? Please provide an example.
- If your specific needs are not being met, what suggestions do you have for how your faculty mentor could be a better mentor for you and other students they will work with in the future?
- What are some obstacles or challenges you've encountered, if any, in your relationship with your faculty mentor?
- Can you explain how comfortable you would feel approaching your faculty mentor about personal (as opposed to academic) issues?

How has the communication between you and your faculty mentor been like?

- Is there anything you think your faculty mentor could do to improve communication between the two of you?
- What communication styles/tactics that your faculty mentor has employed do you find most helpful?
- How has the virtual format of this year has affected your communication with your faculty mentor?

RQ2: What do students need from mentoring?

This question is specifically about the mentoring experience in the department (what the mentees are receiving in terms of professional development, networking, etc.).

In general, what do you want out of a mentorship experience?

- What specific elements of a mentoring experience would you need in order to see it as effective/successful?
- What areas do you wish the mentorship covered, that it does not?
- How has your mentor supported you in finding practicum or job opportunities? How about networking?

These questions are about the mentee's relationship and connection with their faculty mentor outside of professional development.

What would you want to get out of a relationship with a faculty mentor?

- What do you value in a mentoring relationship?
 - o In what ways are you getting that now?
- In what ways did your mentor try to build relationship with you throughout your mentoring experience?
 - o What kinds of activities would you like that we could encourage among faculty?

If your faculty mentor does not meet your needs, where else do you turn to for support? How has that gone?

What suggestions do you have for strengthening the mentorship in the department?

2nd year Focus Group Guide

RQ1: How did students feel about how mentorship was carried out in the year leading up to COVID?

This question is specifically about the mentoring experience structure (what the mentees were receiving in terms of professional development, networking, practicum support, etc.).

How did you feel about the mentorship you received in the year leading up to COVID?

- What were your general thoughts about the mentorship you received?

These questions are about the mentee's relationship and connection with their faculty mentor outside of professional development.

What were your interactions like with your current faculty mentor in the year leading up to COVID?

- What did you like about their mentoring style?
- What were some challenges or obstacles, if any, you encountered in your relationship with your faculty mentor?

What expectations did you have for your faculty mentor coming into the program?

How was the communication between you and your faculty mentor like in the year leading up to COVID?

- What communication styles/tactics that your mentor employed did you find most helpful?

RQ2: How do students feel about how mentoring was carried out this year, post-COVID?

This question is specifically about the mentorship experience (what the mentees are receiving in terms of professional development, networking, etc.).

What are your thoughts on the mentorship they received?

- What are your general thoughts about the mentorship experience?
- How, if at all, has the online format impacted your mentorship experience?
- Have your thoughts about the mentorship program changed between last year and this year?
- How has your mentor supported you in finding practicum or job opportunities? How about networking?
- How has your mentor prepared you to find job opportunities after graduation?

These questions are about the mentee's relationship and connection with their faculty mentor outside of professional development.

What are your current interactions like with your faculty mentor?

- What do you like about their mentoring style? Are your specific needs being met? Please provide an example.
- If your specific needs are not being met, what suggestions do you have for how your faculty mentor could be a better mentor for you and other students they will work with in the future?
- Can you explain how comfortable you would feel approaching your faculty mentor about personal (as opposed to academic) issues?

How has the communication between you and your faculty mentor been like?

- What communication styles/tactics that faculty mentor employs do you find most helpful?
- Do you feel like the virtual format of this year has affected your communication with your faculty mentor?
- Is there anything you think your faculty mentor could do to improve communication between the two of you?

RQ3: What do students need from a mentorship experience?

This question is specifically about the mentoring experience in the department (what the mentees are receiving in terms of professional development, networking, practicum support, etc.).

In general, what do you want out of a mentorship experience?

- What specific elements of a mentoring experience would you need in order to view it as effective/successful?
- What areas do you wish the mentorship covered, that it does not?
- How has your mentor supported you in finding things like practicum or job opportunities? How about networking opportunities?

These questions are about the mentee's relationship and connection with their faculty mentor outside of professional development.

What would you want to get out of a relationship with a faculty mentor?

- What do you value in a mentoring relationship?
- o In what ways are you getting that now?
- In what ways did your mentor try to build relationship with you throughout your mentoring experience?
- o What kinds of activities would you like that we could encourage among faculty?

If your faculty mentor does not meet your needs, where else do you turn to for support? How has that gone?

How, if at all, has your relationship with your faculty mentor changed over time?

- Will you carry these relationships beyond your time here at Gillings? Why or why not?

What suggestions do you have for strengthening the mentorship in the department?

Is there anything else you would like to share or anything you like to discuss? Or any questions you have that I may not have asked?

BIPOC Focus Group Guide

RQ1: How do students feel about how mentorship is currently being carried out in the department?

This question is specifically about the mentoring experience structure (what the mentees are receiving in terms of professional development, networking, practicum support, etc.).

How do you feel about the way in which mentoring is carried out in the department currently?

- What are your general thoughts about the mentorship you are receiving?
- What do you expect from your faculty mentor in terms of professional development?
- How, if at all, has the online format impacted your mentorship experience?
- What preparation or tools do you think a mentor and mentee should receive to engage in a successful mentoring experience?

These questions are about the mentee's relationship and connection with the faculty mentor outside of professional development.

What are your interactions like with your current faculty mentor?

- What do you like about their mentoring style? Are your specific needs being met? Please provide an example.
- If your specific needs are not being met, what suggestions do you have for how your faculty mentor could be a better mentor for you and other students they will work with in the future?
- What support, if any, have you received from your faculty mentor over the last year, specifically keeping in mind the pandemic and racialized violence people of color have been experiencing?
- What are some obstacles or challenges, if any, you've encountered in your relationship with your faculty mentor?
- Can you explain how comfortable you would feel approaching your faculty mentor about micro/macroaggressions? How about issues related to equity and inclusion more broadly?

How has the communication between you and your faculty mentor been like?

- Is there anything you think your faculty mentor could do to improve communication between the two of you?

- What communication styles/tactics that your faculty mentor has employed do you find most helpful?
- How has the virtual format of this year has affected your communication with your faculty mentor?

RQ2: What do students need from mentorship programs?

This question is specifically about the mentoring experience in the department (what the mentees are receiving in terms of professional development, networking, etc.).

In general, what do you want out of a mentorship experience?

- What specific elements of a mentoring experience would you need in order to see it as effective/successful?
- What areas do you wish the mentorship covered, that it does not?
- How has your mentor supported you in finding practicum or job opportunities? How about networking?

These questions are about the mentee's relationship and connection with their faculty mentor outside of professional development.

What would you want to get out of a relationship with a faculty mentor?

- What do you value in a mentoring relationship?
- o In what ways are you getting that now?
- What expectations do you have for your mentor? Do those expectations depend on the identity of the mentor?
- In what ways did your mentor try to build relationship with you throughout your mentoring experience?
- o What kinds of activities would you like that we could encourage among faculty?

(If you don't have one already) How, if at all, would having a BIPOC Faculty Mentor impact your mentorship experience?

How does having a White Faculty Mentor impact your mentorship experience?

- What kind of training do you think White faculty may need to improve the mentorship in the department?

How, if at all, have you identified BIPOC faculty mentors to support you?

- How would you describe those relationships?
- How is it the same or different from your relationship with your assigned Faculty Mentor?

If your Faculty Mentor does not meet your needs, where else do you turn to for support? How has that gone?

What suggestions do you have for strengthening the mentorship in the department?

Is there anything else you would like to share or anything you like to discuss? Or any questions you have that I may not have asked?