

THAT'S NOT MY JOB?

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What is mentorship? Why does it matter? Who truly needs it? In higher education, mentorship is defined as the opportunity for students to build positive relationships with faculty and gain the knowledge and insight needed to navigate and overcome academic challenges (Redmond, 1990, as cited in Strayhorn & Terrell, 2007, p. 70). This approach is particularly vital for minority students facing unique issues in higher education, often revealing and addressing supports they may not have recognized they needed, such as being told they matter (Love, 2019, p. 2). Students of color are more likely to be subject to hostile environments in higher education due to race-based stressors (Griffith et al., 2019). To this end, mentorship is not just important for college students; it's critical.

"SHE'S MORE THAN A MENTOR"

For the past four years, I have worked as the campus-based coordinator for the college pipeline program, EdUCATE. EdUCATE is designed to matriculate students who want to be future educators. The purpose of the program is to not only address the national teacher shortage but also to find students who want to give back to their communities through education. EdUCATE aims to identify and cultivate future educators who inspire and encourage their students, potentially becoming the positive role models that they may have once lacked. Most of our students are from marginalized groups, are first-generation university students, and come from urban communities. All of our students want to make a change by positively disrupting the education system. Although I was hired to be the pipeline coordinator, most of my students would consider me to be their mentor. As a result, mentorship has become a large part of who I am and even more of who I want to continue to be. This is not because of what is being asked of me but because it is what I recognize that my students need the most. Over the past year, my eyes have been opened to the power of mentorship and why it's especially important for students of color as they navigate Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs). As the pipeline coordinator, I provide support for each student in our program throughout their time in college. This consists of providing useful tips for their academic, social, and professional lives. As listed in my job description, my role consists of:

1. Being responsible for the design and program development, matriculation, near-peer mentoring of students, and overall support and navigation for the pipeline program,
2. Supporting the students in their college transitions, matriculation, and retention, and
3. Acting as the single point of contact for all activities of the program.

My role in higher education has expanded significantly over time. My students' perception of me, reflected by the phrase "She's more than a mentor" written on my office whiteboard, directly illustrates this evolution. This statement captures not only how I've come to view my work but, more importantly, how my students view me. For many of my students, my role has evolved to be not only a mentor but also a mother figure, a safe space, and even, at times, a friend. This is the



part of my role that is not listed in the job description. But it's also the part of my job that has become the most meaningful. With students who are more likely to face race-based stressors due to their identities, I make it a point to show up for them enthusiastically so that they don't have to face those stressors alone.



My journey to working in higher education began unknowingly as I pursued my master's degree. During this time, I was also hired to work as a graduate assistant for the EdUCATE program. I was given the task to meet one on one with the five students we had in our program. Four years later, we now serve 37 students on our campus, whom I meet with every week to direct them to the appropriate departments for support, hold weekly check-ins, provide homework support, and even sometimes lend a listening ear. Some may say that, within my role, I do a lot. I've also come to learn that some students may even argue that I don't do *enough*. It's funny. Even in those moments, I still find myself thinking, "If not me, then who?"

Each day, the expectation within my role does not change. But the way that I approach mentorship seems to grow by the day. Without mentorship, many students would be left to face their educational journeys in a way that may lead them to feel alone, unseen, or unheard. Pinar (2019) makes an argument that "teachers are not responsible for student learning; students are" (p. 128). I've come to learn that, although students choose the paths they want to take in life, teachers make a significant impact on their educational experiences and not only teachers but also all individuals who work directly with students. The relationship between mentors and their students is proven to have a positive impact on their overall student success (Strayhorn & Terrell, 2007). It is not uncommon for students of color to struggle with feeling a sense of belonging while at PWIs. In spaces where students are not predominantly represented, having a mentor is crucial, given that minority students who do not have role models may find succeeding in higher education difficult (Blackwell, 1989, and Patitu & Terrell, 1997, as cited in Strayhorn & Terrell, 2007).

I'm grateful to be in the position where I can meet my students with sincerity and care by embracing the moments that are both unexpected and unscripted yet essential. To me, that's what matters the most; these are the aspects that have become the most meaningful. I look forward to talking with students about the importance of professionalism and networking with faculty and staff while also appreciating the more difficult conversations about personal struggles or even being someone they can vent to or a shoulder to cry on. The depth of mentorship was something I hadn't considered before this role. Up until being hired for this position, I had navigated life without very many intentional mentors, especially during my collegiate years. Now that I am in this position, I aim to show up for my students—my mentees—in the best ways possible and to ensure that each of them knows their value and feels seen, especially after expected or unexpected shortcomings.

When I think about it, the scripted elements of working in higher education are not what motivate me to come into the office each morning. Each day, I'm expected to arrive on time, dress professionally, meet with students, send the necessary emails, and engage with prospective students for our program. Although this part of my role is manageable, the heart of my job stems from unexpected daily visits from my students. It's the unscripted aspects of my job that make me love what I do, and they are what I believe my students need the most. Today, this has even expanded to occasional and even more regular visits from students outside of the EdUCATE program. These are the students who may stop by the Thinkspace (where my office is located) and

become curious about where all of the commotion is coming from (my mentees tend to be exceptionally noisy). A few are even friends with some of my mentees and now make it a point to stop by just to say “What’s up” or seek advice. When scheduled check-ins organically shift into hour-long discussions about our lives and most embarrassing moments, my role feels more worthwhile. During my first year as a new hire, I was met with a variety of challenges that often left me between a rock and a hard place. Nonetheless, these challenges were ones that I decided to embrace and strategize ways to overcome, for me and own sake, of course, but especially for *them*.

I’m going to tell you a story about mentorship. The good, the struggles, and the boundaries. I’ll specifically be focusing on an encounter I had with one of my students that significantly impacted the way I now view the mentorship within my role and my approach with my students. There’s a saying that goes, “You can do 99 things for someone, and all they’ll remember is the one thing you didn’t do.” It wasn’t until I began doing this work that I began to think about this quote more often. How is mentorship truly defined? Where do the boundaries lie? There was this student; we’re going to call him Malik. Malik was a transfer student in our program. He was excited about being a teacher and even more excited about being at a new school—at least at first. He was thrilled to find out that he had a mentor assigned to him. But I believe Malik saw me more as a personal *assistant*. When Malik was having his way, he was a joy to be around. That was until he wasn’t. When he didn’t have his way, he would go from 0 to 100 in a matter of seconds. When he was irate, *everyone* had to know it. In these moments, he would be adamant about finding someone to blame. One day, he woke up and decided that it was going to be me.

NO ONE EVER SAID IT’D BE EASY

Malik was a dynamic student. He would show up early, actively participate in all of his classes, and would never hesitate to come to our meetings with several questions related to the education program and our campus. In the beginning, Malik would leave our meetings feeling confident in his ability to navigate the new space. He was enthused to become a future educator and wanted to make sure that he moved seamlessly into his desired profession. One day, Malik walked into our meeting with what felt like a gloomy cloud over him. He was having a hard time back home and was starting to feel like an outsider amongst his classmates.

“They’re always staring at me. I don’t even want to go in there anymore.”

Looking down at the clock, I realized that it was between the 11:40 class sessions, “Malik, are you in class right now?”

He looked up at me with a fake smile. “Yes, and that’s why I’m in here now. Can’t *you* take care of it?”

I was perplexed. What exactly did he want me to do? Surely, I could reach out to his professors about how he was feeling uncomfortable, but to me, that felt like overstepping. The last thing I ever wanted to do was speak *for* my students.

“I’m sorry to hear that your classmates are making you feel uncomfortable. I thi—”

“I didn’t say that. I’m not uncomfortable. I never told you I was uncomfortable. I’m just done with that class because those people are weird. Everyone here is weird! Why are you assuming I’m uncomfortable? You know. It’s fine. I don’t think you can help me.”

At this point, Malik wasn’t in the space to tolerate a response from me. He had made up his mind that I wasn’t going to tell him what he wanted to hear. Thinking back on it, this could

have partially been on me. I didn't intend to offend him. I'd just never dealt with any of my students walking out of a class before!



The following day, Malik returned to my office in what appeared to be a calm, cool, and collected manner.

"Hey, Malik, how are things going for you today?"

"They're good. I didn't come in here to talk about yesterday. I went back to class. It was fine. I'm not going to talk to my professor about it. She can't change the people in there."

"It's good to know that today is going better. I really hate to hear that yesterday went that way. As you said, we don't have to get into it much, but I do think it would help if you talked with your professor about why you left. You're a great student. I wouldn't want her to get the wrong impression."

Malik's face seemed to light up a bit. He fixed his posture in his seat and began to let out a small laugh. "You know, you're right! Let me email her right now!" He looked at me with a grin. "Also, I need transportation to go to field. It starts tomorrow."

"Tomorrow? Wow, that came quickly. Have you engaged with your professor about this? There's a carpool system that you can likely utilize."

This was the beginning of what became a nearly impossible situation to diffuse. I wish I could say that it started and ended in my office that day, but it didn't. As I write this scenario, I'm now starting to see why Malik grew to be so frustrated with me. I was so focused on sticking to the script that I was overlooking the signals he was sending my way. If he didn't like how his classmates were treating him, why would he also want to be in their car? Who would want to ask a favor from someone whom you feel doesn't welcome or acknowledge your presence?

"Um. No one told me about that. Why didn't *you* tell me about that? Field starts tomorrow. If I don't have a ride, I just won't go."

His energy began to shift again. Malik began to repeatedly take big and loud sighs as he packed up his things. "You know, Sydnie, you didn't prepare me for this. Why didn't we talk about this? I've never done any of this before. Isn't this what you're supposed to do?"

For the first time in a long time, I didn't have anything to say. But then I suddenly had everything to say! I was frustrated. Sydnie, breathe. Don't take it personally. Pause. Slow down. He's upset. He's underprepared, and he's taking it out on you. Problem solved. Don't fuel the fire. *Fix it.*

"Why don't we draft a message together? In the meantime, we can look for alternative transportation options. I don't work with the field placement department; I would've mentioned all of this to you if that were the case. We're going to figure this out. You'll be at field tomorrow."

I didn't realize it at the time, but I was falling into what many become guilty of when helping others—making someone else's problem my own.

A week later, the issue resurfaced. Once again, Malik didn't have transportation for his field placement and came to me to figure it out for him. But this time I was prepared. I knew that his wish for me to figure out the solution would become a regular expectation. That was *not* my job?

"Malik, I learned that there's a transportation form for students to fill out for transportation arrangements. Did you see that in your email? Did you fill it out?"

Malik rolled his eyes. "No. Because you didn't send it to me."

"I understand that. But I wouldn't be the one who sent it to you. It would come from the field placement office."

"I didn't see an email." I watched as his frustration began to rise. "Isn't this *your* job? Weren't you a PK-5 major? This program is the worst. You don't even do what you're supposed to do!"

"Malik, I understand your frustration. But no, that is not my job. I'm not responsible for sending you information that comes from other departments. There's still time to complete the form."

"Yeah, I won't be meeting with you anymore. This program is horrible."

Malik walked out.

That was our last meeting.

Reflecting on the circumstances, I believe that Malik was having struggles beyond what he was disclosing to me. As a transfer student, he was familiar with a number of different campuses and what it felt like to be unsupported. He had also experienced support beyond what some might have defined as support. Malik spoke of this regularly by saying things like, "At my other school, they would've just done this for me," and "The school I came from would tell me things before I even had to inquire about them." His comments would feel targeted. I would take his comments personally. I know that I shouldn't have, but I did. I had never had a student like Malik. In my mind, we were offering him an immense amount of support—support that *I* didn't receive during my undergraduate years at Miami. I think it's safe to say that Malik struggled with how he defined mentorship and support. In his eyes, you were either with him or against him. And, if things weren't going his way, then you couldn't have had his best interests at heart. He believed that *I* didn't have his best interest at heart. I believe that he felt that I didn't think he mattered. That wasn't true. I carried this situation with me for a while. I talked about it every opportunity I had to get things off my chest. I tried to make sense of it all. It left me feeling as if I had failed, failed to meet him where he was, failed to help him understand the situation, failed to communicate my role, and failed by not letting it get to me. It took me some time to realize that his reactions were not reflective of me and how I did my job. The truth of the matter is that they were reflective of what far too many students have become accustomed to—that the system will *always* be against them.

This is the other side of mentorship that is difficult to make sense of. How can you convince someone who's been hurt that you really do care? How do you navigate when it's appropriate or necessary to say, "No," or when it's time to push for accountability instead of stepping in and searching for the magic eraser to make it all go away? Where do you draw the line? Considering how the situation ended with Malik, I still found myself pondering what I could have done differently and how I could have avoided the conflict that erupted so rapidly. The truth of the matter is that there is no perfect solution to avoid conflict. But how you respond to it makes all the difference. It was important for me not to lose sight of why my role still mattered—why mentorship still mattered. If anything, this situation was a prime example of why there is a great need for students to feel supported. And, furthermore, why it's absolutely critical for students of color to feel seen. In a society where the color of your skin marks you as disposable, the idea of mattering is essential (Love, 2019, p. 2). I want all of my students to feel empowered by all they can achieve and to know that, even in a society where there are many things against them, I never will be one of them. But, while doing that, it's also just as important for me not to lose myself in that process. It's okay to not be able to do or *fix* it all.

WHY MENTORSHIP MATTERS

Navigating what my role consists of outside of, alongside, what is expected of me has been a journey that I learn and grow from every day. From a classroom perspective, Vaughn et al. (2021) refers to this as “teacher adaptability” (p. 186), which is when a teacher uses knowledge of a student’s background to modify instruction so that their teaching methods are culturally responsive (Ladson-Billings, 1995, as cited in Vaughn et al., 2021). These modifications make room for teachers to meet students where they are by acknowledging where they come from. Considering that I’m not a teacher, this practice led me to think of another approach stemming from this practice that applies to my role as a mentor, “mentorship adaptability.” Mentorship adaptability is when a mentor is intentional about their engagement with their students and seeks knowledge about the backgrounds of their students to ensure that they feel both seen and heard while also making efforts to meet them where they are to enhance their success as collegiates. This approach would be similar to “teacher knowledge of students” in the way that mentors would make strides to connect with their students from a lens of genuine care (Vaughn et al., 2021, p. 187). Within higher education, there is a need for institutional efforts led by faculty and staff to support Black students (Griffith et al., 2019)—efforts to reduce race-related stressors and foster more inclusive campus environments.

Black students often feel unsupported at PWIs, and this substantially affects their journeys to success. This is largely due to race-related stressors that Black students are more likely to face compared to their White counterparts (Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007, and Harper et al., 2011, as cited in Griffith et al., 2019). In addition to facing these struggles, not having a safe space to retreat to makes these circumstances incredibly challenging, leaving students to struggle not only academically but also emotionally and socially. These “race-related stressors” (Griffith et al., 2019) can be the result of isolated and cumulative discriminatory experiences, which can be cognitively and emotionally taxing. In fact, there is inequitable treatment across the education system for students from non-dominant races and cultures. And, although this dilemma cannot be addressed solely by the curriculum (Timberlake et al., 2017), mentorship can be transformative. Strong mentorship can create environments where students feel valued in spaces where they aren’t represented as strongly (Morgan et al., 2020). Creating schools that are equitable, diverse, and socially just goes beyond K-12; higher education needs radical change as well, especially at PWIs, where Black students are subject to navigating racially hostile environments negatively impacting their persistence, academic motivation, matriculation, graduation, and sense of belonging (Johnson-Ahorlu, 2013, Museus et al., 2018, and Smith et al., 2011, as cited in Allen, 2025).

My desire is for more individuals to understand that mentorship is a necessity, as it helps to alleviate what may feel like lonely struggles for Black students, especially, and helps them find success (Strayhorn & Terrell, 2007). It’s not explicitly expected for me to foster relationships with my students to help them find success, but to me, mentorship would be incomplete without this aspect. As I was hired to support our students as they matriculate and navigate college, being there for them emotionally has largely superseded their areas of need for support. This is why, despite how challenging it may be, intentional mentorship has never been optional but an absolute necessity.

As for Malik and me? Well, I learned from him that, in this work, there will be times where tensions rise in situations where even care won’t cut it. This is where I believe mentorship adaptability comes into play. No one ever said that mentorship would be easy. There’s no perfect



solution to avoid conflict, but I do believe that there's a way to balance these situations as they come about. Moving forward, I am more intentional in learning more about what my students have come from so that I can meet them where they are. This requires adaptability. Some approaches prove to be successful, and others fall short of meeting their expectations. I have come to terms with the reality that not all interactions will go as well as planned. I have also made the active decision to learn from each of those moments. It's all part of the journey, theirs and my own. One of the major parts of mentorship is going through the motions and doing what you can, when you can. I had done all that I felt I could do to support Malik, yet he still made the decision not to return to the program. Him feeling as though I had fallen short of my responsibilities was something out of my control. Being adaptable in this work includes admitting when situations become out of your control. I don't think Malik's final decision was a reflection on me or how well I do my job. But it was a reflection of what he presumed to be another system that had failed him. I've learned from that situation the importance of making room to hear my students out while putting my personal opinions to the side and also remaining mindful of the systems that are against them, the ones that are against *us*. Although I no longer work with Malik, I still wish him the absolute best. My desire to show up for students with authentic care hasn't changed, even knowing that they might not consider my approach to be *enough*. And, in those moments when I fail, as we all do at times, I strive to take that as another opportunity to grow. Because, in this work, growing from failure is a choice I've found to be worth taking, especially for the sake of being there for my students, the ones who make what I do most meaningful.

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