CHAPTER 7

# The Importance of New Paths in Mentoring for Graduate Students in Their Search for Academic Opportunities After Graduation: An Auto-Ethnography

*Paula Belló*

The need for mentoring in higher education does not finish at the end of graduate studies, for students in general, and for minority students in American universities, in particular. It is well known from the literature the particular difficulties international students might face in these academic settings. Instances of difficulty can include building professional networks, understanding research-academic culture, getting protection from harmful situations, and obtaining specific career guidance.

The very competitive international job market sets enormous challenges to everyone competing for a job post at different levels of the academic hierarchy. These demands can result insurmountable for international students, who, among other limitations (lack of culture-specific knowledge, differences in methodology in networking, difficulties, and

P. Belló (✉)
Académica de la Escuela de Pedagogías en Inglés, Universidad de Talca, Linares, Chile
e-mail: paula.bello@utalca.edu



D. Chapman and A. Wilkerson (eds.), *From Student to Scholar*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-42081-9_7

limitation with the English language) need special paperwork and/or sponsorship to work legally in the United States of America (USA).

Therefore, alternatives to the lack of mentoring on the side of the professorship can be peer mentoring and mentoring circles. These experiences have been discussed in the literature with varied results (Colvin & Ashman, 2010; Darwin & Palmer, 2009). In academia, experienced graduate students might be in the position to offer mentoring to their peers, who, in turn, can further mentor each other. Thus, mentoring can become beneficial for mentors and mentees and open a path of peer collaboration, which can be multidimensional and very rewarding in the future.

The autoethnographic narrative serves as a means of expression and empowerment of the writer (Pivato, 1996). Thus, experiences can be analyzed at multiple layers of consciousness, connecting personal experiences to the social culture of both author and reader (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). This narrative intends to share personal experiences within the challenging world of academia in the USA.

## On Becoming a Ph.D. Student

When I arrived at the University of Central Florida (UCF) as a new student in the Ph.D. in Education program, Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) track, in 2013, I was a nontraditional one. This means that after finishing my studies I finally understood that, as a foreigner from South America in her forties, who had worked as a teacher of English for 20 years and who had abandoned a well-established job to pursue her dreams of finishing graduate studies at the level of Ph.D., the general perception was that I belonged to a minority group of senior doctoral students.

However, by pursuing doctoral studies, I was not only going to fulfill my dream of participating in the academic life of an American higher education institution, but I was also going to participate in academia actively by having a part-time job as a graduate teaching assistant. Arrangements had been made so that I would be working with an assistant professor, whom at the moment of my arrival, I had not had the chance of meeting or learning much about. I wrongly believed that the Ph.D. in Education Program at UCF was only going to require my involvement as a student, i.e., attending classes and accomplishing assignments. Different from my experience as an M.A. student, this time, I was also going to fulfill extra

duties as a graduate teaching assistant. Nevertheless, however thoroughly I could have prepared for the new experience, it would have never been sufficient for the reality that I was going to encounter after starting my studies.

I recognized that the lack of preparedness regarding different aspects related to university life in the United States, the specific work and research carried out by professors, and the culture of the institution was my fault. I also recognized my naïve attitude and my erroneous belief that my excitement and love for academia were going to supply any lack of deeper and more complete information. Nevertheless, today, memories of those first moments of my doctoral student life still live in me. The more I reflect on them and how I learned from direct experience, the more I can elaborate on their meaning and importance in my life today.

One morning, I arrived earlier than usual to my supervisor's office. Soon after my arrival, a senior professor whose office was opposite to the one I was at, came in very upset looking for my supervisor, who had not arrived yet. She immediately told me her mother had passed the night before and wanted to share the news. After my supervisor's arrival, we pitied the professor for her loss, and that was the first time my supervisor introduced her as her dearest colleague and mentor. I recognize I had heard about "mentorship" before during my M.A. studies, but I had not got deeper into the topic. In my lack of understanding, I believed "mentorship" to be some kind of help that someone with seniority offered a novice in academic or professional activities. However, that informal conversation with those professors was my introduction to "mentoring" at UCF, where the academic culture installed included peer mentorship among academics. At that moment, I started my discoveries. Associate professors had created the culture of mentoring new assistant professors who had recently accessed the faculty force, and specifically the college of education's faculty. The senior professor had participated in the search committee that elected my supervisor. Afterward, and for a year, the senior professor had been mentoring my supervisor in her process of adaptation to the new institution and her job. I always remember my supervisor's face of satisfaction and relief when she confirmed with a big smile, that the senior professor was "Her Mentor."

Recapitulating on the topic of mentoring, it was historically described as a relationship between academicians (or business managers) and their students (or newcomers into the business world) thanks to which there was a slow development in the latter's responsibility, self-direction, and

successful decision- making (Blackwell, 1982; Darwin & Palmer, 2009; Healy & Welchert, 1990). Some researchers studied mentoring to support adult development and the realization of the mentees' dreams and visions of their future lives (Valadez & Duran, 1991). This development could usually be achieved by means of building shared wisdom and connections with colleagues and providing protection from harmful situations and clear guidance (Levinson, 1977). Wilbur (1987) and Zey (1985) described the benefits of mentoring relationships in different settings, both predicting career success and newcomers' adjustment to new work settings. Moreover, Zey (1985) had already posed a particular interest in establishing mentoring programs to support minorities in new work or academic settings in his seminal work.

## Who Becomes a Mentor?

As I have stated in this story, I had been assigned to work as a graduate teaching assistant to an assistant professor who had been working in that position for a year. She became my supervisor from that moment on. She used to call me her research assistant, basically because of the tasks she had assigned me to do, including data organization, filing, and analysis. Assistantships were assigned by the College of Education at UCF and provided clear benefits for assistants. Some of these were particularly helpful since they provided a source of funding, which was fundamental for international students. Assistantships mainly support faculty in their teaching demands, especially of those assistant professors who are adapting to their new work setting. Supervisors and assistantships could be assigned according to demand, but mentorship relationships could only develop from those relationships between supervisors and supervisees who experience affinity and the conviction that academic work can be better carried out by means of mentorship.

When did my supervisor become my mentor? I think it was the result of development, as well as her decision soon after our work together started. The moment she might have felt her relationship with her academic "supervisor" started to change after her first year at the institution, she named herself my mentor. At that moment, more academic opportunities appeared for us to show our work together. Departing from her work with students in the classroom that I observed, we developed presentations and literature research on topics of shared interests. These included

narrative pedagogy, reflective, reflexive practices, and dialogic interactions, both face to face and in online classes.

Long afternoons of shared work in a shared space, helped my supervisor and I have intimate conversations about our previous studies, experiences, and familiar backgrounds. Identifying herself as a Latina of Puerto Rican origin, she expressed her empathy toward me: "I think that the fact that you are a non-traditional, Latin American student, brings us together as supervisor and supervisee," she commented. One afternoon, while discussing a presentation at a seminar, where she had invited me to present with her, she revealed her thoughts and state of mind. Emphasizing the fact that I was going to overcome the obstacles and difficulties related to the presentation, she stated forcefully: "You will do it successfully. I know it as your supervisor….and as your mentor." Our affinity might have enforced this mentorship relationship of mutual understanding as "non-traditional." On the contrary, studies conducted to examine cross-gender and cross-race relationships between mentors and minority mentees (Goldstein, 1979; Morrison & Von Glinow, 1990), offered findings signaling cross-gender and cross-race mentoring relationships to be the least beneficial for women and minorities.

## Mentors and Mentees Benefit from Mentoring

In general, mentors–mentees' relationships have been proved successful for both (Burke & McKeen, 1997; Darwin & Palmer, 2009; De Vries, 2005; Ehrich, Hansford, & Tennent, 2004; Higgins, 2001; Kram, 1985). Benefits for the mentors have been investigated since the seminal work developed by Kram (1985), who studied how senior executives mentoring protégées developed a sense of competence and self-respect in their work. Further research in academia has reported improvement in professional development, self-confidence, and satisfaction with the academic career (Burke & McKeen, 1997; Darwin & Palmer, 2009: De Vries, 2005; Ehrich et al., 2004; Higgins, 2001). Moreover, the mentoring relationship can increase research productivity and professional recognition for mentors if the mentees fulfill their jobs as expected (Johnson, 2002).

Aguilar-Gaxiola, Norris, Carter, and Reed (1984) analyzed four dominant roles of the traditional mentor, namely role-modeling, professional socialization, advocacy, and emotional support, areas that are being discussed along with this work. In my experience, my mentor introduced

me to the rest of the well-known faculty at the college; and recommended which seminars and conferences to apply for. She also granted me access to academic groups and activities, such as proposal presentations and dissertation defenses, where she demonstrated her knowledge and skills acquired along with her academic career. More importantly, however, were our interactions on different topics of common interest, namely our qualitative research projects, and possible new pathways to be followed in research, mainly with teacher candidates and in-service teachers. Her advice on how I could best conduct research and tasks were also very much appreciated, as well as her emotional support in moments of melancholy when homesickness affected me.

Emotional support, especially when mentees experiment feelings of sadness, isolation, or homesickness (in the case of international students), becomes a mentor's most valuable job. When they go beyond advocacy and defending mentees' legal rights, to care for the mentee as a person whose well-being in new and demanding environments is fundamental for the success of the task started by both, it is possible to start moving from pure helpfulness and guidance to real mentorship in its full meaning. The development of agency in the mentoring activity was evident from the beginning, as well as my mentor's positioning of ownership in the mentoring role. Erikson, cited in Healy and Welchert (1990), stated that mentoring helped mentors fulfill their educational needs as they transmitted knowledge, experience, and advice to mentees. It also helped them transcend from their everyday preoccupations in their jobs to care for and support someone else develop in the academic world.

As time progressed, I understood the benefits of learning from the job I had been assigned, as well as from my supervisor's role. At the beginning of my doctoral studies, I felt I needed to be a perfect student, earn As in every assignment, and read every single article assigned, even more than once. However, my supervisor and mentor warned me against this attitude at the beginning of the first semester and tried to help me understand these were self-imposed demands that I did not need to comply with. I remember one of our dialogues about the reading of assigned articles and how I still needed to reread them looking for some specific information. Her response was emphatic: "No, there is no time for that in grad school!".

She was right! My mentor was very precise in clarifying how deceitful self-demands can be, especially because an increase in student workload, did not guarantee success in the tasks being accomplished. After deep

reflection, it would be much more important to consider that graduate students focus on specific topics of interest that will probably be included in their dissertations, and look for opportunities to participate more in academic activities with their mentors, including dissertation defenses, academic presentations, research projects design, data collection and analysis, and of course article writing. It is recommendable that, as beginner academicians, graduate students who hold graduate teaching assistantships understand their positions as a springboard and the best opportunity possible to peek into a future academician life. Carter, cited in Valadez and Duran (1991), suggested that the most successful and beneficial mentor–mentee relationships commonly occur between faculty and students who share common goals, perceptions, and views of the world.

## Mentor–Mentee Relationships and Shared Goals

So, were there shared goals, perceptions, and views of the world between my supervisor and me? In previous conversations, we had agreed that our backgrounds had common points; however, how about our goals for the future? It took me sometime between the first and the second semesters to understand the work, demands, and objectives of assistant professors in general, and of my supervisor in particular. The tenure-track position poses specific demands that are well known to academicians, and they include participation in research projects, grant search, and grant applications to secure funds, publications in scholarly journals, plus the thorough yearly evaluations in which peer academicians and authorities participate. However, the news was that, my supervisor was not only under the pressure of those requirements, but also her plight was complexed as she belonged to an underrepresented minority faculty group. At that moment, the mentoring culture established at the university became more apparent to me. At the same time, understanding the university's population composition was fundamental, and not only the students' population distribution but also the faculty's. UCF's website (College Factual, 2019) announces that enrollment has increased by over sixty percent from 2000 to 2018, and the student enrollment level has reached 68,571 students. However, both the students' and the faculty's population cannot precisely be considered diverse, since an amount of 32,754 students (i.e., 47.80%) of the total population is "White." Moreover, "International" students amount to 2719 (i.e., 4%) of the total student population (College Factual, 2019).

In regard to faculty, the university reports that nearly 20% are minorities (College Factual, 2019). This was a crucial situation for a tenure-track assistant professor belonging to a minority group of professors whose efforts amounted to double of any other academicians in the same hierarchical position. I remember that our most common conversation topics revolved around: (a) difficulties minority or newly arrived faculty experimented to find acceptance into research teams, (b) difficulties to find colleagues with common lines of research to organize research projects, and (c) difficulties to find insertion into writing teams to produce articles on those research topics to fulfill the required number of publications in the tenure career. On the other hand, I personally had two main objectives at the moment of arrival at the institution. One of them was to complete my Ph.D. program successfully and graduate from it within the stipulated time frame. The second objective was to fulfill my duties as a graduate teaching assistant successfully. Later I learned that both these objectives were joined together since their fulfillment was necessary to keep my student status and stipend.

It was clear that our objectives coincided with our desire to do our jobs successfully, have access to a new academic community, and secure a successful door for a desired job in the future. However, how long could these common points persist if the time frame for the assistantship was three years maximum? Could the mentoring relationship be extended beyond that? Along the three years of my doctoral studies and my work as a graduate teaching assistant, I could barely stop and think about these issues. Therefore, when the time came for the completion of my degree, the closure of my job as an assistant, and the farewell to the mentor–mentee relationship with my supervisor, I realized that the mentoring of doctoral students is an intensive task which might have a short life. Even when it is true that there is an impact of the mentoring relationship on the mentees, as well as on the mentors (Kram, 1985), the special relationship established between supervisors and supervisees (who also become mentors and mentees) is prone to lessen in intensity as the everyday work diminishes and finishes.

## Objectives and Needs of Minority Students in Academia

Throughout the sharing of my lived experiences, I have reflected on how much more difficult it would have been to enhance my networking at the college of education and beyond had I not had the support of my mentor

in my socialization. Moreover, her assistance in helping me understand the new research-academic culture, for which I existed in, opened my eyes to the need to rely on the help of the more knowledgeable, in this case, represented by her, my supervisor and mentor, as well as other recognized faculty at the college and university. The crucial importance of networking also gained renewed attention. Connecting with people in my area of expertise, both in higher hierarchical levels or among peers, has always been important, as well as an everyday activity carried out since the days of studying and teaching. In academia, however, it acquired relevance because a successful networking process, within the correct group and setting, can become fundamental for the desired job within academia.

During the time of my studies and our work together, my supervisor's offer of clear guidance and protection constituted a safe frame within which to operate. This became especially important when the time came to start applying for my first academic job posts. One day my mentor came to the office with what she explained was a surprise for me. It was a document with an excel chart that had been previously passed to her by her supervisor. "This chart was created by my supervisor at graduate school," she explained. "She had created it to annotate all of her applications to job posts," she added. The chart was a great example of a well-organized job search, including annotations of the job posts applied to, the interviews conducted, the campuses visited, and the job positions offers received. The application of this model proved to be valuable in my own experience, as well. Among these multiple benefits, the mentoring relationship constituted a role model to imitate in the future, and I know today that the best way to thank her would be by "passing it over" as she used to say, as she had personally done.

Despite the positive experience and efforts to keep the mentoring association and its benefits, I found it hard to keep a fluid relationship after graduation. However, the need for mentoring continues to be fundamental for newly graduated doctoral students, and mainly for minority, international students. After doctoral studies, it is expected that the previous mentor–mentee relationship, based on a supervisor–supervisee, professor–student relationship, changes, and adapts itself to a new reality. Even though mentorship had supported me in the previous stage as a doctoral student, I had to realize the paths my mentor, and I needed to follow were quite different after graduation. Whereas her demands as an assistant professor continued being the same as described before, my needs as a novice adjunct employee had changed completely. I understood it as a

natural development that our mentor–mentee relationship had to change. However, there was not a single day I have not remembered the tears cried, the dialogic interactions lived, and the lessons learned together.

I learned about the challenges of the very competitive American job market, even at the postdoctoral level, very early in my job search. Difficulties in my case included some logical limitations concerning language and accent. English is not my native language. Nevertheless, and most importantly, the need for special paperwork and sponsorship to work legally in the USA became a special constraint. This was particularly true related to the need to receive legal advice as to how to proceed with special documentation, payments, and deadlines at the United States Citizenship and Immigration Service (USCIS), information which was accessible to some people on campus, but not primarily to most of the faculty like my mentor.

The competition with American academicians who have developed the same expertise has made the job quest an incredibly challenging situation. However severe, I have always considered that being a foreigner would not diminish my possibilities to get a job in the American job market. I have prepared myself. I have studied the English language thoroughly, have studied education, and taught in various international educational institutions. As well, I have studied my native language, Spanish, at a high proficiency level, dealt with language learners in different learning settings, and been a language learner myself of both English and German as foreign languages. Moreover, I have pursued further studies, discovering new interests, skills, and passions along the way. Examples of these are my passion for researching and developing qualitative studies, especially on teacher education and teachers' job and professional development. Having become a global citizen is an asset in my academic education that has guided me to develop different kinds of mentoring relationships.

Accepting the fact that faculty mentors would not always have: (a) the complete necessary information to support their mentees to understand external pressure and conditions; (b) the existing widespread network to support their mentees' insertion in desired academic circles; or (c) the extensive time to support mentees along their career development has allowed me to think about alternative ideas to the lack of mentoring on the side of the professorship once the relationships mentor–mentees lose their "everydayness." The alternatives I would like to discuss further are those of "peer mentoring" and "mentoring circles."

## Peer Mentoring as an Alternative

I remember a landmark conversation I had with a friend of a friend, who was a master's student at that moment and came originally from Chile. He had himself gone through the process of getting his Optional Practical Training (OPT) work permit and had all the updated information in regards to the requirements and paperwork. "You have to start the process for the OPT three or four months before graduation," he explained, "so that the permit arrives around your graduation, and you can secure a job post for that matter," he asserted. This piece of advice turned out to be one of the greatest along my career. It arrived right on time to open my eyes to begin the process of the OPT work permit before my graduation. The USCIS confers the OPT work permit to F1 status students, i.e., students with a student visa. They should be studying a degree-granting program or have finished their study programs. The permit allows students to work for one year after the F1 visa expires and even longer in STEM areas, namely Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics. The main objective is that students gather practical experience related to their fields of expertise.

Heirdsfield, Walker, Walsh, and Wilss (2008) assert that peer mentoring and peer mentoring programs, in particular, grant new transition students in higher education support and guidance by students who have already developed knowledge and experience in academic settings. This support enhances new students' access to academic and social connections, affects their transition to university positively, and improves a sense of belonging, retention and skills development (Glaser, Hall, & Halperin, 2006). In different levels of education, the activity of mentoring among students has proven to be real, successful, and more influential than any other relationships established in educational settings (Colvin & Ashman, 2010; Goodlad, 1998; Heirdsfield, et al., 2008; Luczak & Kalbag, 2018). Colvin and Ashman (2010) described the roles performed by mentors as they were discussed by participants in their study on peer mentoring. These roles include: (a) connecting link: peer mentors help mentees get involved in general students' activities on campus; (b) peer leader: peer mentors develop leadership skills to motivate the development of their mentees in the academic setting, (c) learning coach: peer mentors fulfill a crucial role in student recruitment and retention within their programs of

study, (d) student advocate: peer mentors fulfill the roles of helper or liaison to support mentees with personal or academic needs, and (e) trusted friend: peer mentors offer unquestionable help in case of need.

During graduate studies, I found myself playing the roles of learning coach, student advocate, and trusted friend, especially with one of my cohort colleagues who was considerably younger than me. Whenever we had to deal with complex or demanding courses or tasks, especially those dealing with topics that were outside our area of expertise, we used to meet to face the academic demands in collaboration. The difference in age and experience offered me opportunities to mentor my classmate, and transmit her my experiences with complex projects, disciplinary routines, and work under pressure. I especially remember our meetings in the evenings, after our duties as graduate teaching assistants had finished. "This evening, my Hong Kongese roommate will come to explain the topics we did not understand in statistics last night," I announced one day, and we both breathed with relief. "Moreover, I will have to help Kim tomorrow since she cannot meet with us tonight," I added, hoping I would understand and remember the explanations to be able to pass them on to another colleague. Statistics 1 was a challenging course for scholars who had been educated as teachers of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). As such, external help was always welcomed, adding up to a chain of peer mentoring that went on from receiving information and passing it on to others who needed it. Mentoring can occur among peers of the same cohort or from different ones. There are also cases in which more advanced students mentor students lower in rank, i.e., senior students mentoring freshmen students, or graduate students mentoring undergraduate ones. In any case, this activity can be beneficial for both mentor and mentee and open a path of peer collaboration, which can be very rewarding in the future.

## Mentoring Circles: The Holmes Scholars, a "Home" for Peer/Circle, Mentoring

Collaboration among peers has been another critical pillar along with my education since I started undergraduate studies. During graduate studies, it became fundamental as a strategy to face extreme academic demands and pressure to accomplish a myriad of duties as a student, a graduate teaching assistant, and the various other tasks included within those roles. Collaborative atmospheres benefit the development of peer mentoring

among colleagues who undergo similar experiences, face similar difficulties, and seek common goals. Such is the case of the group of Holmes Scholars who belong to the Holmes Program developed at UCF. For almost thirty years, the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE) Holmes Scholars Program has supported historically underrepresented populations of students pursuing education studies at AACTE member institutions (AACTE, 2019a). The program holds a high reputation because of its contribution to the education of higher education faculty of African-American, Hispanic, Native American, Asian-American, and foreign origin. Over these years, 600 graduate students have benefited from the program, and more than 200 are employed in tenure-track and leadership positions. Moreover, it is expected that many more will benefit since the expansion of the program in 2015 when it started to support students in lower levels of education, i.e., from high school up to master's levels (AACTE, 2019b).

My supervisor and mentor also started my contact with the Holmes Scholars Program at UCF. A Holmes Scholar herself, she had participated actively in the group as a graduate student at her institution and mediated between the coordinator professor and the authorities so that I could be given the opportunity of belonging. Admission to the group came in 2014. Furthermore, it allowed me to have two very active years of mentoring support through Holmes Scholars. The group acted as an essential network, support, and reference group, conformed by graduate students "of color" as they call themselves, mainly African-American and Hispanic scholars, whose access to and retention in higher education would have been much more difficult without the support of this contention group. The University of Central Florida (2019) announces that the Holmes Scholars Program on campus works hard to: (a) diversify faculty and students in different educational settings, i.e., colleges of education, K-12 school environments, and others, (b) represent the interests of and grant a voice to the Holmes Scholars group, (c) support social and academic relationships among Holmes Scholars, and (d) sustain the mission and objectives of AACTE. An example of such support was the accommodations we were offered on campus, which were suitable to work every day, as well as to share our work, listen to and support each other, and why not start long-lasting mentoring relationships.

Darwin and Palmer (2009) explain that the dyadic model in which a mentor (usually an experienced faculty member) works together with a mentee (that can be a junior faculty member or a student) is the most

commonly applied mentoring model in higher education. However, the researchers also discuss that the availability of mentoring opportunities in diverse academic settings is quite scarce, and this fact makes this traditional relationship little auspicious. Though dyadic mentoring programs offer significant advantages to both mentors and mentees, as discussed above, the pairing can result problematic, or become difficult to carry out. Furthermore, relationships can become complicated (Darwin & Palmer, 2009).

Thus, the option of establishing relationship networks between a mentor, or multiple mentors and a group of mentees has been brought to the forefront instead. These networks would enable mentees to rely and learn from the support of one or various mentors, as well as from their peers, to understand the changing reality and needs existing more easily, both in academia and the world of work (Darwin & Palmer, 2009; de Janasz, Sullivan, & Whiting, 2003; Palermo, Hughes, & McCall, 2011). The latter refer clearly to the origin of mentoring circles in the mix of mentoring and peer-learning group strategies, emphasizing the importance of learning through user feedback and advice favored by the circles' spirit. Learning does not only come from the mentor or mentors, who transfer their knowledge, but also from the peers making mentoring multi-directional and more egalitarian (Darwin & Palmer, 2009).

Darwin (2000, 2007) and Karalis (2006) have pointed out the advantages of mentoring circles in their research publications. According to them, there are personal and institutional benefits from the practice of mentoring circles. On the one hand, individuals: (a) gain access to networks, thus reducing academic isolation, (b) obtain greater connectivity to favor team problem solving by fostering closer, richer relationships, (c) increase confidence and commitment building self-esteem, (d) develop career progression and flexibility (e) acquire and share knowledge, (f) engender diversity of opinion, and (g) understand institutions' systems, culture, and organization. On the other hand, institutions also offer and receive benefits from mentoring circles as they collaborate in (a) supporting individuals build confidence in the workplace, (b) changing stereotypes, and (c) developing and transforming the culture of the workplace.

The Holmes Scholars group offer the innovative approach of mentoring circles to its members with a coordinator who plays the role of a "multiple mentor" for each one of us, and also with a structure in which senior scholars approach the junior ones to offer support, guidance, and the

opportunity to speak up for our own desires and positionalities. Nevertheless, most importantly, I value the multiple directionalities of mentoring options since the mentoring activity transcends beyond formal circles and mentoring structures. My relationship with my colleague and coursemate Kim, who was always finding opportunities for collaboration outside of our formal class called "Collaboration," was an example: "We can present our work on collaboration between scholars in the next Holmes Scholars conference on diversity" she told me one morning. "How about meeting two or three mornings this week?" she continued. "I will explain how we can prepare a more appropriate PowerPoint presentation." She certainly knew the nuances of such presentations within the Holmes Scholars Program since she had been a member longer. "Moreover, our coordinator's advice will help us a lot in the preparation." The coordinator, an experienced scholar, was the most consulted Holmes Scholar on campus. She guided the whole group once a month, creating a space for self and group reflection, as well as for communication among peer scholars.

During my years at UCF, those meetings were the perfect setting in which the scholars could further connect with each other, as my colleague and I had done thanks to sharing the offices where we worked every day. Opportunities appeared to pass the experiences lived and their teachings forward. A recurrent topic at those meetings was the scholars' dissertation processes and their unique nuances, needs, and obstacles. Thus, the Holmes Scholars Program at UCF and other universities, such was the case of the Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University (FAMU), made it a priority to mentor the scholars through the dissertation process by means of organizing collaborative "dissertation retreats." Those meetings became exciting opportunities for enlarging the benefits of mentoring circles while emphasizing the contact with Holmes Scholars colleagues from different educational institutions. Many academic conversations as the ones with my colleague Amanda were favored then when we could both have "dialogic interactions" (Gergen & Davis, 2003) about the needs we had to solve to find a definitive path for our dissertations. Little did I know then, that this enriching connection was going to survive the years and distances, so that this same colleague would offer me opportunities to write in collaboration to continue learning how to navigate academia and its demands.

## Some Lessons Learned

Though I am far from being an expert in mentoring, I hope my autoethnographic narrative can be enlightening for graduate students who are just beginning or about to begin their academic journeys. First of all, prospective graduate students need to prepare thoroughly before starting studies at any institution. Even when students might have chosen a well-known institution, graduate schools have their own requirements, culture, and opportunities that students need to know about beforehand. Another critical piece of information would be to know how assistantships are assigned and if the institution supports a mentoring culture. As remarked above, it is not always evident that supervisors–supervisees will become mentors–mentees. However, it is always good to know whether the professors in the institution are prepared for offering such opportunities to students. Whenever possible, graduate students should embrace any mentoring opportunity from faculty as it is a unique way to learn to navigate academia with the least harm possible. Graduate students may have excellent opportunities to accomplish much more than just graduate courses work, and those opportunities need to be taken advantage of since the first day.

Graduate students will undoubtedly benefit from enhancing their networking. Therefore, it is fundamental to meet every professor in the college, including those outside their field of expertise. By enhancing networking circles, graduate students increase their opportunities to participate in research projects, in which their supervisors or mentors might or not participate. This activity becomes fundamental in their education as future researchers, but also as future presenters of their own research studies results. This is why it is recommendable to keep informed of seminars, congresses, and professional meetings where research studies can be discussed or learned from, as well as; networking can be enhanced. Graduate students can prepare for mentoring as much as possible beforehand. A brief search can unravel a myriad of materials for self-preparation so that it becomes easier to recognize, analyze, and spread the potentialities and benefits of mentoring among the population under their influence. It would also be advisable that graduate students enhance every mentoring opportunity, be it peer mentoring or mentoring circles so that this culture be spread as much as possible in their institutions and benefit as many students as possible.

## Conclusion

Beyond granting me access to academic circles and remarkable knowledge about my field of expertise, my graduate studies opened my eyes to the knowledge of myself through a continuous process of self-reflection. This narrative helped me understand my experience, elaborate the process of career decision- making and redefine the direction toward the future of my academic life, considering my positionality and autonomy developed along the path of having had so many enriching mentoring experiences. Opening my eyes to diversification in this path was fundamental to take advantage from new perspectives in mentoring and apply my learning process to become more productive in my academic career, while I sowed a path with mentoring opportunities for others who would also flourish thanks to positive mentoring and learning experiences.

Kram (2004) in Darwin and Palmer (2009) refers to the evidence existing that learning is fostered when individuals work together with supervisors, professors, senior managers, and peers. Thus, Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of learning in social settings with the presence of both, more knowledgeable individuals and peers learning together (Wertsch, 1985), offers a suitable theoretical framework within which to understand mentoring. My personal narrative offers a perspective on the topic of mentoring. However, there are many more research studies that need to be conducted in regards to the benefits, demands, and obligations generated by different mentoring models. Darwin and Palmer (2009) set the discussion around the need to overcome the individualistic and paternalistic traditional view on mentoring to open doors toward collaborative relationships favored by mentoring circles. This pattern can become the avenue to transform academia from a very competitive, exclusive setting into a more participative and inclusive one.

## References

Aguilar-Gaxiola, S., Norris, R., Carter, F., & Reed, W. (1984). The roles of mentors in the lives of graduate students. In *Proceedings from the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (AERA)*, New Orleans, LA.

American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE). (2019a). *Holmes program*. Retrieved January 24, 2019, from https://aacte.org/programs-and-services/holmes-program#benefits-for-students.

American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE). (2019b). *Holmes Scholars: The next generation of higher education faculty*. Retrieved January 24, 2019, from https://aacte.org/news-room/aacte-in-the-news/341-holmes-scholars-the-next-generation-of-higher-education-faculty.

Blackwell, J. E. (1982). *Networking and mentoring: A study of cross generational experiences of Blacks in graduate and professional schools*. Atlanta: Southern Education Foundation.

Burke, R. J., & McKeen, C. A. (1997). Benefits of mentoring relationships among managerial and professional women: A cautionary tale. *Journal of Vocational Behaviour, 51,* 43–57.

College factual. (2019). Retrieved January 7, 2019, from https://www.collegefactual.com/colleges/university-of-central-florida/academic-life/faculty-composition/.

Colvin, J. W., & Ashman, M. (2010). Roles, risks, and benefits of peer mentoring relationships in higher education. *Mentoring & Tutoring: Partnership in Learning, 18*(2), 121–134.

de Janasz, S. C., Sullivan, S. E., & Whiting, V. (2003). Mentor networks and career success: Lessons for turbulent times. *Academy of Management Executive, 17*(4), 78–91.

Darwin, A. (2000). Critical reflections of mentoring in work settings. *Adult Education Quarterly, 50,* 197–211.

Darwin, A. (2007). Group mentoring based on team learning. In D. Clutterbuck (Ed.), *Coaching the team at work*. London, UK: Nicholas Brealey International.

Darwin, A., & Palmer, E. (2009). Mentoring circles in higher education. *Higher Education Research & Development, 28*(2), 125–136.

De Vries, J. (Ed.). (2005). *More than the sum of its parts: 10 years of the Leadership Development for Women Program at UWA*. Perth: The University of Western Australia.

Ehrich, L. C., Hansford, B., & Tennent, L. (2004). Formal mentoring programs in education and other professions: A review of the literature. *Educational Administration Quarterly, 40*(4), 518–540.

Ellis, C., & Bochner, A. (2000). Autoethnography, personal narrative, reflexivity: Researcher as subject. In N. Denzin & Y. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Handbook of Qualitative Research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Gergen, M., & Davis, S. N. (2003). Dialogic pedagogy: Developing narrative research perspectives through conversation. In R. Josselson, A. Lieblich, D. P. McAdams (Eds.), *The narrative study of lives: Up close and personal: The teaching and learning of narrative research* (pp. 239–257). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association. http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/10486-013.

Glaser, N., Hall, R., & Halperin, S. (2006). Students supporting students: The effects of peer mentoring on the experiences of first year university students. *Journal of the Australia and New Zealand Student Services Association, 27,* 4–19.

Goldstein, E. (1979). The effect of same-sex and cross-sex role models upon subsequent academic productivity. *American Psychologist, 34*(4), 407–410.

Goodlad, S. (1998). *Mentoring and tutoring by students.* London: BP Educational Service.

Healy, C. H., & Welchert, A. J. (1990). Mentoring relations: A definition to advance research and practice. *Educational Researcher, 19*(9), 17–21.

Heirdsfield, A. M., Walker, S., Walsh, K., & Wilss, L. (2008). Peer mentoring for first-year teacher education students: The mentors' experience. *Mentoring & Tutoring: Partnership in Learning, 16*(2), 109–124.

Higgins, M. C. (2001). Reconceptualizing mentoring at work: A developmental network perspective. *Academy of Management Review, 26*(2), 254–288.

Johnson, W. B. (2002). The intentional mentor: Strategies and guidelines for the practice of mentoring. *Professional Psychology Research and Practice Training, 33,* 88–96.

Karalis, D. (2006). *Exploring mentoring circles in a work setting: case study of a professional organization* (Unpublished thesis). University of Adelaide, Adelaide, SA, Australia.

Kram, K. E. (1985). *Mentoring at work: Developmental relationships in organizational life.* Glenview, IL: Scott Foresman.

Kram, K. E. (2004). Forward: The making of a mentor. In D. Clutterbuck & G. Lane (Eds.), *The situational mentor.* Aldershot: Gower.

Levinson, D. (1977). *The season of a man's life.* New York: Ballantine.

Luczak, C., & Kalbag, A. (2018). The appropriateness and effectiveness of cross-aged peer mentoring in the learning environment. *International Journal of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences, 4*(2), 76–84. https://dx.doi.org/10.20469/ijhss.4.10003-2.

Morrison, A. M., & Von Glinow, M. A. (1990). Women and minorities in management. *American Psychologist, 45*(2), 200–208.

Palermo, C., Hughes, R., & McCall, L. (2011). A qualitative evaluation of an Australian public health nutrition workforce development intervention involving mentoring circles. *Public Health Nutrition, 14*(8), 1458–1465.

Pivato, J. (1996). Representation of ethnicity as problem: Essence or construction. *Journal of Canadian Studies, 31*(3), 48–58.

University of Central Florida. (2019). *Holmes Scholars Program.* Retrieved January 24, 2019, from https://knightconnect.campuslabs.com/engage/organization/HolmesScholarsProgram.

Valadez, J. R., & Duran, R. P. (1991). Mentoring in higher education. In *Proceedings from the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (AERA)*, Chicago, IL.

Wertsch, J. V., & Center for Psychosocial Studies (III). (1985). *Culture communication, and cognition: Vygotskian perspectives.* Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press.

Wilbur, J. (1987). Does mentoring breed success? *Training and Development Journal, 41*(2), 38–41.

Zey, M. (1985). Mentor programs: Making the right moves. *Personnel Journal, 64*(2), 5S–57.

Kram, K.E. (2004). Forward: The making of a mentor. In D. Clutterbuck, & G. Lane (Eds.), The situational mentor. Aldershot: Gower.