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M. Christopher Brown II , Guy L. Davis & Shederick A. McClendon

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# Mentoring Graduate Students of Color: Myths, Models, and Modes

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*M. Christopher Brown II and Guy L. Davis*  
*Shederick A. McClendon*

“To be or not to be” is not the question. The question is “How does one become what one wishes to be?” The ongoing process of professional development requires faculty to work with students in building knowledge bases, skills, and behaviors that are deemed successful within the students’ chosen vocations. Historically, individuals entered their professions through apprenticeship programs that provided practical, hands-on experiences. However, formal apprenticeship programs are now primarily limited to the preparation of trained workmen and skilled technicians. How, then, are lawyers, doctors, librarians, researchers, and educators to

M. CHRISTOPHER BROWN II is Assistant Professor of Higher Education, Department of Educational Organization and Leadership, University of Illinois at Urbana–Champaign.

GUY L. DAVIS is Assistant Professor of Career Programs and Information Systems, The Career Center, University of Illinois at Urbana–Champaign.

SHERICK A. MCCLENDON is a doctoral student, Department of Leadership and Organizations, Peabody College of Vanderbilt University, Nashville, Tennessee.

Requests for reprints should be sent to M. Christopher Brown II, Department of Educational Organization and Leadership, University of Illinois at Urbana–Champaign, 333 Education Building, 1310 South Sixth Street, Champaign, IL 61820.

be prepared? They are prepared through informal apprenticeship activities termed *mentoring*.

The word *mentor* has a unique history. The word is in fact the proper name of a person, Mentor. The story of Mentor is found in Homer's (trans. 1990) epic poem *Odyssey*. The *Odyssey* is a poem about Odysseus, king of Ithaca, who led the Greek soldiers during the Trojan War. The story goes that Odysseus roamed the countryside for 10 years after the war before reaching home. However, before Odysseus went off to war he hired Mentor and entrusted him with the education of his son, Telemachus. Mentor became Telemachus's teacher, counselor, and guide.

Although the preparation of intellectual laborers is officially carried out in college classrooms around the country, the classroom is unable to provide the full range of nuanced knowledge and experiences necessary for individuals who wish to practice certain professions. As such, the concept and practice of mentoring has become paramount. Mentoring is the process by which a novitiate person (student or mentee) is positively socialized by a sagacious person (faculty or mentor) for the purpose of learning the traditions, practices, and frameworks of a profession, association, or organization.

Modern-day discourse employs the word *mentor* in a number of ways. There are mentors, mentees, mentoring, and mentor (the verb). Recent years have even brought increased research and writing on both the concept and practice of mentoring (Alire, 1997; Anderson & Shannon, 1986; Blackburn, Chapman, & Cameron, 1981; Blackwell, 1989; Desjardins, 1993; Donovan, 1990; Friedman, 1992; Merriam, 1983; Merriam, Thomas, & Zeph, 1987; Roche, 1979; Schatzberg-Smith, 1988; Scott, 1992; Van Stone, Nelson, & Niemann, 1994). However, academics and other writers have provided scant data regarding the mentoring of students of color (Blackwell, 1987a, 1987b; Brown, in press-a; Frierson, 1990; Willie, Grady, & Hope, 1991). As such, the literature base on mentoring graduate students of color is even more scarce.

We assume (correctly or incorrectly) that readers are already convinced of the need for mentoring graduate students of color. Persons in need of additional convincing may wish to read Epps (1989) and Blackwell's (1989) articles in *Academe* (the entire issue is on mentoring and minority faculty). Therefore, rather than focusing on why higher education benefits by mentoring graduate students of color, we concentrate on thinking and rethinking the epistemological and axiological constructions of certain myths, models, and modes of mentoring. Correspondingly, this article is focused on exploring what mentoring graduate students of color requires. There are three planks to the article: (a) debunking five myths surrounding mentoring graduate students of color, (b) providing examples of

mentoring models, and (c) recommending three modalities for individuals who wish to mentor graduate students of color.

### Myths Surrounding Mentoring Students of Color

A *myth* is a collective opinion or belief that is premised on falsehoods or fallacious reasoning. After interviewing several colleagues and graduate students, several myths surrounding mentoring, particularly as it relates to students of color, emerged. One of the myths on mentoring is that any senior person can mentor a junior person. Although seemingly logical, this practice or belief fails to account for individual personality types and differences. Every senior person, in this case faculty member, does not have the predisposition conducive to mentoring. Many faculty members believe that mentoring graduate students of color is a "moral" and "just" thing to do; however, they see no practical benefit. "Effective mentoring ... requires the mentor to have some basic understanding of what mentoring is, including its reciprocal benefits" (Brown-Wright, Dubick, & Newman, 1997, p. 414). Faculty must acknowledge that these relations allow new perspectives into research interpretation and professional practice. It is an opportunity to engage in intellectual or professional exchange with another person whose mind may not yet be biased or predisposed to a particular tradition or paradigm.

Another myth is that engaging with graduate students of color during class and seminars is sufficient mentoring. Effective mentoring requires that the mentor spend time with the student outside of the classroom. There must be an opportunity for the student to engage with the faculty person outside of the normal venues of academic interaction. The purpose of the mentoring relationship is to supplement classroom (and orientation) information with pragmatic experiences that give the student insights that would otherwise not have been gained. These out-of-class interactions move the student closer to witnessing, if not participating in, the totality of his or her chosen professional or academic arena. These out-of-class activities will be the cornerstone of letters of reference for future employment. In addition, nonclassroom activity also (a) improves the students' self-confidence in their ability to do professional work, (b) teaches them how to cope with the formal and informal structures of the organization or profession, and (c) fosters the likelihood that students will enter their selected field.

Moreover, many faculty believe that mentoring is only extra advising. The myth of mentoring as advising-plus is detrimental in that valuable time that could be devoted to meaningful interaction is forsaken. A true

mentoring relationship requires a faculty person to move beyond his or her space as academic expert to a space of codiscovery. Ideally, a mentoring relationship will include some joint project in which each partner is an equal contributor, or in which the student takes the lead in design and implementation. This association should not be premised on the hierarchical strictures of advising, but established on a common plane of collegiality: "The relationship must be such that the student is able to discuss problems and ask questions without fear, and not hesitate to take the initiative to meet with the mentor whenever the student is in need" (Abdullahi, 1992, p. 310).

There are two other mentoring myths that are central to the lives of graduate students of color. The first is the erroneous and specious belief that students of color can only be mentored by faculty of color. Students of color can be mentored effectively by White faculty and faculty who are not racially marginalized. Epps (1989), in fact, argued this point eloquently and succinctly, stating that "the extent to which all faculty, rather than just [faculty of color], are committed to the task of recruiting and nurturing [talented students of color] is an indication of an institution's commitment to equality for [students of color]" (p. 25). It is unacceptable for White faculty and their compeers to relegate the mentoring of students of color to faculty of color (Brown, in press-a).

Mentoring should not be restricted to castelike constructions and arrangements. Linda Tillman (1998), who is now a professor, recounted her experience as a graduate student of color at a research university. She published the following narrative that explores the dynamics of mentoring:

As I observed these relationships, particularly between faculty members and their graduate advisees, it was clear to me that most of these relationships occurred between whites, and most often between white males. I observed few, if any, African Americans being nurtured to the degree that white students were. Since I had aspirations of becoming faculty in a major research university, I became concerned about how I would access this type of sponsorship that many of my peers were receiving. If, according to professors in my department, sponsorship was an important aspect of graduate training, who would sponsor me? In a department where I was exposed to few African-American faculty members, who, then would socialize me to the norms of the academy? Unlike my peers (most of whom were white males), for me the possibilities seemed more limited. (p. 142)

Professor Tillman's recollection forces us to ponder one of the stark realities of mentoring students of color. The truth is that there are more students of

color than faculty of color; as such, students of color must be mentored by White faculty members and their compeers.

In 1991, African American, Hispanic, American Indian, and Asian American faculty totaled a mere 12.3 % of the full-time professorial staff in U.S. higher education (National Center for Education Statistics, 1995). However, for the corresponding year, 1992, students from the same underrepresented racial and ethnic populations listed totaled 22.5% (National Center for Education Statistics, 1994). In gross numbers, that amounts to 55,545 faculty of color out of a total of 451,588 faculty, and approximately 3,260,520 students of color out of a student populace of 14,491,200. These statistics calculate to a 1:58 ratio for faculty of color to students of color. Mentoring graduate students of color must most often occur across racial and ethnic divides. All of these findings force us to engage the epistemological and axiological bases and biases of mentoring in general and transracial mentoring clusters in specific.

Acknowledging that there are many myths that have intentionally and unintentionally gone unexplored, we now turn our attention to the most damaging myth related to mentoring graduate students of color. Many academics and professionals believe that faculty should mentor only those students with whom there are strong similarities—research interests, philosophical positionality, and often “polisocioecoracial” kinship. The goal is to mentor students with whom the mentoring professor already has strong congruence. We are not suggesting that there are no preexisting congruences between nonracially marginalized faculty and students of color. However, we do assert that when faculty members are not open to mentoring students outside of their experiential sphere, it places graduate students of color, in particular, at a disadvantage.

Blackwell (1983, 1987a, 1988), Brown (in press-a), Friedman (1992), Frierson (1990), McKay (1988), Padilla (1994), and Smith and Davidson (1992) each documented the perplexing crisis of students of color wishing to research topics of interest to marginalized communities and not finding support, much less mentoring. Faculty, regardless of race, must step outside of their intellectual and professional enclaves and resituate themselves in the core of methodical research. The guidelines for research are similar irrespective of the topic being researched. Issues of reliability and validity must be paramount whether the inquiry concerns leadership styles among presidents of research universities or leadership styles among presidents of historically Black colleges. It is not necessary for a student’s research to be identical to a professor’s research for the two to share a productive mentoring relationship. Students need good mentoring that does not force them into the preestablished research interests or methods of their mentor. The sad truth is that many faculty do not choose students

who are different from themselves, because they view mentoring as a venue through which they can reproduce themselves.

Good mentoring requires would-be faculty mentors to engage in self-examination and reflection so that they can purge any fallacious thinking. The myths identified here are real, and they pose a continuing threat to the mission and intent of mentoring. Faculty must acknowledge the benefits of mentoring graduate students of color; engage in activities that supplement formal instruction; move beyond conceptualizing mentoring as extra advising or “cloning”; and concede the roles that we all play in mentoring students, particularly students of color. In an effort to move beyond myth-based, sporadic, and decentralized mentoring of graduate students of color, many institutions have established formal mentoring programs and networks. These programs are intended to move faculty closer toward conscientious mentoring.

### Graduate Student Mentoring Program Models

Mentoring programs exist to provide graduate students, in this instance students of color, structured interactions with faculty and administrators geared toward increasing the probability of degree program completion and career success. Research indicates that students typically attributed their academic success to three primary factors—personal ambition, supportive family, and supportive faculty (Van Stone et al., 1994). Graduate mentoring programs are designed to provide close, supportive relationships between mentoring faculty and the menteed graduate students. This relationship is particularly important for students of color on campuses with predominantly White enrollments. Mentors have the ability to assist graduate students of color with adjustment to both the academic and nonacademic aspects of graduate education. There are several models for these mentoring programs, each archetypically different, yet similar in function.

A growing number of institutions across the nation have mentoring programs that assist graduate students of color with the adjustment to graduate school and preparation for a professional career. Among these mentoring programs is the University of California–Berkeley’s (UC–Berkeley) Graduate Mentorship Program. The UC–Berkeley mentoring program is designed to attract, retain, and graduate students of color. The program also includes providing financial support in the form of doctoral fellowships, assisting program students in locating inexpensive housing accommodations, and pairing incoming program students with faculty mentors. They neglect, however, establishment of formal

mentor-mentee relationships. More notable is the mentoring program at The Ohio State University, which provides students of color with the option of selecting a faculty mentor, student or peer mentor, or both, as well as academic and financial support (National Education Association, 1993).

Not all mentoring programs for graduate students of color are embedded in the institutional structure. Moreover, not all of the mentoring programs provide students with continued opportunities for faculty or administrative engagement. One example is the mentoring program at Princeton University. The mentoring program at Princeton is limited to the summer session, in which students engage in research projects under faculty oversight. Princeton is one of several universities that participates in the Mellon/Ford Research Exchange Program (sponsored in conjunction by the Mellon and Ford Foundations). The Princeton program defrays the cost of a 2-month research project and provides students with a summer stipend (National Education Association, 1993).

There are many similarities in the mentoring programs that exist for graduate students of color. Most of the programs adopt an institution-wide approach, have symbolic (if not meaningful) financial support from the administrative oversight unit, and identify expansion of the pool and pipeline of faculty and professionals of color as their goal. Likewise, several activities appear consistently in formal graduate mentoring programs around the country. The following 10 activities were most frequently listed in mentoring program pamphlets, annual reports, and external program evaluations:

1. Assignment of a faculty mentor.
2. Assignment of a student or peer advisor.
3. Formally established student or peer network.
4. Academic assistance workshops.
5. Computer skills workshops and assistance.
6. Research, writing, and professional publication guidance.
7. Social activities and programming.
8. Provision of financial assistance.
9. Orientation or welcome programs.
10. Career decision-making and planning workshops (Johnson, 1996; National Education Association, 1993).

In addition, many mentoring programs for graduate students of color also survey students annually to assess the areas in which students indicate needs or desire additional professional development. One program with activities and success worth mentioning is the Peabody Mentoring Program at Vanderbilt University.



The goal of the Peabody Mentoring Program is to increase the number of graduate students of color in graduate and professional programs, the number of those students who subsequently complete their degree programs, and the number of students who find professional success (as individually defined). The Peabody Mentoring Program was initiated after conversations between students of color and faculty and college administrators led to an official campus study of recruitment and graduation rates for students of color. The findings from this study were published in the *Minority Graduate Student Report*, which revealed negative practices and trends with regard to student experiences and matriculation success rates (Hoover-Dempsey, Robinson, & Jones, 1994). The report was followed by a formal request for institutional support. The program was established in Fall 1995 with an advisory or steering committee of seven faculty members and two graduate students.

The Peabody program seeks to create a campus climate that encourages and values diversity, simultaneously developing a caring and personalized support network for graduate students of color. This network is established through promoting increased communication and interaction levels between faculty members and students and providing the encouragement and support often necessary to complete an advanced degree. To accomplish these goals, Peabody faculty members provide one-on-one mentoring, including assistance with the academic socialization process, professional development, and environmental adjustments associated with graduate study at Peabody College. The committee also matches students of color with full-time faculty members based on shared research and personal interests. During the academic year, several structured academic functions (e.g., brown-bag lunches, panel discussions, group dialogues) and social activities (e.g., potlucks, bowling, movie nights) are sponsored. An evaluation plan has been developed to assess the program's effectiveness and long-term impact.

Currently, there are 40 mentor-mentee pairs and several additional faculty volunteers. Since the inception of the Peabody Mentoring Program, more than 80 students have participated. Those students are all currently engaged in professional work or pursuing careers in education. The career tracks range from faculty and administrative appointments to agency positions (e.g., Assistant Director of the Consortium for the Advancement of Private Higher Education). More than a dozen mentees have participated in summer programs and internships (e.g., Cambridge University student exchange program). All students are encouraged to present at their respective professional conferences. Individual mentee-mentor relationships have also afforded many students opportunities to co-author papers for scholarly publication.

Based on initial evaluations, the Peabody Mentoring Program is progressing successfully toward the identified goals. The advisory committee, however, continually experiences challenges in coordinating events that do not conflict with the courses or assistantships of participating mentees. As a result, the advisory board has recently established an all-student steering committee to assist with planning social and academic activities. The new steering committee will also have oversight of a newly created Listserv and the bimonthly newsletter. Undoubtedly, the active involvement of students will facilitate both existing and emerging programming needs in the Peabody program.

The Peabody Mentoring Program and other programs like it have a unique opportunity to affect the recruitment, retention, and employment possibilities of graduate students of color. These programs serve as models not only for institutional approaches to the academic pipeline issue for students of color, but as guideposts regarding what effective mentoring activities entail. Mentoring programs acknowledge that faculty who elect to serve as mentors or who are designated mentors have academic tasks to undertake, professional destinies to explore, and intellectual roles to perform. The roles and behaviors are at the center of the academic and professional mission of mentoring.

### The Tripartite Modes of Mentoring

Myriad missions exist in mentoring. Mentoring has goal-oriented forms and manners of being that attempt to maximize student growth and development—academically, professionally, and otherwise. As such, it must be viewed as a nurturing process in which the faculty member serves as a role model, teacher, sponsor, encourager, counselor, and friend to the students with the end goal of promoting the latter's professional and personal development. Each of these functions must be carried out within a context of a continuing, caring relationship between the mentor and mentee. The mission of mentoring requires the faculty member to perform specific roles and exhibit given behaviors. Although the roles and behaviors are varied, there are tripartite modes of mentoring that capture the sum of all the requisite activities (Brown, in press-a, in press-b). The three modes of mentoring are academic midwifery, role molding, and frientoring.

*Academic midwifery* is the way in which faculty assist their students in producing new ideas and scholarly insights. It is related to the official instructional and advising responsibilities of a professor, but advances to a role of mentoring. Mentors must bring to life the sleeping potential within their students that without assistance would otherwise be wasted. Although ab-

sent from the literature on professorial duties or on mentoring, one of the greatest responsibilities is the care of the intellectual soul of our students. Mentors must assist students in giving birth to intellectual ideas, research methodologies, and professional practices that are transformative. As previously explored, mentoring is not about teaching students how to do what you do but aiding them as they find their own way.

As such, mentors engaged in academic midwifery must be facilitators who coach students through the process of academic and professional discovery. This role requires faculty mentors to be very careful. Terenzini (1996) wrote:

Graduate programs not only prepare students to become higher education administrators or researchers, but they also serve as powerful socializing agents. Graduate students learn about more things than the history, curriculum, students, organization, administration, and research methods of higher education from their faculty guides. They learn—and in many cases internalize—their mentors' intellectual orientations, value systems, criteria, and standards about what constitute appropriate topics and good research. What we are teaching them may not be conducive to the development of their awareness of policy issues. (pp. 11–12)

Although speaking specifically about training students of a specific field for the multiple perspectives of that field, Terenzini advanced the argument that faculty often predispose students to certain traditions rather than allowing students to select a tradition or positionality through serendipity. The academic midwife modality is central to graduate students of color for whom there may be limited pools from which mentors can be drawn (Blackwell, 1989; Scott, 1992).

What, then, makes a good academic midwife? A good academic midwife is a mentor who is respectful of oppositional ideas, committed to the intellectual and professional development of the student, and adaptive to different and nontraditional techniques and approaches. The good mentor acknowledges the transracial, cross-cultural, "polisocioecoracial" dynamic of the mentoring collective with graduate students of color. In addition, the mentor who is engaged in academic midwifing must be available when students are having intellectual "contractions." He or she must be encouraging of student interests, proactive in his or her mentoring role, and nurturing of newly born thoughts or ideas produced by his or her students. The good mentor must be a coach who guides the student through the intellectual birthing process and delivers them safely into the professional arena.

The next modality requires mentors to move beyond role modeling to *role molding*. Role molding differs from academic midwifery in that the focus shifts from the theoretical, abstract, and cognitive to the practical, pragmatic, and applied. *Role modeling* suggests that one serves as a symbolic figure of what is possible or aspired. Conversely, role molding is the active engagement of faculty in shaping the lives of their students into the academic and social shapes or patterns the students desire. At this juncture, it is necessary to offer a warning. Faculty must be leery of trying to mold students into what they wish their students to be. (If you recall, Malcolm X wanted to be a lawyer, but his teacher wanted him to be a carpenter.) Under role molding, the mentor is to aid the student in carving out his or her own niche. This is extremely difficult in academic research.

The myth, as previously explored, is that students will follow in the intellectual and research traditions of their mentors. This is problematic in that many mentors will be senior-level White faculty (or compeers) who may not be engaged in research on marginalized communities and may not be using new research paradigms (e.g., narrative, critical theory, feminist epistemologies) that may be of interest to graduate students of color, as well as other graduate students. The role molder is to teach through confirming and questioning the usefulness and appropriateness of mentee activities, maintaining a focus on the student's desired career goal or research outcome. Moreover, as Tillman (1998) pointed out, mentors must be sponsors. In sponsoring students or mentees, a faculty person protects them from unnecessary activities, supports them in their career endeavors, and promotes their successes. Sponsorship is extremely important in publishing research and securing professional employment.

The last mode in the mentoring tripartite is *frientoring*, the unique nexus between mentoring and friendship. As such, it is the frientoring function of mentoring relationships that is the most complex. This complexity is generated by the asymmetrical nature of the mentor–mentee (faculty–student) relationship. Traditionally, friendly interactions between faculty and students have been discouraged because the positionality of faculty as superior partners and students as inferior partners raises ethical questions for many academics (Smith & Davidson, 1992). Hence, out-of-class friendships between faculty and students are discouraged. However, discouraging out-of-class relationships between faculty and students runs contrary to the idea of mentoring. Mentoring of graduate students requires friendly relationships between faculty and students.

Frientoring addresses the asymmetrical nature of mentor–mentee relationships by establishing a collegial tier in which each party can contribute as equals. In frientoring, the faculty member provides guidance and wisdom, and the student provides respect and a modicum of reverence to the

interactions. The faculty member is not a dictator, but a colleague. The faculty member or mentor is *primus inter pares*—first among equals. Frientoring allows both participants to feel as though they are giving of themselves and simultaneously receiving intellectual and emotional reinforcement. Frientoring allows a safe space where students can be free agents in their intellectual pursuits and yet be guided through the presence of a mentor. Frientoring gives voice and value to student or mentee thoughts and interests.

The modes of academic midwifery, role molding, and frientoring are central to the effective mentoring of graduate students of color and all students in general. The tripartite modes serve to promote and advance the academic pipeline of students of color. By bringing to life the buried cognitive thoughts of the students, shaping them into studious inquirers, and providing them genuine access to our professional lives, we create an atmosphere where students will aspire to serve comparable roles in the lives of future students. Each of the tripartite modes require care and support, experiential learning, collaboration, and commitment to both the students and the profession (Valadez, 1998). Consequently, faculty must rethink their roles as professors and mentors (Brown, in press-b). Bean (1998) wrote, "Only if we reimagine our work, can we serve the soul of the world" (p. 511).

### Concluding Thoughts

It is erroneous to assert that the failure to achieve matriculation and career parity among students of color in higher education suggests racist and discriminatory policies and programs. There are no standards by which to accurately assess integration or inclusion of "all" persons into America's ivy halls and professional networks. Nonetheless, in an effort to reverse the growing underrepresentation of students of color in academic, corporate, and civic venues, mentoring programs and efforts must be praised and upheld as a necessity. If the current graduate student mentoring programs and relationships are successful, the nation and the world stand to benefit.

In reacting to the problems, debating the solutions, and studying the outcomes of graduate students of color in the academy, we encounter at every turn more questions and fewer answers. One thing, at least, is clear: To recruit, enroll, graduate, and employ a diverse population is only a beginning, albeit an essential one. The educational opportunities—and obligations—that must follow these initial steps will test higher education's commitment, energy, resources, and imagination in profound and enduring ways.

As informed persons who bear the responsibility of mentoring and developing programs to effectively mentor students of color, academics are obligated to approach the issue of mentoring with both a critical eye and an expanded level of consciousness. We must begin to pay more attention to the institutional processes that affect students of color as they matriculate through graduate programs nationwide. The structures, norms, practices, and personnel will ultimately govern whether the career trajectories of these students will be positive or negative. To the extent that mentoring programs and mentors can adopt the tripartite modes of mentoring, they will have increased greatly the likelihood of professional success among graduate students of color.

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