

Supporting Students of Color on the Pathway to Graduate Education

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Some of the counselors there [at CSU attended] have real preconceived notions of what minority students are capable of achieving, and they steer minority students away from graduate school. They even went as far as to steer me away from being a math and science teacher. When I started at [CSU attended] they [counselors] wanted to place me in basic [remedial] courses and were really surprised by my test score." *Latina doctoral student studying biology.*

—From DeAngelo, 2009

He [a Latino student who had just as much potential as I do] did not have the information he needed to even really know what graduate school is all about or what it would take for him financially. *White doctoral student studying genetics.*

—From DeAngelo, 2009

Introduction

One of the most important influences to a student's pursuit of graduate education—if not the most important—is having a faculty mentor during a student's undergraduate education. This is especially relevant for students of color who remain underrepresented in graduate education (Kim, 2011; U.S. Department of Education, 2014). While there are a number of potential reasons for the underrepresentation of students of color in graduate education, one explanation that has gained traction, and is problematized in this brief, situates the problem as one of academic mismatch. Academic mismatch occurs when students are overmatched academically at the institutions they attend as undergraduates. Mismatch is thought to create a situation that causes overmatched students of color to perform poorly academically, which in turn limits their aspirations for and potential to succeed in graduate education. This narrative was recently argued in the *Wall Street Journal* opinion pages by law

professor Gail Heriot of the University of San Diego, who discusses the reason why we do not have more black scientists. Heriot (2015) stated, “Encouraging black students to attend schools where their entering credentials places them at the bottom of the class has resulted in fewer black physicians, engineers, scientists, lawyers, and professors than would otherwise be the case.¹” While academic achievement is relevant to graduate study, the research presented in this brief reveals that the real crisis is not academic mismatch but a scarcity of the mentoring relationships that lead to graduate education.

The brief begins with a review of mentoring – what constitutes mentoring, motivations for mentoring, which students get mentored, and the importance of mentoring to graduate education. A discussion of the scarcity of mentoring for students of color, especially at more selective institutions, and how this challenges the mismatch hypothesis follows. The brief concludes with ways that institutions can recognize barriers to faculty mentorship and support faculty in engaging in these relationships.

What Constitutes Mentoring and Motivations for Mentoring

Mentoring is described in a number of ways and can be constituted differently based on the relationship present. However, the most powerful mentoring relationships tend to encompass four characteristics. These characteristics include (a) a focus on achievement and development of potential, (b) a reciprocal and personal relationship, (c) a relationship where the mentor is an individual with more experience, influence, and achievement, and (d) a relationship where the mentor takes on emotional and psychological support and directly assists with career aspirations and planning through role modeling (Crisp & Cruz, 2009; Jacobi, 1991). These four characteristics move interaction between students and faculty to the level of mentoring.

Although expected roles for faculty include advising and teaching, which naturally includes interaction with students, the mentoring relationships that are most successful in supporting students to pursue graduate studies fall outside of this formal faculty role. For example, as DeAngelo and colleagues (2016) describe, expected role behavior with undergraduate students includes behavior that is aligned with institutional or departmental expectations of faculty role, such as advising regarding course selection

¹ See Cole & Barber (2003), Saunder (2004), and Arcidiacono & Lovenheim, (2016) for scholarly examinations of the mismatch hypothesis, and Davis (1966) for the social theory of mismatch, also termed the frog-pond hypothesis. Arguments related to mismatch suggest that if students of color attended institutions where their entering credentials were better matched, their academic performance would be stronger and more would then aspire to and successfully enter graduate education, the pipeline to the professoriate and learned professions.

and matriculation, the involvement of students in research experiences, and teaching of hard skills required for admission and success in graduate education. However, extra-role behavior that constitutes mentoring is behavior that is not explicitly required, recognized, or rewarded as part of faculty role (DeAngelo et al., 2016; Johnson & Ridley, 2004). This includes actively identifying and approaching students to initiate mentoring relationships, promoting graduate education as an option for students, and actively working to socialize students to the academic culture. In addition, this behavior takes place both within and outside formal channels, and the behavior within formal channels goes above and beyond the formally sanctioned role of the faculty.

Motivations to engage in this type of behavior vary, but for those within the DeAngelo and colleagues' (2016) study, there were two primary reasons for engaging in these relationships. Some faculty pursued mentoring relationships with undergraduate students because of their personal experiences and a sense of responsibility related to assisting students to enter graduate study. For example, faculty discussed positive mentoring experiences that they wanted to emulate or a lack of mentorship they received that intensified their desire to mentor undergraduate students. Other faculty saw a benefit in supporting students with whom they could personally identify (students of color and/or first-generation students).

Who Gets Mentored and the Importance of Mentoring

Students who perform at high levels, and who demonstrate motivation and proactive behaviors, “rising stars” (Ragins & Cotton, 1999; Singh et al., 2009), fit the dominant paradigm for student success (Bensimon, 2007), and are more likely to be mentored (Fuentes, et al., 2014; Robertson, 2010). In this dominant paradigm for student success, “the student is an autonomous and self-motivated actor who exerts effort in behaviors that exemplify commitment, engagement, regulation, and goal-orientation” (Bensimon, 2007, p. 447). Therefore, “rising stars” tend to be more engaged in their academic endeavors and interact informally with faculty during their early college careers. Fuentes and colleagues (2014) demonstrate that this early interaction with faculty results in more frequent mentoring relationships later in college. The lack of investment in mentoring students that faculty initially identify as “lesser quality” works against diversification of graduate education.

While mentoring relationships can be initiated by either party and can take shape in a number of ways, the most meaningful mentoring relationships emerge when there is a commitment by both the student and faculty member. These active and committed relationships help students become oriented to their

institutions and their academic fields (Becher, 1989; Eagan et al., 2011; Weidman, 2006) and provide valuable networking resources and access to information (Stanton-Salazar, 1997, 2010). Especially important to increasing diversity in graduate studies, strong mentoring relationships guide students along their educational pathways, helping them to gain additional confidence to pursue advanced studies (Crisp & Cruz, 2009; DeAngelo, 2009, 2010; Eagan et al., 2011; Landefeld, 2009; Seymour et al., 2004).

Research demonstrates that students of color have degree aspirations that equal or exceed their white counterparts, yet they are no more likely than white students to pursue graduate study (Cherwitz, 2013; English & Umbach, 2016). Students of color are also less likely to be mentored than white students (Felder, 2010; Johnson, 2015; Milkman et al., 2014, Thomas et al., 2007). Even though students of color are less likely to be mentored, studies continue to document the importance of these relationships for pursuing graduate education. Faculty mentors can serve as role models within the discipline and provide cultural and social capital for diverse students, especially in fields where women and minorities are particularly underrepresented (Whittaker & Montgomery, 2014). While beneficial to all students, intensive mentoring relationships may be particularly important for students of color in pursuing graduation study (Davis, 2008; Davidson & Foster-Johnson, 2001; DeAngelo, 2009, 2010; Felder, 2010).

Examining the Mentoring Crisis for Student of Color at Selective Institutions

In examining faculty mentorship for students of color, the study of DeAngelo (2008) is particularly relevant and will be explored in some detail here. This study examined the role of the college experience in the development and maintenance of PhD degree aspirations². To understand the role of institutional selectivity as it relates to the opportunity for mentorship, it is important to first examine relationships as they relate to the distribution of students by selectivity. From the DeAngelo (2008) study, Table 1 displays the distribution of underrepresented racial minority³ and white students by institutional selectivity in the study and Table 2 displays these relationships restricted to just those students who aspire to the PhD at the end of college.

² The DeAngelo (2008) study used hierarchical generalized linear modeling to study PhD aspirations development at the end of the college experience for underrepresented racial minority and white students. The study included 13,645 students at 251 institutions across the country.

³ In the DeAngelo (2008) study the term underrepresented racial minority students was used to refer to Black/African American, Hispanic/Latinx, and American Indian students which were the focus of the study. In this brief this term is used specifically when the results of the DeAngelo (2008) study are discussed; whereas the term students of color is used throughout the rest of the brief.

Table 1:

Distribution of Students by Institutional Selectivity in Full Sample from DeAngelo (2008) Study			
	Low Selectivity	Medium Selectivity	High Selectivity
White	32%	36%	32%
Underrepresented Racial Minority	40%	28%	32%

Table 1 shows that an equal percentage of underrepresented racial minority students and white students attend high selectivity institutions (32%), but a disproportionate percentage of underrepresented racial students attend low selectivity institutions (40% in comparison to 32% of white students). These relationships as they relate selectivity change dramatically when the sample of undergraduate students is restricted to those who aspire to the PhD at the end of college. Table 2 shows that among white students at low selectivity institutions a smaller percentage (25%) than in the overall sample (32% Table 1) aspire to the PhD at the end of college, whereas at high selectivity institutions the percentage of white students (41%) is higher than in the overall sample (32% Table 1). For white students, as selectivity increases so does the percentage who aspire to the PhD at the end of college. A much different relationship is present for underrepresented racial minority students. At low selectivity institutions the percentage of underrepresented racial minority students who aspire to the PhD at the end of college is roughly the same (39%) as in the overall sample (40% Table 1). Further, at high selectivity institutions while the percentage of underrepresented racial minority students who aspire to the PhD at the end of college is higher (36%) than the percentage in the overall sample (32% Table 1) the percentage point increase is not nearly as large as it is for white students (4 vs 9 percentage points). The question then becomes what contributes to these relationships? The weight of the evidence in the results from the DeAngelo (2008) study demonstrates that access to mentoring rather than academic mismatch underlies these differences⁴.

Table 2:

Distribution of Students by Institutional Selectivity Restricted to Students Who Aspire to the PhD at the End of College from DeAngelo (2008) Study			
	Low Selectivity	Medium Selectivity	High Selectivity
White	25%	34%	41%

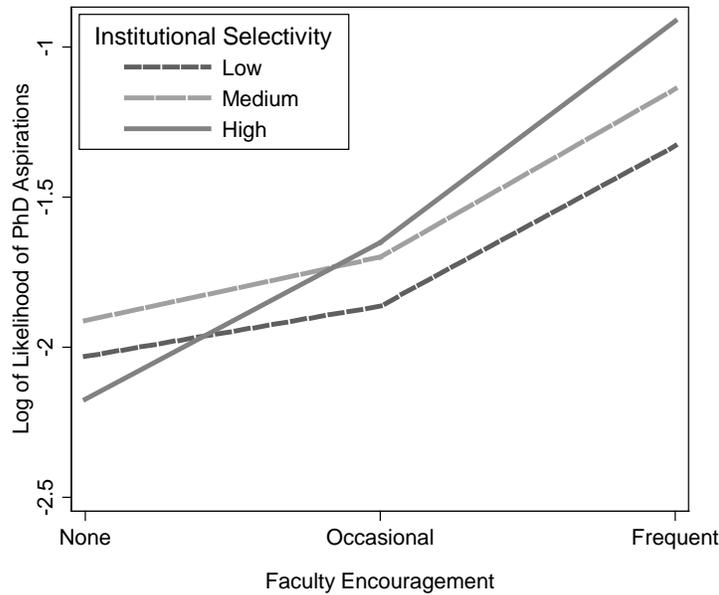
⁴ A direct test of the mismatch hypothesis (Davis, 1966) was conducted in the DeAngelo (2008) study. Results indicated that there was no evidence of mismatch for underrepresented racial minority students as it contributed to PhD aspirations.

Underrepresented Racial Minority	39%	25%	36%
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In looking at the results from the DeAngelo (2008) study, the single largest effect on PhD aspirations was the level of faculty encouragement for graduate study. The higher the amount of encouragement for graduate study from faculty, the more likely both underrepresented racial minority students and white students were to aspire to the PhD (all other factors equal and controlled). Although both white students and underrepresented racial minority students benefited from encouragement for graduate study, a factor that is part of a strong mentoring relationship for students of color (DeAngelo, 2009; 2010), the relative size of the benefit was much larger for underrepresented racial minority students. Odds ratios from the study indicate that occasional encouragement for graduate study (vs. no encouragement) increases the odds of a white student aspiring to the PhD at the end of college by 42%, whereas the increase in odds is 238% for underrepresented racial minority students. At the frequent encouragement level (vs. no encouragement) the trend continues with white students having a 170% larger odds of aspiring to the PhD and underrepresented racial minority students having a 332% increased likelihood of PhD aspirations.

Returning to the role of institutional selectivity in access to faculty mentoring, the DeAngelo (2008) study tested for an interaction effect between selectivity and faculty encouragement. For white students, this interaction was significant (see Figure 1). In this figure, the level of encouragement a white student receives is on the X axis and the log likelihood increase in PhD aspirations is on the Y axis. The dotted and solid lines graph the increases in PhD aspirations by institutional selectivity (low, medium, high) and encouragement level. As the figure demonstrates, white students who are encouraged frequently are more likely to aspire to the PhD at the end of college if they are at a high selectivity institution, and less likely if they are at a low selectivity institution (all other factors equal, and controlled). Further, additional testing demonstrated that the difference in odds is significantly different at low and high selectivity institutions, an increase in odds of 52% for frequent encouragement and high vs. low selectivity, and a decrease in odds of 13% for no encouragement and high vs. low selectivity. Thus, white students who attend high selectivity institutions who are not encouraged for graduate study are significantly less likely to aspire to the PhD at the end of college than are equally similar white students who attend low selectivity institutions. This finding suggests that in the absence of faculty encouragement at high selectivity institutions white students have difficulty envisioning themselves as a future member of professoriate.

Figure 1: Interaction between Selectivity and Faculty Encouragement for Graduate Study for White Students from the DeAngelo (2008) Study



The DeAngelo (2008) study ran the same interaction for underrepresented racial minority students and the effect was not significant. Specifically, results in the study demonstrated that differences in the significance of this interaction for white and underrepresented racial minority students were likely related to the chances of being encouraged for graduate study by institutional selectivity. Keeping in mind faculty encouragement is a strong factor in PhD aspirations in this study, and that faculty mentoring is particularly important to graduate study for student of color (Davis, 2008; Davidson & Foster-Johnson, 2001; DeAngelo, 2009, 2010; Felder, 2010), data from this study indicated that white students were just as likely to be frequently encouraged for graduate study at high (35%) and low selectivity institutions (36%), whereas underrepresented students were more likely frequently encouraged at low (55%) vs. high selectivity institutions (40%). Thus, the weight of evidence in DeAngelo (2008) study suggests that it is the opportunity for encouragement at high and low selectivity institutions⁵ for underrepresented racial minority students, rather than academic mismatch which is

⁵ In the DeAngelo (2008) study at the institutional level selectivity was a significant predictor of PhD aspirations for both underrepresented racial minority and white students.

depressing aspirations for the PhD at high selectivity institutions and contributing to the lack of diversity present in graduate study, the pipeline to the professoriate and learned professions.

Barriers and Supports to Mentoring

In order to increase the opportunity for students of color to be mentored, institutional leaders and those concerned about diversity in graduate education must support mentoring. The DeAngelo and colleagues (2016) study identified that barriers and supports to mentoring typically fit within three areas: the culture of the institution, the culture of the academic discipline, or the culture of the academic profession. The culture of the institution either promotes or deters mentoring in a number of ways. For example, the institutional expectations related to teaching and advising can hinder the development of mentoring relationships, the educational mission can impede engagement in mentoring toward graduate study, and institutional support for graduate study can be relegated to a few programs that do not serve many students. Conversely, institutional culture can support the development of mentoring by creating settings where a group of faculty can be jointly committed to promoting mentoring and graduate study. These settings created cultural supports for mentoring despite an overall cultural ethos at the institution that was a deterrent. Ultimately, without a supportive institutional culture, DeAngelo and colleagues (2016) concluded that faculty members who wish to engage in mentoring must, in general, work against that overall institutional culture.

Secondly, DeAngelo and colleagues (2016) found that academic discipline can promote or deter mentoring behaviors. Sixty-one percent of STEM faculty compared to 18% of Humanities and Social Science faculty in the study discussed research experiences as a way to engage with students. This platform is naturally available to STEM disciplines where research labs provide a structure to facilitate interaction and opportunities for mentoring relationship to develop. Conversely, humanities and social science disciplines must work to use the classroom to engage students, where mentoring behavior may take additional effort to manifest.

Finally, the culture of the academic profession creates a host of barriers and few, if any, supports to mentoring behaviors. The culture of the academic profession regulates the availability of opportunities for extra-role behavior through a system of promotion and tenure that drives the importance and need for research productivity and lacks rewards for mentoring undergraduates or a recognition of the time it takes to engaging in mentoring students. Lastly, in the DeAngelo and colleagues study (2016), the faculty

workload related to teaching can lead faculty to overly focus on teaching as interaction, which can become a substitute for mentoring.

Shifting Culture to Support Mentoring

Given the importance of mentoring to access to graduate study, especially for underrepresented racial minority students, it is imperative that institutional leaders support the extra-role behaviors associated with developing these positive relationships. Specifically, we need to address the bias, racialized and otherwise, engrained in institutional cultures that have resulted in this crisis of mentoring of students of color at selective institutions. Shifting these cultures requires institutional leaders and other institutional actors to interrupt the oppressive structures that allow the bias inherent in these cultures to silently propagate limiting beliefs regarding the academic capacity students of color who attend these institutions⁶.

Moreover, individual actors and institutional leaders need to actively and demonstrably value faculty engagement in mentorship. Incorporating mentorship as a critical component of quality undergraduate education (DeAngelo et al., 2016) remains a vital first step in building cultures that supports mentoring. Overt communication from institutional leaders that emphasizes the necessity of faculty mentorship for undergraduate students in the creation of the next generation of faculty and a diverse professoriate serves as another foundational component of structurally supporting mentorship. Recognizing the time intensive nature and workload associated with mentoring and incorporating it into how faculty are rewarded externally validates this behavior and contributes to shifting culture. Only when we have the cultural shifts that produce equity as it relates who is mentored toward graduate education can we realize the potential to develop a diverse pipeline into the professoriate and learned professions.

Note

This brief is based on a presentation given at the Spring 2016 CGS Research & Policy Forum. Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Council of Graduate Schools.

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⁶ See McCoy, Winkle-Wagner, Luedke (2015) for an empirical exploration of this issue.

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