Near Peer Mentoring to Support Signature Work

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BACKGROUND

DU's Office for Public Good Strategy and Research (OPG) received a three-year (2023-2026) Arthur Vining Davis Foundations grant to enhance DU's Public Good vision by expanding student community-engaged signature work. As part of this funding, a near-peer mentoring program was envisioned to engage graduate students in:

1. Mentoring undergraduate (UG) signature work projects,
2. Developing career-relevant mentoring skills for graduate students,
3. Supporting faculty to increase UG signature work opportunities.

Near-peer mentoring is "a process where a mentor is close to the social, age, or professional level of the mentee. Near-peer mentors are better able to interact with and understand the opportunities and challenges of their mentees (Yap, et al, 2021)."

The Graduate Mentor Fellows (GMF) program was established during the 2023-24 academic year through the OPG. It was developed to prepare graduate students from diverse academic programs to mentor UG students engaged in signature work projects through:

- building community among graduate students from diverse programs;
- providing guided, positive support for graduate students to gain skills, knowledge, and experience in mentoring;
- developing knowledge of signature work and mentoring skills related to signature work;
- supporting graduate students' ability to mentor UG students;
- collaboratively working with faculty to mentor UG signature work; and
- increasing awareness and understanding of the purpose of mentoring in academic (and other professional) environments.

An important goal of the GMF program is to develop and promote best practices in mentoring across the institution; another goal is to support faculty to increase capacity for UG signature work. **Signature work** is a *high impact practice* through which students:

1. Transfer their learning from classes to projects that address complex problems of importance to the student and public good;
2. Have agency and play a key role in defining and carrying out projects;
3. Receive individualized mentoring.

WHAT DOES MENTORING MEAN TO YOU?

1. When you hear the word "mentor," what terms/descriptions come to mind?

2. What would you want out of *having* a mentor?

3. What would you want out of *being* a mentor?

4. Are there different types of mentors?
   If so, what type of mentor would you want to *be*? To *have*?

5. When you hear the word "mentee," what terms/descriptions come to mind?

6. What does a successful mentoring relationship look like to you?

PROCESS, TRAINING, IMPLEMENTATION

Thirty-seven (37) graduate students from seven (7) different campus colleges/programs started the GMF program in Fall 2023. Fall 2023 and Winter 2024 quarters focused on mentor training of GMF. Training consisted of four in-person meetings in Fall quarter 2023 and three in-person meetings in Winter quarter 2024. The GMF curriculum emphasized:

- creating community within the program,
- reflecting on academic and career mentoring experiences (Fig. 1),
- developing knowledge of the fundamentals of mentoring – various types of mentors and roles of mentors,
- strategies for developing effective mentoring relationships,
- opportunities and challenges of mentoring relationships,
- mentoring as leadership development,
- application of evidence-based best practices in academic and professional mentoring relationships,
- developing mentoring goals for Signature Work with UG students,
- identifying their own mentoring expectations for this program,
- setting mentoring goals for themselves and UG students,
- faculty collaborator pairings.

Thirty-two (32) GMF completed training and were paired with 14 faculty collaborators representing 6 different academic programs/colleges in Spring 2024. Approximately 160 UG students had mentoring available specifically for their signature work and/or community engaged projects (about 5 students/mentor, although some GMF had a greater number of UG mentees than others). GMF were matched with interested faculty based on:

- faculty signature work project and availability of faculty
- GMF area of study,
- GMF expressed interests in mentoring certain topics,
- language expertise,
- potential for GMF to provide unique perspective to signature work

Graduate Mentor Fellow distributions:

- 9 from the College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences (CAHSS),
- 3 GMF from the Daniels College of Business (DCB)
- 1 from the Graduate School of Professional Psychology (GSPP)
- 10 from the Korbel School of International Studies
- 3 from the Morgridge College of Education (MCE)
- 4 GMF from Natural Sciences and Mathematics (NSM)
- 3 from University College (Health/Medical Informatics)

Fourteen (14) faculty collaborators representing:

- CAHSS (4 faculty)
- Writing Program (3 faculty)
- DCB (2 faculty)
- Korbel School of International Studies (2 faculty)
- NSM (2 faculty)
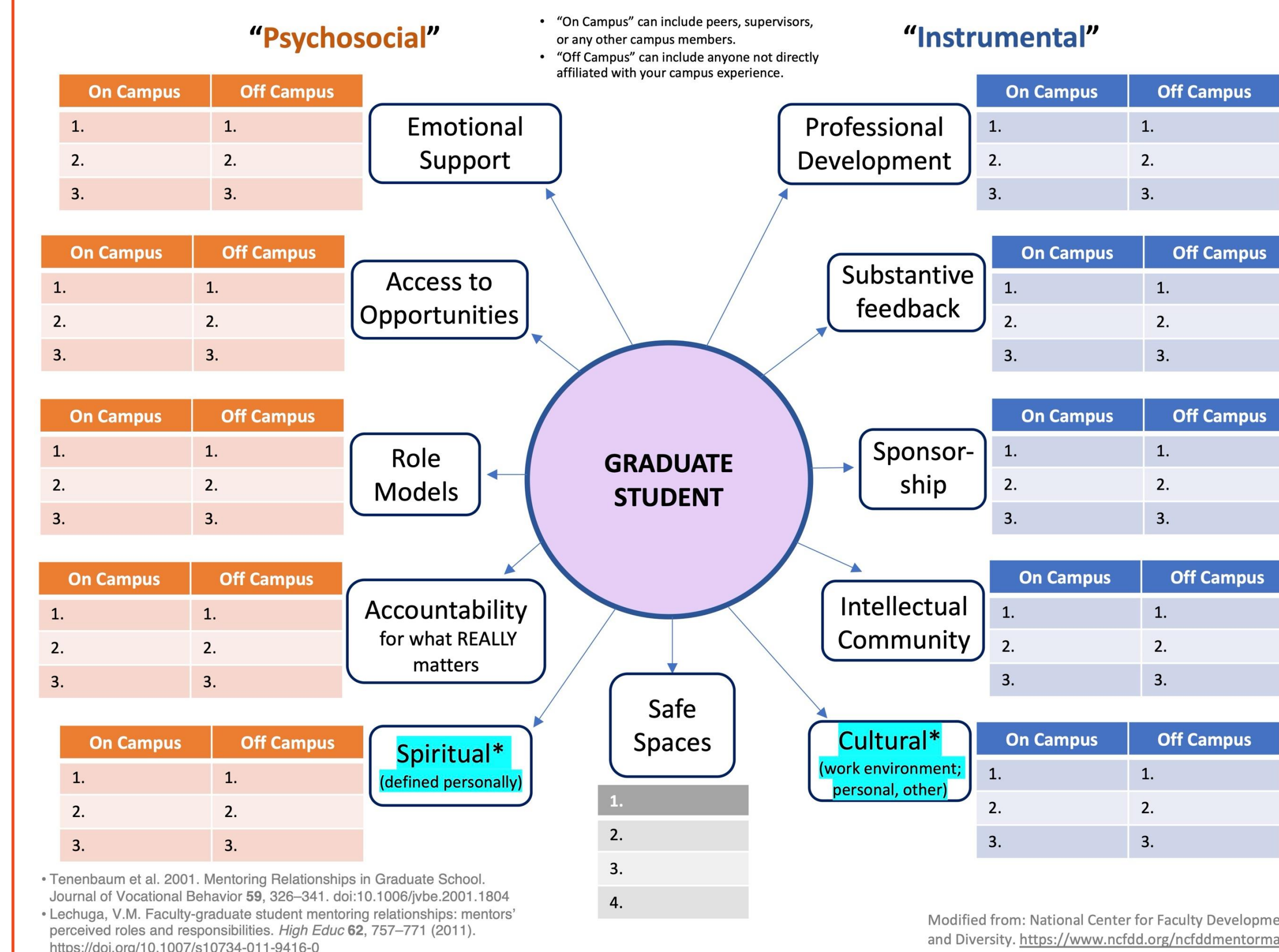- Office of Scholar Development and Fellowship (1 affiliate faculty)

Figure 1. Mapping mentoring relationships – Graduate Mentor Fellows (modified from NCFDD Mentor Map). GMF added components of Cultural and Spiritual mentoring, emphasizing inclusivity in both additions.

RESULTS

Qualitative surveys were utilized to assess the development of mentoring knowledge, skills, and perspectives as well as the impact of mentoring experiences. Pre and Post surveys were distributed to the Grad Mentor Fellow cohort (PRE = Oct 2023, 28 responses; POST = June 2024, 10 responses); one-time surveys were distributed to the Faculty Collaborators (4 responses) and UG students (4 responses) in June 2024. The data below represent responses from the *end of the mentoring experience* for the GMFs, Faculty, and UG students.

Graduate Mentor Fellows (n = 10)

Mentor training

- 90% of respondents felt the trainings:
  - "Introduced me to different, effective mentoring styles"
  - "Expanded my perception of what it means to be a mentor"
- 60% felt the trainings:
  - "Helped me develop interpersonal skills related to mentoring"
  - "Helped me feel prepared to mentor undergraduate students in Spring 2024."
- 50% felt the trainings:
  - "Fostered a safe learning space where I could ask questions and shared any feelings I had as it related to my mentor style"
  - "Provided a collaborative network of other graduate student mentors."
- 30% felt the trainings:
  - "Provided technical training on how to mentor UG students well"
  - "Helped me understand individual needs of undergraduate student mentees"

Professional/Personal development

- 80% reported that mentoring undergraduate students was gratifying for them
- 80% felt very skilled at active listening
- 70% responded they:
  - "Developed a better understanding of myself as a mentor;"
  - "Increased my knowledge and understanding of how to be an effective mentor"
- 60% felt very skilled at:
  - Providing constructive feedback,
  - Helping mentees establish goals,
  - Helping mentees develop strategies to meet their goals
- 50% felt that they:
  - Were helping make DU more inclusive,
  - Improved their leadership skills,
  - Improved their ability to engage in discussions with people they do not know,
  - Grew in their self-reflection abilities,
  - Developed a better understanding of themselves as a mentee,
  - Felt that their experience as a mentor in this program contributed to their own professional growth.
- 40% of GMF respondents indicated they felt "very skilled" at:
  - Setting expectations about having a productive mentor-mentee relationship
  - Aligning the mentor expectations with the mentee's expectations
  - Using strategies to enhance a mentee's excitement for their academic studies
  - Working effectively with mentees whose personal background is different from their own (age, race, gender, class religion, culture, family composition, etc).
  - Helping UG students compare what they learn in class to life experiences in order to determine their own perspective on issues."
- Only 30% of GMF felt very skilled at:
  - Establishing a relationship built on trust
  - Identifying different communication styles and strategies to improve communication
  - Motivating mentees

Relationship development with faculty and UG students

- 70% felt comfortable working with their faculty collaborators
- 50% felt their faculty collaborator was supportive of their mentoring efforts
- 50% felt they were well matched with a faculty collaborator who could utilize their academic and other knowledge, skills, background, and experiences in the UG mentoring (40% responded "sort of" to this same prompt)
- 50% of GMF felt very successful at creating a meaningful and effective working relationship with their faculty collaborator (40% responded "sort of" to this same prompt)

Faculty and UG Student responses (n = 4 each)

Faculty and UG student survey responses mentioned similar concerns/challenges:

- Creating a meaningful and effective working relationship with the GMF
- Better matching of GMF areas of study/expertise with student signature work projects

https://www.usgs.gov/media/images/mentoring-word-cloud

CONCLUSIONS

Overall, the first year of the Graduate Mentor Fellows program was a success. As seen in the responses from the POST-Mentoring surveys, most of the mentors felt they gained valued skills and knowledge related to mentoring. However, it is also noted that design of the training experiences can be improved to better meet the needs and goals of the GMF program. As a first-year program, we established a training framework, timeframe, and topics based on interviews and discussions with graduate students and faculty from a variety of academic programs prior to the start of the GMF development; we did not, however, interview undergraduates engaged in Signature Work projects to understand what might be most beneficial to them. This could be an area of improvement.

Arguably, the greatest overall area of improvement within the actual Signature Work mentoring experience relates to the process of engaging UG with their GMF. This was the most challenging element for both the GMF and the UG students. Extending the mentoring to two quarters instead of one was the most common suggestion and will likely contribute to better mentoring outcomes for all.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

We plan to revise the training and pairing timeframes for future years such that the bulk of the mentor training will occur during the fall quarter; GMF will be matched with Faculty collaborators for both the Winter and Spring quarters to promote more meaningful and productive near-peer mentor relationships and improve Signature Work mentoring outcomes. In addition, we are exploring the possibility of cohort-based training such that graduate students from specific graduate programs will all be trained together.

Increasing the duration of the mentoring engagement from one quarter to two in the future will likely improve the relationship development for all participants (graduate students, faculty, UG students). A focus on enhancing intradisciplinary cohort matching will likely support better signature work engagement and outcomes across all participant groups as well. This is particularly evident in a response from one faculty member: "My GMF helped to foster a thriving community in our lab. We had more undergraduates than most years and everyone seemed to be having a positive experience. The support spilled out to positively affect the whole community of our lab."

REFERENCES

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