

Navigating the Teaching Profession: How Mentorship in a Teacher Preparation Program Works to Support Academic Development in Black Women

Dr. Samantha L. Strachan¹, Ms. D'Ajanae Ballard²

¹Alabama A&M University, Normal, Alabama, USA, samantha.strachan@aamu.edu

²Alabama A&M University, Normal, Alabama, USA, dballar2@bulldogs.aamu.edu

ABSTRACT: This paper will briefly expound on how a teacher preparation program, at an Historically Black College and University (HBCU), pairs graduate research assistants with mentors to support their development as teachers-in-training and burgeoning researchers. We will focus on the Black women who serve as graduate research assistants and explore how mentoring can be used as a tool to support their growth and development in academic environments. The author and co-author of this paper will serve as an example of the mentor-mentee relationship.

KEYWORDS: Black women, mentorship, HBCU, teacher education, teaching profession

Introduction

Several scholars have examined mentorship in academia and its importance for the personal and professional development of Black women at various points in their academic or professional careers (Jordan-Zachary 2004; Cropps & Esters 2018; Johnson-Bailey et al. 2015). As noted by Johnson-Bailey et al. (2015), “Mentorship has long been a means by which individuals aspiring toward upper mobility or career success find support from a person who has already achieved that desired goal” (para. 5). Unfortunately, identifying appropriate mentors in their selected field of study may not always be an easy task for Black women in graduate school (McClure 2019), including Black women who are pursuing graduate degrees in education. This paper will briefly describe how one teacher preparation program, at an Historically Black College and University (HBCU), provides mentorship opportunities to Black women while they pursue their graduate degrees in a teaching field. We will discuss how the women serve as Graduate Research Assistants (GRAs) to faculty and, in turn, faculty serve as mentors who assist the graduate students with navigating not only graduate school, but also the teaching profession.

Program Activity: Strengthening Teacher Education

Alabama A&M University is an Historically Black College and University (HBCU) located in Normal, Alabama, USA. The university is the largest HBCU in the state of Alabama and boasts enrollment of approximately 6,000 students (Alabama A&M University *Points of Excellence* 2023a). In the fall of 2022, 86% of the students who attended Alabama A&M University identified as Black (Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System Report 2022).

The Department of Teacher Education and Leadership is housed in the College of Education, Humanities, and Behavioral Sciences, one of four academic colleges at the university. The Department of Teacher Education and University offers a number of programs in teacher education and instructional leadership, including at the bachelors, masters, specialists, and doctoral levels. At the graduate level, students can earn degrees in several areas including Pre-Elementary Education, Elementary Education, Secondary Education, Special Education, General Education, and Instructional Leadership (Alabama A&M University *Graduate Programs* 2023b).

One of the goals of the department is to ensure that students are provided with well-rounded experiences that contribute significantly to their development as future teachers and school leaders. As such, the department has received funding to strengthen its teacher education programs by providing opportunities for graduate teacher education candidates to serve as Graduate Research Assistants (GRAs) and assist faculty with conducting research. GRAs also participate in professional development opportunities that serve to support their academic development, including attending local and national conferences, presenting at conferences in their field, participating in grant writing activities, developing manuscripts for consideration for publication, and participating in any other scholarly activities deemed as important for GRAs. In turn, faculty provide support and mentorship to the GRAs as they complete their studies. At the center of the *Strengthening Teacher Education Program Activity* are mentor-mentee relationships that are established between faculty and graduate students.

As part of McClure's (2019) study on the experiences of Black women in doctoral programs, the researcher identified three important themes that impact the experiences of Black women in graduate school. One of the themes discussed by the researcher is mentoring. As noted by McClure (2019), "Participation in positive mentoring experiences has the potential to help Black women overcome and reduce their negative experiences by providing them with tools to navigate the academy. Thus, allowing them to feel more connected to their institutions...." (p.55). For the Black women who serve as GRAs in the Department of Teacher Education and Leadership, mentoring is considered an essential component of their academic development. Well-established mentor-mentee relationships can ensure that GRAs are provided with the "tools" needed to navigate the teacher education pathway and the teaching profession.

How the Program Works

Graduate Research Assistants (GRAs) are identified from the graduate student body in the Department of Teacher Education and Leadership. Graduate students who are interested in serving as a GRA complete an application and provide a personal statement indicating why they would like to become a research assistant with the Strengthening Teacher Education Program. In addition to the application and personal statement, GRAs are required to meet the following criteria if they are selected:

1. Must maintain a GPA of 3.25, on a 4.00 scale, throughout their programs.
2. Commit to working with a mentor for at least 20 hours per week.
3. Commit to participating in scholarly and professional development opportunities.
4. Work to publish at least one article and present at local and national conferences during their tenure as a GRA.

The program works to maintain a maximum of five (5) graduate research assistants who concurrently work as GRAs in the department. GRAs can serve in the department for a total of two years while they work on their graduate degrees, and they are paid a stipend during their tenure. While the program is open to Black graduate students enrolled in any one of the teacher education programs, most participants have been Black women who are new to the teaching profession. Hence, after participants are interviewed and accepted into the program, they are paired with faculty mentors who are content experts and who have a track record of working well with students in their respective programs.

The Mentor-Mentee Experience: The Authors as an Example

As an example, we seek to highlight how we, the author (mentor) and co-author (mentee) of this paper and participants in the *Strengthening Teacher Education Program Activity*, approach the

mentoring experience. Kern et al. (2019) identified three factors that might enhance the quality of mentor-mentee relationships. According to the researchers, the age of the participants, matching ethnicities, and matching genders are possible factors that may impact the mentoring relationship (Kern et al. 2019). While Kern et al. (2019) did note that the literature showed mixed results when examining these factors, we do believe that these factors work to the benefit of our mentor-mentee relationship. For example, there is only a 12-year age difference between us as mentor and mentee. Furthermore, we both identify as Black women.

Due to our participation in the *Strengthening Teacher Education Program Activity*, our mentor-mentee relationship has been ongoing for a year. Although focused on academic development and the development of professional and research skills of GRAs, our mentor-mentee relationship is grounded in openness as guidance is provided and a willingness to learn is exhibited on both sides. The following statement from the co-author (mentee) encapsulates our relationship:

“While in the program, I have gained experience from writing proposals. I get the chance to explain why my research is significant and it gives me a platform to demonstrate my projects. Most importantly, this program has given me the opportunity to have a mentor. I am fortunate to have a mentor who is Black and a woman. It is vital that Black women have mentors because we are able to see someone who is successful and looks just like us. The support I gain from working with Dr. Strachan is great because I can ask questions about my education and career and receive honest feedback. She is also able to quickly connect me with people who can better assist me when my concerns or questions are out of her scope. Having a black woman as my mentor provides motivation to continue pursuing my career as an educator based on how successful she is. I know that there will always be someone rooting for me to win because of the mentee and mentor relationship we have.”

She continues by stating that she feels more “well-prepared, confident, and optimistic” about her experiences in graduate school and her training as a teacher. As we work together in the program, we will continue to examine how the mentor-mentee relationship impacts her academic development as well as the academic and professional development of Black women who serve as GRAs in the department.

Conclusion

This paper offers a very preliminary discussion into how one program seeks to enhance academic development in Black women who serve as Graduate Research Assistants (GRAs) in a teacher education program. Pairing Black women with mentors can serve as one avenue to assisting Black women with developing academic and professional skills as they work as research assistants in graduate school. Therefore, we will continue to examine mentor-mentee relationships as established in the department and the Strengthening Teacher Education Program Activity. We hope that further examination of the mentor-mentee relationship will provide us with insights into how Black women can be supported as they navigate the teaching pathway and profession.

References

- Alabama A&M University. 2023a. *Points of Excellence*. Retrieved from <https://www.aamu.edu/about/points-of-excellence.html>.
- Alabama A&M University. 2023b. *Graduate Programs*. Retrieved from <https://www.aamu.edu/academics/graduate-studies/graduate-program-listing.html?programTypeFilter=all&collegeFilter=all&sortFilter=department>.

- Cropps, T. A., & Esters, L. T. 2018, July 10. "Sisters, other-mothers, and aunties: The importance of informal mentors for Black women graduate students at predominantly white institutions." *Diverse: Issues in Higher Education*. Retrieved from <https://diverseeducation.com/article/119653/>.
- Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System Report. (2022). *Alabama A&M University Fall Enrollment 2022-2023*. Retrieved May 8, 2023.
- Johnson-Bailey, J., Lasker-Scott, T., & Sealey-Ruiz, Y. 2015. "Mentoring while black & female: The gendered literacy phenomenon of Black women mentors." *Adult Education Research Conference*. Retrieved from <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2015/papers/29>.
- Jordan-Zachery, J. S. 2004. "Reflections on mentoring: Black women and the academy." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 37(4): 875-877.
- Kern, L., Harrison, J.R., Custer, B.E., and Mehta, P. D. 2019. "Factors that enhance the quality of relationships between mentors and mentees during check and connect." *Behavioral Disorders* 44(3): 148-161.
- McCLure, C. L. 2019. "Where are all my sista's@?!: Exploring the graduate school experiences of Black women and implications on faculty career choice." *Journal of Underrepresented & Minority Progress* 3(1): 51-66.