



Mentoring for Learner Success

Executive Summary of the American Council on Education's Learner Success Laboratory at Elon University

February 18, 2022

No other institution is looking at mentoring with this intensity, particularly using the constellation model. This report makes the mentoring work that is already happening at Elon explicit. Your Relationship-Rich Mentoring Map also is excellent and should be helpful for prospective mentors.

W. Brad Johnson, Professor at the U.S. Naval Academy and John Hopkins University

Mentoring needs to be clearly articulated to the campus community. You offer a clear and common definition of mentoring while still demonstrating the value of other meaningful relationships across campus. As constellation mentorship becomes institutionalized, there needs to be consideration of the capacity for faculty and staff of color.

Dawn Whitehead, Vice President, Office of Global Citizenship for
Campus, Community and Careers, AAC&U

There was great interest, engagement, and thoughtful conversation about mentoring during the site visits. Boldly Elon is an ambitious plan but high participation in the ACE initiatives at all levels speaks to the commitment and hope to improve the experiences of all students through mentoring.

Lyssa Palu-ay, ACE Lab Advisor and Dean of Justice, Equity and Transformation at the Massachusetts
College of Art and Design

#MentoringMatters

I have a few [mentors] that have just been phenomenal. I would say that mentoring has been the cornerstone of my Elon experience. I didn't expect that when I came in, but I have been absolutely overjoyed with the amount of guidance that I feel and support that I felt like I've had. [My mentor] is incredible ... and really great in her field and knows so much. And so every time we talk, I leave with more questions than answers ... like my brain is exploding. She does a really awesome job of letting me explore things on my own while still giving me guidance.

(Perspective of a mentee)

To me, a mentor is a person who provides scaffolding and support to get you to where you want to be next, hopefully in a positive and encouraging way, but also with constructive feedback. I think the job of a mentor is to help you grow, and sometimes growth is painful. So, a combination of both pushing and encouragement to help you reach your goals.

(Perspective of a mentor)

Many people have asked me, "Why is it that you chose the work that you do?" I believe that I am constantly growing and learning and becoming, and this work allows me to maximize that opportunity because it's so relationship-rich and so diverse and so challenging.

(Perspective of a mentor)

#MentoringConstellations

I feel like there's somebody who is an expert in every area of my life. There's a big intersectionality with all parts of my identity. So that's very, very important because I may not understand all the aspects of all the things that I am, but at least there's somebody that knows enough about one aspect.

(Perspective of a mentee)

I think it's useful to have a number of people who serve different needs, and it helps people develop a sense of belonging, it helps people develop a sense of, "I can problem solve, I can figure out who I need to talk to or what I need to do next in order to address whatever issue is going on in my life."

(Perspective of a mentor)

I love this whole idea about the constellation of mentors ... part of my role as a mentor is connecting them to other people. And that's such an important part because often I'm not the right person. ... By modeling collaboration and demonstrating it, and then promoting it and facilitating it, I see that as an important part of what we do, absolutely.

(Perspective of a mentor)

The question is, if there's a constellation, how are students making connections? It's not just creating the constellation, it's who's helping them see it, who's helping them make sense of their place in the constellation and their connections between the experiences? And again, I do think it is possible to just say, "Constellation of mentors, every student has one." But being Elon, I want us to go to the next step of, "Where's the integration, where's the conscious reflection, the making sense of [strengths, interests and values]"?

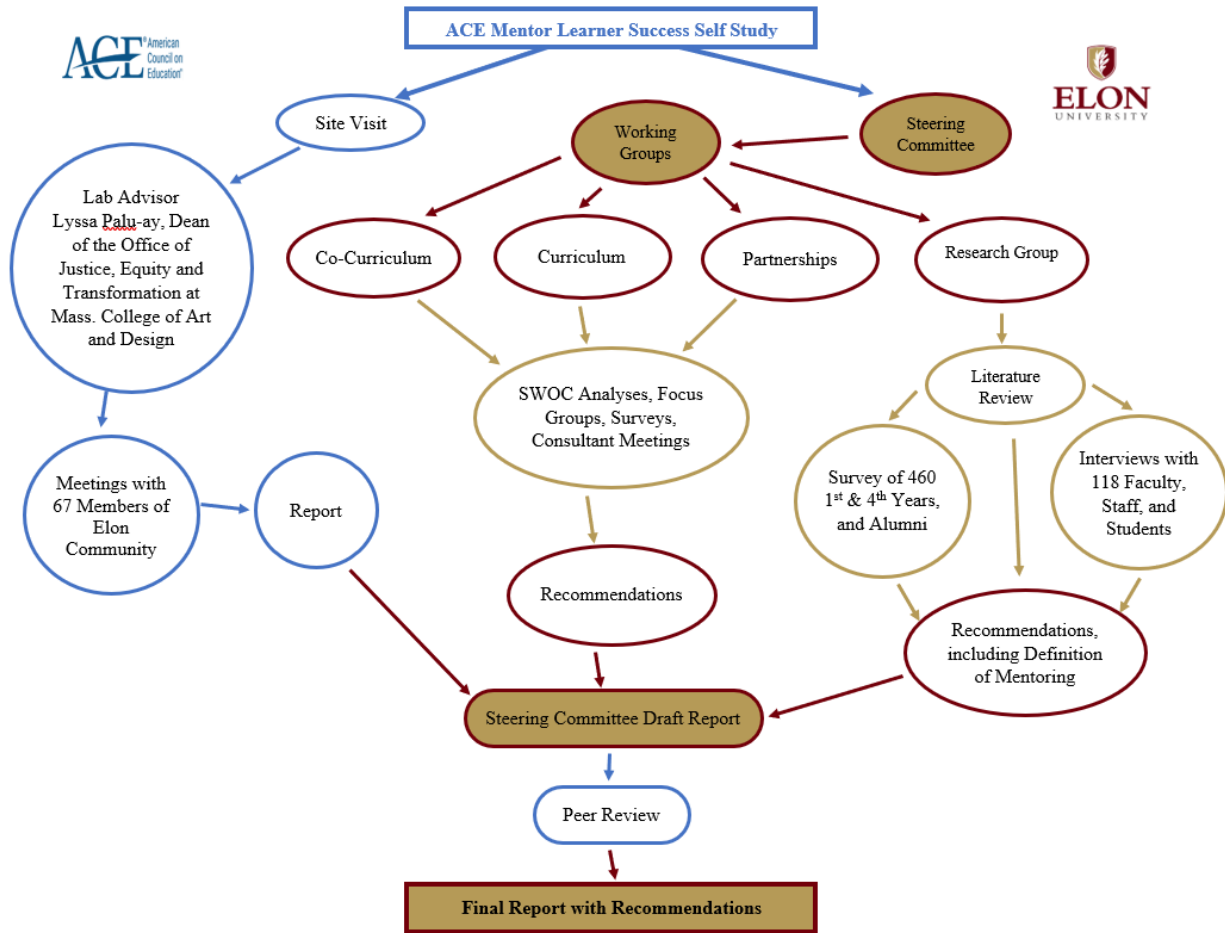
(Perspective of a mentor)

We were honored to be accepted into the inaugural cohort of the ACE Learner Success Lab with an institutional focus on “Mentoring for Learner Success.” President Book charged the Steering Committee on November 5, 2020, observing that mentoring is the cornerstone of Boldly Elon and the ACE work will be crucial in laying the foundation for a future task force charged with developing plans for implementing Boldly Elon mentoring initiatives.

Adapting the ACE model and self-study process to fit the Elon context and focus (see Figure 1), we conducted a 12-month self-study with the following **processes and outcomes**:

- External site visit by ACE Lab Advisor Lyssa Palu-ay with 67 campus constituents (January 19 – 21, 2021)
 - External site visit report
 - Thematic analysis
- Formation of four working groups: Curriculum; Co-Curriculum; Partnerships (student employment, alumni, and community partners); and Research.
- Working group SWOC analyses
- Data collection including:
 - Working groups’ interviews, focus groups, and surveys with campus and community constituents
 - Research group
 - Interviews with 118 faculty, staff, and students
 - Surveys with 460 members of the 2024 and 2021 classes and alumni
- Creation of a “Definition Package,” tested and revised iteratively with community members, including:
 - Definition of mentoring relationships in the Elon context
 - Overview of the research
 - Composite cases and constellation maps
 - Relationship-rich map, explanation, and models
- Development of preliminary recommendations by each working group
- Steering Committee critical review of and feedback on recommendations
- Campus Conversation (November 5, 2021)
- Steering Committee facilitators’ feedback on Campus Conversation
- Development of integrated set of recommendations using an ecological systems approach
- Draft of final report for external peer review site visit
- Peer review virtual site visit by Brad Johnson, Professor at the U.S. Naval Academy and John Hopkins University; Dawn Whitehead, Vice President, Office of Global Citizenship for Campus, Community and Careers, AAC&U; and Lyssa Palu-ay, ACE Lab Advisor and Dean at MassArt (January 31, 2022)
- Submission of final report to ACE and Elon (February 2022)
- Communication of findings through social media, website, presentations, and publications (Spring 2022)

Figure 1. Self-Study Process



Primary Recommendations

Elon University's 2030 strategic plan, Boldly Elon, calls for the adoption of a groundbreaking mentoring model in which **all students will learn to build meaningful mentoring constellations that include near peers, staff, faculty, and others beyond the university**. As written in the plan, “this lifelong constellation of mentors will emerge as a hallmark of an Elon education, guiding reflection to integrate learning across students’ educational and professional trajectories and engaging all students in developing essential skills and fluencies to shape the future.”

Based on the self-study research, the ACE Mentoring for Learner Success Committee developed the following integrated set of recommendations (more detailed recommendations can be found in the body of the full report). These recommendations were developed utilizing a campus-wide ecological systems model, and approved, with appropriate cautions, by the Steering Committee.

- 1) **Adopt and consistently apply a common definition of mentoring relationships that offers clarity about what constitutes a mentoring relationship within a continuum of other meaningful relationships in a supportive, relationship-rich context.**

The following definition was generated out of an extensive review of extant theory and scholarly research, further refined through interviews and surveys conducted with the Elon community, and iteratively tested and revised in response to extensive feedback.

Mentoring relationships are fundamentally developmental and learner-centered. Within Elon’s relationship-rich campus environment, mentoring relationships are distinct from other meaningful relationships in that they:

- promote academic, social, personal, cultural, and career-focused learning and development in intentional, sustained, and integrative ways;
- evolve over time, becoming more reciprocal and mutually beneficial; and
- are individualized, attending to mentees’ developing strengths and shifting needs, mentors’ expertise, and all members’ identities.

Although mentoring sometimes is conceptualized as a one-to-one hierarchical relationship, mentoring relationships function within a broader set of relationships known as a mentoring constellation. The number and nature of specific relationships within these mentoring constellations vary across individuals, time, and contexts, with different mentors and peer mentors offering varied forms of support and expertise. As a result, mentors play significant roles serving one or more mentoring functions, though few mentors will serve all mentoring functions.

The full report includes a comprehensive definition package.

- 2) **Make the mentoring constellation model a signature component of students' Elon education and ensure students have multiple pathways to identify and develop mentoring relationships, with attention to building agency and capacity across all years.**

High-quality mentoring demands multiple guided opportunities for reflection across all years, from the first-year experiences, such as Core courses, through advanced and culminating experiences, such as capstones and signature work. Based on recent task force reports and extensive research in the literature and on our campus, we know that we must attend particularly to the needs of our students with minoritized identities so that they are not only succeeding but also thriving.

- 3) **Develop context-specific professional development for students, staff, faculty, alumni, and other participants in Elon's mentoring initiatives, to support the integration or deepening of mentoring relationships within a constellation framework.**

This recommendation represents a significant need identified by all members of our campus community in our research.

- 4) **Develop a centralized infrastructure with significant resources to facilitate, support, and promote the University's curricular and co-curricular mentoring initiatives, basing the design, delivery, and assessment of specific programs on the mentoring relationships definition and the accompanying mentoring constellation model.**

In the same way that high-quality teaching is supported by an ecosystem of campus-wide resources, mentoring must also be threaded throughout our campus and *be the work of all departments*.

Relationship-rich Mentoring Map

Mentoring Relationships and a Relationship-rich Environment

In a relationship-rich model of education, relationships of many kinds matter. As Felten and Lambert (2020) argue, “Key is not tasking each student with identifying a single mentor who will meet all of their needs, but rather creating a relationship-rich environment where students will have frequent opportunities to connect with many peers, faculty, staff, and others on and off campus” (p. 6). In this model and from this perspective, mentoring relationships become one of many kinds of meaningful relationships that, together, provide a supportive context for learning and development: a mentor constellation.

As Ragins and Kram (2007) articulate, “We now recognize that mentoring relationships exist within the context of developmental networks” (p. 9). Mentoring relationships are, therefore, helpfully understood within a broader context of supportive, developmental relationships: a relationship-rich environment. They do not form whole immediately. Mentoring relationships develop over time, emanating out of other forms of relationships and contexts.

For instance, the mentoring relationships faculty and students develop frequently begin within the classroom, wherein the faculty serve in the role of teachers not mentors, at least initially. Those teacher-student relationships that develop into mentoring relationships do so over time and, often, outside the classroom context in which their relationships have the opportunity to germinate.

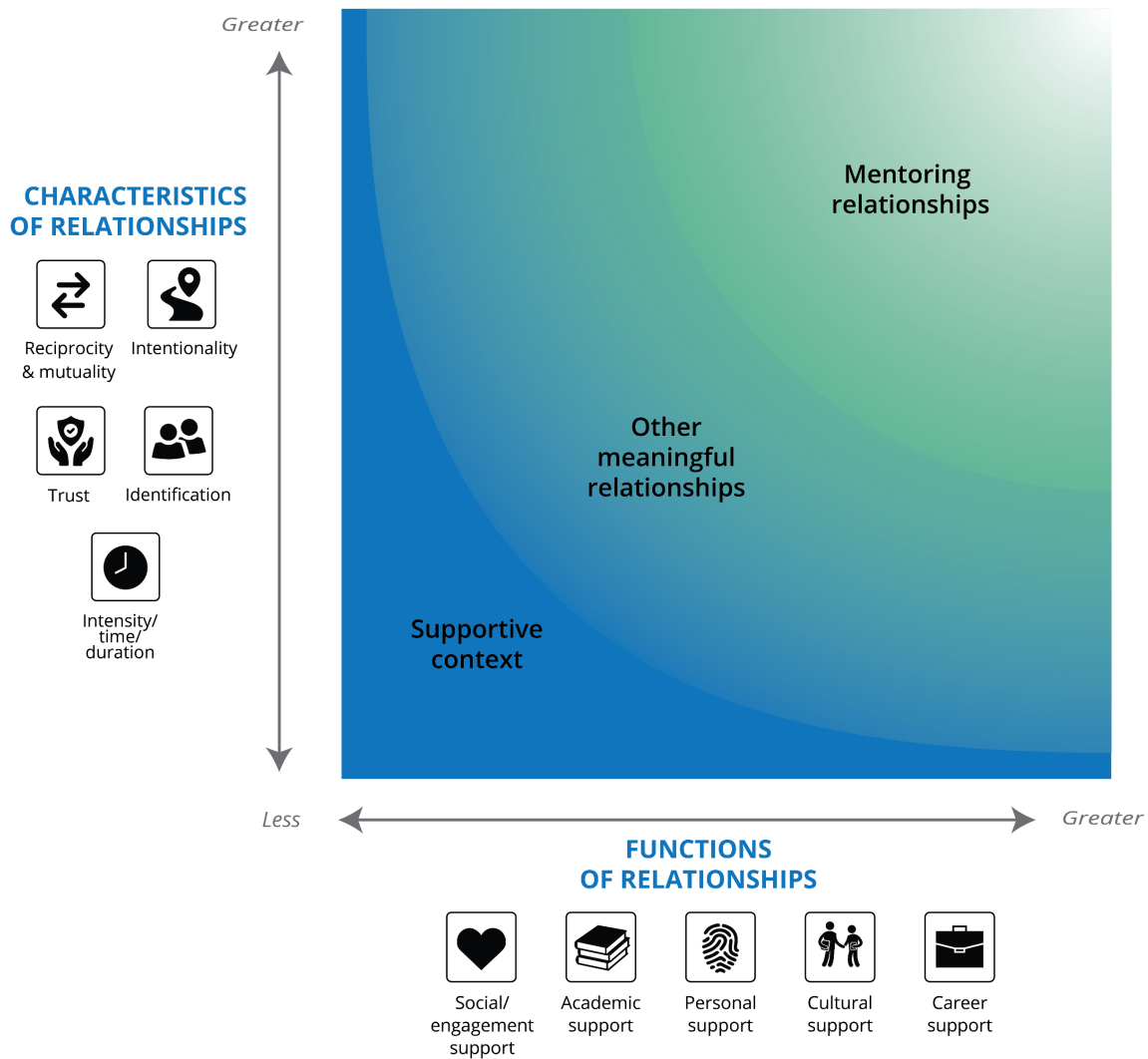
Of course, mentoring relationships form across a variety of contexts beyond the classroom, with on-campus employment functioning as a significant location for such relationship development. Though initially serving in the role of supervisor, staff across campus are often identified by students as key mentors, with the “office” context, understood broadly, serving as a locale out of which mentoring relationships have an opportunity to develop.

Teacher and supervisor are two kinds of meaningful relationships that reside within a broader relationship-rich higher education context. They are two among many, including advisor, RA, classmate, coach, teammate, librarian, and tutor. These relationships hold *potential* for developing into mentoring relationships, but they are distinct from them. Mentoring relationships require time to develop, and they do so out of other meaningful relationships.

These initial relationships and the contexts out of which they form are, thus, critical to the *possibility* of mentoring relationships. The development of mentoring relationships relies on this broader context and set of relationships. Put another way, the full range of meaningful relationships is not only significant but critical.

The Relationship-rich Mentoring Map below represents one way to understand, identify, analyze, measure, assess, and plan the development of a relationship-rich environment that recognizes the multiplicity and value of many relationships, including mentoring relationships. It draws salient relational characteristics and functions from the literature on mentors and mentoring to construct sliding measures that map out various kinds of relationships that support student learning and development.

Relationship-Rich Mentoring Map



The graphic depicts **three kinds of valued relationship spaces** (mentoring relationships, other meaningful relationships, and supportive context) defined by a set of relational

measures (mentoring characteristics and functions), each depicted on a sliding scale from less to greater.

1. The upper-right of the graphic marks the space of **mentoring relationships**. In that space, there could be a variety of relationships, but all would be marked by individual relational measures that tended, in general, towards the “greater” end of the scale.
2. Moving toward the bottom-left away from the mentoring relationship space, the graphic marks the spaces of **other meaningful relationships**. These spaces recognize a variety of other important relationships within the relationship-rich educational environment that aid student development and offer important forms of support.
3. Finally, the bottom-left of the graphic marks relationships that may be less significant independently but are part of a broader, **supportive context**. Much of the literature on mentors and mentoring addresses the value of (a) a broader institutional culture that values relationships, (b) the individuals that make up and activate those cultures, and (c) the opportunities for and development of the individuals within, as well as the institution as a whole. This third relationship space may include less well-developed relationships, but as in the case of a residence hall, they can provide a broad supportive context.

Relationships matter, across the board. The Relationship-rich Mentoring Map helps us understand, value, and differentiate the wide range of meaningful relationships that characterize a relationship-rich educational environment, while also distinguishing mentoring relationships as special and significant among other meaningful relationships.

Why “Mentoring Relationships”?

A great deal of the literature focuses on “mentors” or “mentoring” as a primary construct and unit of analysis. These orientations tend to lift up a single individual with exceptional characteristics (a mentor) who serves deeply and holistically a wide range of functions (mentoring). As a result, they tend to lead toward three problematic trajectories:

- an all-or-nothing end, whereby one is either a mentor or is not
- an overloading of expectations, whereby one has to serve excellently across a wide range or roles and functions
- a diminishing of other meaningful relationships, whereby those who offer important supportive and developmental relationships are considered less valuable or are not recognized or valued at all because they do not meet the criteria of the singularly valued mentor.

As a foil to these problematic trajectories and in a democratizing effort to recognize a wide range of valued relationships and functions, institutional practices often lean toward overly broad,

inclusive definitions that erase significant differences between kinds of relationships: everything and nothing becomes mentoring.

The construct of *mentoring relationships*, rather than mentors or mentoring, frames a differently powerful orientation. Approaching mentors and mentoring from the construct of *mentoring relationships* does not deny that there are such individuals – mentors – serving others in exceptional ways – mentoring – and through very deep and broad relationships. Instead, it places those kinds of relationships – mentoring relationships – within a broader set of relationships that are different but of great value and even critical to the possibility of mentoring relationship development.

Brief Conclusions

A constellation model, in which students have multiple meaningful relationships with peers, staff, and faculty, among others who provide multifaceted support and guidance, acknowledges the complex realities of developmental relationships and the continuum along which mentoring occurs. In this model, mentoring relationships become one of many kinds of relationships that, together, provide a supportive context for learning and development. Because mentoring relationships are sustained, developmental, and learner-centered, it is imperative that we scaffold opportunities for students to develop agency to build mentoring relationships throughout their time at Elon, through diverse pathways in the curriculum and co-curriculum. A mentoring constellation framework fits our institutional context and offers opportunities for mentors to connect with and support each other and their mentees.

Throughout the self-study, a number of compelling questions and emergent tensions surfaced around topics such as academic and student life mentorship; formal and informal mentoring structures; the necessity of training and time/capacity/resources to undertake it; selective, programmatic mentoring and scaling up; students' need for mentors from marginalized identities; and saturation, capacity, and overloading a few, highly sought and talented mentors. The mentoring initiatives developed out of this self-study must be responsive to emergent contextual challenges, integrated with our work on diversity, equity, and inclusion, and considerate of human and systems capacities that bear the strains of scale, scope, and quality.

Steering Committee Members

Co-Leaders: Maureen Vandermaas-Peeler, Amy Allocco, Nancy Carpenter, and Sylvia Muñoz
Committee Members: Stephanie Baker, Vanessa Bravo, Steve DeLoach, Marcus Elliott, Bob Frigo, Shannon Lundeen, Jessie L. Moore, Scott Morrison, Tim Peeples, Brandy Propst, Sandra Reid, Joan Ruelle, Evan Small, and Sean Walker