

# Mentoring Mentality: Understanding the Mentorship Experiences of National FFA Officers

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## Abstract

*National FFA officers are propelled into a very public position when elected to serve the organization. With an expectation to serve as leaders, officers spend the year interacting with FFA members, sponsors, legislatures, parents, teachers, and others. In order to perform in the highest capacity, they often turn to mentors to guide them through personal and professional development. Little is currently known about what makes mentorship effective for students who undergo an extensive, culminating leadership development experience. This qualitative study examined the mentoring experiences of 12 past national FFA officers over the course of four life stages, beginning the year prior to election as national officer and concluding at least two years following their year of service. Using a phenomenological approach through a lens of mentor relationship theory and leader-member exchange, a journey map was created to better understand how these individuals describe mentorship and the quality of mentorship experienced over the course of the four life stages. Findings indicated effective mentorship must have high affect and professional respect, with contribution and loyalty being less important to the relationship. Implications exist for protégés, mentors, and leadership practitioners who facilitate mentorship programs or have direct mentor-protégé relationships with college-aged students.*

**Keywords:** mentoring; mentorship; national FFA officers

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## Introduction and Relevant Literature

Mentorship has influenced the lives of both students and adults in educational, career, and personal developmental aspects (Dennis, 1993). The mentor-protégé relationship has existed to transmit knowledge, skills, attitudes, and culture regarding the protégé's career choice or personal life through counsel, advice, guidance, and support (Johnson, 2016; Jones et al., 2014). This mentoring relationship can be important for both the mentor and protégé, and Huwe and Johnson (2003) described the need to

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be a good protégé in order to reap the benefits of a successful mentor relationship, instead of exclusively relying on the mentor to make the relationship beneficial for them both.

Agricultural leadership development programs have yielded successful, capacity-building results (Kaufman & Carter, 2005), and mentorship has been an important aspect in formal leadership development programs to increase participants' leadership capacity over the long term (Lamm et al., 2017). For example, Strawn et al. (2017) reported increased relationship-building skills, a deeper understanding of leadership, exposure to new leadership experiences, and increased communication skills through leadership development programming with an effective mentor.

Previous literature has suggested students who self-select into extra-curricular activities experience higher levels of motivation, satisfaction, self-efficacy, and leadership efficacy (Allen & Hartman, 2009). Leadership development practitioners have intertwined mentorship into extra-curricular activities, leadership programs, and career pathways to create more positive outcomes for program participants. The mentors involved fill roles of parents, teachers, club leaders, peers, faculty, student affairs professionals, and advisors, among others (Crisp & Alvarado-Young, 2018). When mentorship occurs effectively, students' perceptions of their leadership capacity, leadership identity development, and leadership skills are positively impacted (Crisp & Alvarado-Young, 2018).

In analyses of agriculture teacher mentoring programs, Tummons et al. (2016) found perceived similarity between the protégé and mentor (values, beliefs, personality, etc.) was a predictor of effective mentorship and led to more prepared and confident teachers. Additionally, when personality, access, and trust were intentionally considered in creating the pair, more effective mentoring relationships developed for cooperating teachers and preservice teachers (Jones et al., 2014). When those criteria were carefully considered to match both individuals in the dyad, career advancement mentoring and personal learning was more effective (Kram & Ragins, 2007). Additionally, mentoring within agricultural leadership had greater capacity for effectiveness if expectations were communicated to both the mentors and protégés (Lamm et al., 2017). Finally, agricultural industry leaders want students to possess skills such as dependability, problem-solving, critical thinking, clear communication, and crisis response to be successful employees in the workforce (Easterly III et al., 2017), which are interpersonal skills effective mentoring has developed (Haber-Curran et al., 2017); therefore, effective mentorship is greatly needed within the context of agricultural leadership development.

Many reports have recognized the National FFA Organization, formally Future Farmers of America, for its efforts in developing leadership skills in its members (Ahrens et al., 2015; Robertson, 2019). The National FFA Organization provides "a path to achievement in premier leadership, personal growth and career success through agricultural education" for students (2019b, para. 4). The organization has also fostered deeper development of a few selected individuals which are elected to serve as national FFA officers (NOs). "Each year, the National FFA Organization selects six student members to represent the organization as a national FFA officer," spending one year, as a "year of service" in their respective elected position (National FFA, 2019a, para. 1). The officers participate in leadership development training, represent student membership during meetings, facilitate workshops focused on building leadership skills and knowledge for FFA members, deliver motivational speeches, and serve as advocates for FFA on a global scale (National FFA, 2019a). Throughout the year of service, each officer travels over 100,000 miles, interacting with FFA members, business leaders, government officials, the general public, and more, all while leading personal growth and leadership training conferences for FFA members (Woodard, 2018).

The NOs are traditional college-aged students who take a year-long leave of absence from their studies to fulfill their responsibilities after being successfully elected. Marken and Auter (2018) reported college students who identified a mentor from their time in college most often identified college professors as being mentors for the students. However, NOs remove themselves from their higher education studies for at least a year, and the mentors they choose have not been documented.

Lambert (2018) stressed the importance of developing a mentor relationship in a specific life context, which highlighted the need to examine mentoring experiences of college-aged students and evaluate what made the relationship effective. This study was conducted to further investigate the mentoring relationships of these student leaders who become the face of FFA, which has close and longstanding ties to agricultural education.

This research contributes to the American Association for Agricultural Education (AAAE) National Research Agenda's Research Priority 5: Efficient and effective agricultural education programs (Roberts et al., 2016). Understanding the formal and non-formal mentorship experienced by NOs before, during, and after their year of service expands the conversation about what makes mentorship effective for students, and especially student leaders. This could prove beneficial to mentors and protégés engaging in mentoring relationships, as well as leadership practitioners who are facilitating mentoring in their programs. Focus on mentorship in agriculture, and agriculture teaching, has grown in recent years; therefore, understanding effective mentorship is imperative.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study used a framework stemming from Mentor Relationship Theory (Kram, 1983, 1985, 1996) and Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) Theory (Dansereau et al., 1975). Kram (1983, 1985, 1996) stated mentorship exists in two basic developmental spaces: career (or vocational) and psychosocial. Vocational development consists of narrowly focused guidance to help a protégé improve specific skills related to their job, while psychosocial development involves growth in the protégé's personal life. The breadth of mentoring theory extends to examine the phenomenon in its different phases, understanding effective mentoring variables, and predicting how mentorship influences a protégé's outcomes (Schunk & Mullen, 2013). Mentorship has ventured into leadership as a discipline, with findings that indicated student involvement in mentoring can predict leadership gains (Astin, 1993; Dugan & Komives, 2010; Thompson, 2006). Scandura et al. (1996) asserted the developmental nature of a mentor and protégé's relationship can be viewed as similar to leader-member relationships. Additionally, Fletcher and Mullen (2012) discussed mentoring as one-to-one mentor-protégé engagement, mentioning the holistic relationship as a dyad with consistent interaction. Therefore, this study also used LMX to better understand mentorship.

Dansereau et al. (1975) proposed the idea that leadership exists as a dyadic relationship between a leader and a follower. Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995) later clarified the domains of leadership exist within three facets: the leader, the follower, and the relationship itself. LMX suggests the dyadic relationship between a leader and subordinate is unique to each pair (Dansereau et al., 1975; Graen & Cashman, 1975; Graen et al., 1982; Graen & Scandura, 1987; Liden & Graen, 1980). This relationship can have additional effects on outputs of the leader and follower. Followers, or protégés in this study, who have high-quality relationships with their leaders, or mentors, perform better in their job because they are more motivated to put forth effort into their tasks and can rely on their leader for support or guidance if they encounter challenges (Gerstner & Day, 1997). Liden and Maslyn (1998) argued LMX is not unidimensional and developed the multidimensional LMX (LMX-MDM) instrument to reflect the relationship characteristics and qualities of the dyadic relationship between a supervisor and his or her employee using four dimensions: (a) contribution, (b) affect, (c) loyalty, and (d) professional respect. Thus, the LMX-MDM instrument measures the multidimensionality of the dyadic relationships between leaders and members.

Contribution was defined as the perception of the amount and quality of work that both the leader and the follower put forth toward mutual organizational goals (Dienesch & Liden, 1986). Affect was described by Dienesch and Liden as "the mutual affection members of the dyad have for each other based primarily on interpersonal attraction rather than work or professional values" (1986, p. 625). Loyalty, defined by Dienesch and Liden (1986), is the extent to which both leader and member publicly support each other's action and character. When a dyadic relationship has high-quality loyalty, leaders

are more likely to ask members to take on tasks which require independent judgment and/or responsibility (Scandura et al., 1986). Professional respect, a fourth dimension added by Liden and Maslyn (1998), was defined as the perception of the degree to which members of the dyad build a reputation, internal or external to the organization, of excelling at the member's line of work.

The following example illustrates how the different dimensions of LMX can help understand the different exchange types:

A high-quality exchange dominated by contribution may involve a leader and member who frequently work together on projects after normal business hours or on the weekend, whereas a high quality exchange based on affect may involve a leader and member who spend much time at work discussing non-work issues (Liden & Maslyn, 1998, p. 45).

Understanding the quality of the dyad on the four different dimensions has provided insight into how specific LMX styles influence self-perceived leadership capacity within individuals involved in a dyadic relationship. Liden and Maslyn (1998) offered a quantitative instrument which measured the quality of the four LMX dimensions, which was adapted for this study in a more open-ended way to collect qualitative data.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to describe the mentorship experiences of national FFA officers (NOs). The study was guided by the question, "How do NOs experience mentorship?" and used the following sub-questions to investigate this.

1. How do NOs describe mentorship?
2. What mentorship experience do NOs have prior to their election to office?
3. What mentorship experience do NOs have during their year of service?
4. What mentorship experience do NOs have following their retirement from office?

### **Methods**

Qualitative research includes the researcher as a tool of data collection and interpretation (Nealon & Giroux, 2003). Especially in qualitative studies, researchers must bracket their own experiences in order to examine the phenomenon from an unbiased perspective (Crotty, 2003). While the term "bracketing" has been contested because it is impossible to completely remove bias (Gearing, 2004), it is important for researchers to include their own background in phenomenological research to give readers a better understanding of bias which could be present in the findings. Moustakas (1994) explained this as a process called epoché, which can be achieved through this subjectivity statement.

### **Subjectivity**

The primary researcher grew up in a small rural town in a large, agricultural, Midwestern state. When they were old enough, they joined 4-H and FFA, which sparked an interest in agriculture. While actively participating in both organizations, they took on greater leadership roles in FFA, serving as a chapter officer, competing in many career development events, and leading various service projects. As they graduated high school and moved to college, they elected to serve as a state FFA officer for their respective state association. Following their year of service, they also spent a summer as an intern at the National FFA Center in Indianapolis.

These steps, and many that followed, were guided by the direction of two great mentors in their life: a high school agriculture teacher and a state FFA staff member. As they left the FFA realm and pursued other interests in college and beyond, they had a third mentor who helped prepare them for a career, navigate personal crises, and build professional relationships. Once they began their career, however, a few others took on the role of a mentor. While they were initially excited to have them as guides, they quickly realized the "mentors" did not stay in contact, nor did they provide much helpful guidance. Because of these experiences, the researcher wanted to know more about what makes a

person an effective mentor, as some seemed to innately be good mentors while others had to work hard at it.

### **Methodology**

Moustakas (1994) explained phenomenology as a method of human science research in which the researcher turns to the participants to understand and make sense of a lived experience. This research design allowed participants' experiences with a shared phenomenon to be reduced in order to deduce shared meaning between individual participants. In this study, the mentorship experiences of NOs are investigated to understand what makes mentoring effective. Moustakas (1994) identified four components of transcendental phenomenology, with the first two being phenomenon identification and the epoché, which involves reflection on the researchers' experiences with the phenomenon and its influence on the data. The third requirement is to collect data using multiple sources and individuals, and the last factor is to analyze the data to create a textural, structural, and composite description of the phenomenon. These components address what happened based on the participants' responses, the context in which the phenomenon occurred, and the derived meaning of the phenomenon, called the essence (Moustakas, 1994).

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

This study used a purposive sample of NOs. The officers' mentoring experiences were also examined across four researcher-identified life stages to answer the research questions, which focused around their year of service. The participants were selected for the following reasons:

- NOs are assigned a team leader or coach who formally mentors and develops the officers during their year of service. Therefore, it can be assumed every NO has experienced some level of mentorship.
- NOs hail from different state associations, representing many geographical areas of the country, and examining their experiences created a more holistic review of mentorship by eliminating factors which may be specific to a state or region of the U.S.
- College-aged students often choose professors as their mentors (Marken & Auter, 2018), but the NOs defer at least one year of college to serve as an officer, so their identified mentors may exist beyond the scope of academia.

Additionally, the criteria were narrowed to include only officers who served between the years of 2013 and 2018 ( $n=30$ ), as recently-retired NOs would be able to reflect on their experiences prior to, during, and after their year of service while limiting the amount of recall bias present in the data. Out of the 30 identified officers who met the criteria for selection, 28 had accessible current contact information. All 28 were invited to participate in the data collection process, and 13 accepted. However, only 12 completed the data collection process in its entirety. Table 1 provides limited demographics.

**Table 1**  
*Participants' Demographic Information*

Participant	Gender	Current Full-time Role
Abigail	F	Graduate/Professional Student
Brielle	F	Young Professional
Caleb	M	Young Professional
Denise	F	Young Professional
Felicity	F	Graduate/Professional Student
Gwen	F	Young Professional
Jace	M	Young Professional
Leah	F	Undergraduate Student
Nora	F	Undergraduate Student
Ralph	M	Young Professional
Staci	F	Undergraduate Student
Tristan	M	Young Professional
Wyatt	M	Young Professional

*Note.* Wyatt only completed the written portion of the data collection process. His interview was not completed and therefore only his written documents were analyzed to be included in the study. Due to the limited number of participants and the public nature of national FFA office, demographic factors such as race and age were removed to protect the identities of the participants.

Data were collected in two stages. First, the past NOs were invited to participate via email. Those who agreed were then mailed a consent form and asked to complete a self-guided, written journey mapping questionnaire. This step included written responses because Bunnell et al. (2018) found physically writing could prompt the same level of response as typing, but writing is a slower process which allows deeper reflection for the participant.

Journey mapping is a technique used to create “a graphic visualization or a map of a customer or user’s experience with the product and the business or organization which produced it” (Howard, 2014, p. 11). More commonly used in retail services (Moon et al., 2016), this method has recently been adapted to better understand behavioral sciences (Samson et al., 2017; Silvert & Warner, 2019). While there is “no single right way to create a customer journey” (Richardson, 2010, p. 4), Custer (2018) described the first step as creating the framework of the map by selecting the boundaries of the process, or its beginning and end steps. These chronological boundaries created the horizontal axis of the map, because they showed the visual progression of time (Howard, 2014). Then, a vertical axis was created using metrics the researcher wanted to learn more about, narrowing data into a focused touchpoint in each chronological stage (Rosenbaum et al., 2017).

The horizontal axis of the journey map was comprised of the four researcher-identified life stages with which each participant could identify, listed in chronological order: (1) the year prior to NO, (2) the NO year of service, (3) the year following NO, and (4) today, or the time of data collection. The vertical axis was created using Liden and Maslyn’s (1998) LMX-MDM dimensions, which included affect, contribution, loyalty, and professional respect. Questions to which the participants responded were adapted from Liden and Maslyn’s (1998) quantitative instrument which measured the quality of leader-member exchange in a dyadic relationship.

In addition to the words in the map visualization (Figure 1), there is a resemblance of a line graph behind the words. While the journey map data were qualitative in nature, the questions were designed so the participants shared stories and examples to support their answers. Through these answers, a number of 1-3 was assigned to their response in analysis, which allowed a quantifiable visualization of the data to be created. For example, in terms of professional respect, a one was assigned

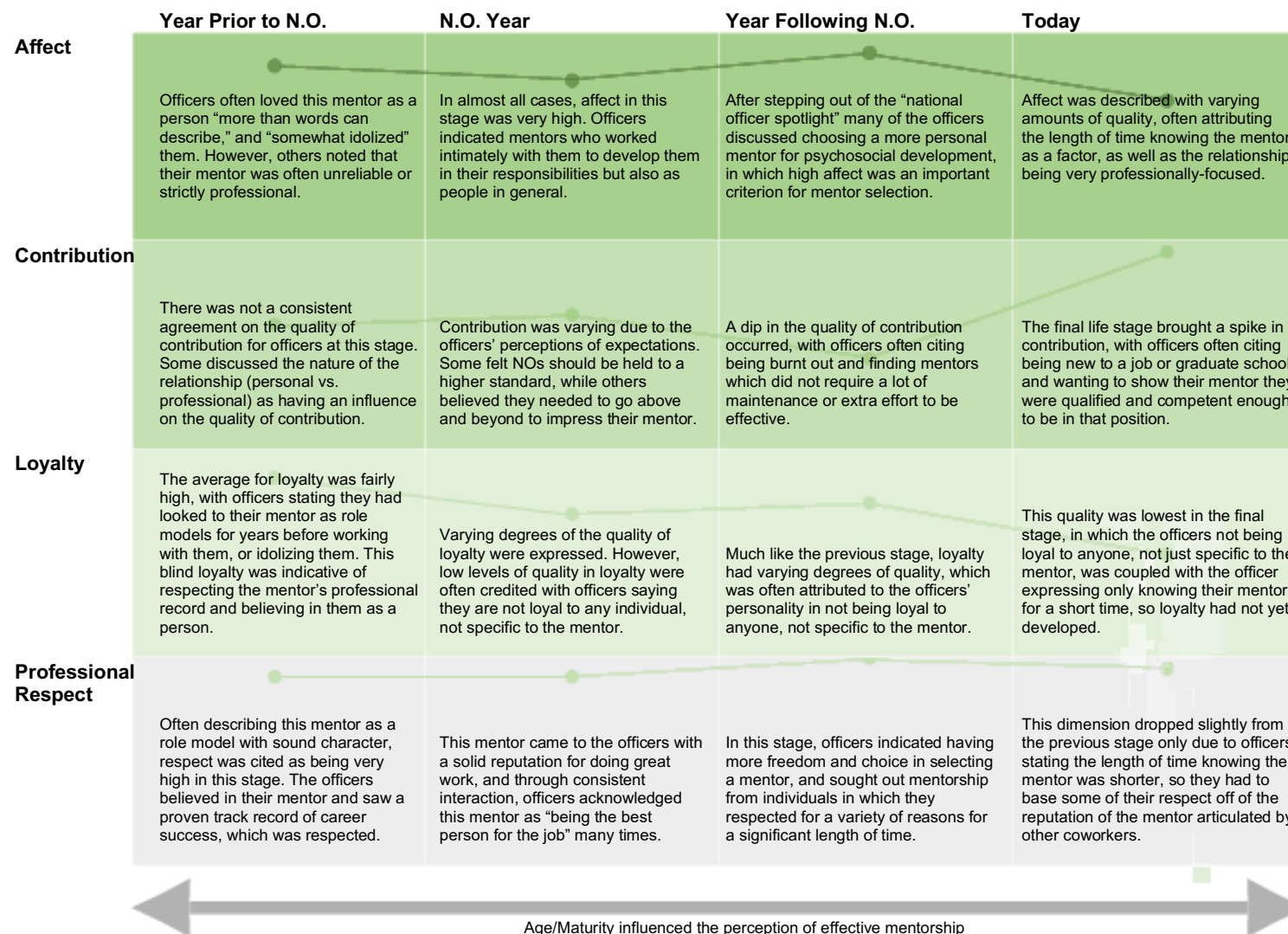
to an answer which indicated a lack of professional respect for the mentor (e.g., I do not believe my mentor was good at their job and I do not feel they should continue in their position). A two was assigned to answers which indicated a neutral answer (e.g., My mentor was good at their job, but they often made decisions or acted in ways which caused me to question their abilities). A three was given to responses which indicated a strong feeling of professional respect (e.g., There is no better person that could have done the job of my mentor!). This process was repeated for each of the life stages in this study and in the areas of affect, contribution, professional respect, and loyalty. These estimated points of data were then plotted on the journey map to give a better visualization of the change in overall quality of each LMX dimension from one chronological life stage to the next.

After the completed responses were mailed back to the researcher, a semi-structured interview was conducted in-person or via Zoom, a video conferencing software, depending on the participants' location. Interviews lasted between 47 and 77 minutes. The interview was used to understand the participants' best mentorship experience, focusing on the dyadic relationship with the mentor they identified as having the most "profound or significant impact" on their life. Questions were created based on qualities important for effective mentoring, as suggested through previous literature (Schunk & Mullen, 2013).

Once all data were collected, interview data were transcribed using a transcription service and verified by the interviewer, stripping any identifying information. We then coded the data, identifying similar words and phrases in the data across participants (Harding, 2013), which resulted in approximately thirty meaning units, or themes, generated from each participant. Each coded transcript with initial themes was sent to the respective participant for verification. Once the transcript and codes were checked by the participant, the rest of the analysis followed phenomenological reduction (Moustakas, 1994), which first required horizontalization. This stage required the researcher to read through the journey map data several times, listen to each interview recording at least twice, and read the transcript of each interview at least three times. Secondly, phenomenological reduction requires the researcher to delimit units of meaning. We clustered internal relationships among the preliminary codes and themes to create broader themes, which are later reported. Following this step, participants were emailed the final themes with explanations of each to verify their accuracy.

Sound qualitative research must measure up to standards of credibility and trustworthiness, ethics, and transferability (Tracy, 2010). Credibility and dependability were created by using multiple participants and collecting data in more than one way. The multiple data sources, written data from journey mapping and verbal data from the interview served as a method of triangulation. Additionally, member checking was employed in two areas which enhanced the level of credibility. Finally, Tracy (2010) also mentioned credibility can be enhanced if the researcher provides thick, rich description, partiality, and multivocality of the data by using specific quotes from the participants in the report of the findings. The reflexivity included in the researcher subjectivity statement offered sincerity in the study, which Tracy (2010) offered as one of the criteria for excellent qualitative research. Finally, ethical considerations were cogitated, which Tracy said influences high-quality qualitative research, by obtaining participants' informed consent before the journey map and again before the interview. This qualitative research should not be generalized past the sample but may be transferable to other like groups (Ary et al., 2014). While some threats to transferability exist, the findings could be applicable to other college-aged or young adult groups in which an extensive leadership experience occurred.

**Figure 1**  
*Journey Map Visualization Of National FFA Officers' Mentorship Experiences*





## Findings

The findings presented in this section use pseudonyms to protect the identities of the participants. First, a definition is presented to explain how the participants described mentorship, aligning with the first research sub-question. Following, the journey map (Figure 1) is explained, supported by participant quotes to explain sub-questions two through four.

### An Evolving Definition

In the written responses, the participants were given the definition of a mentor as previously identified in this paper. However, the participants were asked in the interview to describe what they perceive mentorship to be and to articulate what qualities a mentor should possess, which culminated in the following:

Effective mentorship requires one person, often older, who is a ‘life stage’ of experience ahead of one protégé, to intentionally invest in the protégé’s life in order to develop them in a specific context. Additionally, effective mentorship requires both parties to explicitly recognize the purpose of the relationship and outline expectations of the mentorship.

The components of this definition are explained in greater detail with supporting quotes.

While the participants noted having a younger mentor might be “weird” (Staci), they said having a mentor with a life stage more of experience in an area was more important. Felicity, who facilitates curriculum about mentorship to other students, explained:

I think a mentor has to be somebody who’s like a life stage above you just because, like we do this activity where we can trust mentors and peers and I think one of the big things is like a mentor has, in my situation, already graduated [from my program] because I think kind of in the midst of it, you’re jaded.

She believed the extra life experience helped to create less bias in the guidance given to the protégé. Ralph shared the sentiment, stating:

To me, it is helpful for a mentor to have, you know, probably at least five years or so in age difference, or at least life experience equivalency. So I have mentors who are fairly close to my age, but most of my mentors are a decade or two older than me.

Age might be important, but the life experience seemed more valuable to the participants for effective mentoring.

Beyond the life experience, the participants indicated effective mentorship requires intentional investment in a specific context. Caleb discussed his definition for mentorship:

I think it is intentionally investing in the lives of students. It’s kind of the beginning aspect of that. So when I think about the mentors that I’ve had, it’s not just a passive, I want you to get better at a speech or I want you to perform better in this facet of work or in our relationship, but it is a very intentional and purposeful investment in their life.

He recognized the importance of focused investment in a specific area to be an effective mentor. Jace’s views on mentorship aligned with Caleb, but he took it a step further, stating:

When I think of a mentor, I think of someone who does two things. One, helps me build some type of technical or skill-based thing, right? And two, someone who helps me become a better person in the future, right?

According to the participants, effective mentors regularly and intentionally invested in the protégé in order to foster growth and development in a specific area of the protégé’s life.

Finally, the participants articulated effective mentorship also required explicit expectations between the mentor and the protégé. Mentorship was not a relationship which just happened, but rather required a discussion upfront to indicate the protégé’s needs. To explain this, Abigail said:

I think that’s the biggest roadblock, how do you approach somebody and say, can you mentor me? And in a way that they’ll want to, and you know, there’s expectations on both sides and

those are very clearly communicated. I think that's a technical side of mentorship that people don't understand, and they don't know how to get to that level.

Gwen added she had individuals in the past who she thought were mentors, but they turned out only to be friends. To the participants, mentorship was effective when both parties recognized the relationship as a mentorship and discussed the expectations they had for each other.

### **The Mentorship Journey**

After the participants identified their mentors across the four life stages under examination in this study, they reflected on their experiences by completing a written journey map. Figure 1 displays the journey map created from the data. This visualization illustrated the four chronological life stages, as well as the overall experience within each of the four LMX dimensions (Liden & Maslyn, 1998). As the data were analyzed, age and maturity, which did not fit into any of the four dimensions, was added as an additional theme. This section outlines the essence of each dimension of mentorship experienced by the participants throughout their life stages and concludes by presenting the findings in accordance with the age and maturity of the participant.

### ***Affect***

Affect was the first LMX-MDM quality examined in the four life stages of mentorship experienced by the participants. Overall, the participants developed a level of affection with their mentor organically, but it was fostered over time as long as the officer and mentor had shared interests and values. Over the first three life stages, the participants noted having high affect for the mentor. Nora, for example, stated her mentor prior to NO “was like a father figure to me...He called me out when I was wrong, called me up to be better, and celebrated success with me in small gestures.” While their relationship started out in more of a professional manner, Nora bonded with her mentor in a way that she considered him a friend far beyond their mentorship. For Leah’s first mentor, she offered:

I love this person! He was my one-on-one mentor as a state officer and empowered me in so many ways. I believe he sees me as the person I truly am, and he helps me to live out my beliefs. He was one of the first people to really encourage me.

Leah recognized she had a strong personal relationship with her mentor and noticed he was a person who saw her as a human being but found ways to encourage and cultivate her potential. This example was one of many which illustrated the high amount of affect the participants perceived in their early mentoring relationships.

In this study’s fourth and final life stage of participants’ mentoring experiences, affect decreased slightly. Evidence in the data illustrated the decrease in affect for the “today” mentors could be due to a short length of time knowing the mentor or having a strictly professional relationship. Denise said she only knew the mentor she identified for a month before her research interview, yet she still felt strongly enough to call her a mentor. This mentor was not a colleague or pigeonholed into a strictly professional relationship, but Denise noted they have not had a lot of time to fully get to know one another:

I chose her because of the potential I see of where this mentor relationship is going... I see her care for me. And I know that that's just getting started. And so I think the reason I wrote her down is my excitement to press into that mentor relationship going forward like today where I am.

Tristen echoed Denise in that he did not know his mentor for the final life stage for very long, less than three months in total. He had recently taken a new job and started working for his identified mentor, but the relationship had a lower level of affect due to the focus being more on professional growth. He said:

I think it's a lot of that positional sort of authority and he is guiding me in a lot of the training that I'm experiencing the responsibilities I'm taking on, and so I'm seeking feedback from him

looking to grow into the role. So I think that from—I think right now it's developing in a very professional manner and then it will continue to develop into more of a personal manner. Affect in the first three stages of most of the participants remained high, but due to the often-short timeframe of knowing the mentor in the final life stage, the quality of the dimension decreased.

### ***Contribution***

Contribution measured the effort of work-oriented activity each member put forth in the dyadic relationship. Over the four life stages, the participants demonstrated a high level of the contribution dimension in their relationships for the first two stages. A decrease in contribution occurred in the third life stage, followed by an increase in the fourth stage. Brielle acknowledged for her first two life stages examined in this study, which often included one year as a state FFA officer and one as a NO, there was an expectation to be a high performer which skewed the level of contribution to be higher than other life stages.

In the third life stage (following NO), Brielle mentioned feeling some burnout from FFA and leadership, and finding a mentor who did not expect such high performance all the time. Nora also explained her reasoning for having a lower level of contribution:

During this time, I just wanted to be unplugged from FFA. My mentor, seeing/hearing I was struggling to let go, talked me through why I felt how I felt and how I could apply that now in college/in my real life.

In this stage of life, following national office, Nora no longer needed to be working hard with her mentor to accomplish goals because she wanted to navigate a slower pace in life. The focus of her day-to-day was no longer about facilitation, engaging with FFA members, or other task-oriented things, but rather taking time to learn in college and develop herself.

In the final life stage examined in this study, many of the participants reported a high level of contribution, but often credited it to a new job, where they wanted to impress their supervisor, colleague, or mentor. Especially in a professional aspect, many of the participants discussed instances in which they have applied extra efforts to carry out a task for their mentor. For example, Jace, who has been in his job for less than two years, mentioned he often does more than is required with his mentor in order to carry out his job responsibilities well:

So her and I spent about a month working on [a project] that's typically something that a team of five to seven people work on together. But again, it was one of those things like her and I were in the trench together working on it. There were times when Saturdays and Sundays where we would hop on the phone with one another and like we were trying to scramble to get this done.

New to the job, Jace both desired and felt obligated to put in extra effort to help his mentor in order for both of them to be successful and maintain a good relationship.

### ***Loyalty***

A high level of loyalty was determined in the participants for the first life stage in this study, but loyalty was typically found as one of the lowest dimensions in the relationship. For example, Brielle measured her loyalty based on if she would defend her mentor if they were publicly insulted. Brielle acknowledged the strong character traits and capability in her mentor's job, observed over time, were enough to create loyalty for her first mentor. She said, "I would defend their job ability and respectful character as I think my mentor is a good person, and any major insult would seem out of line—for anyone, in my opinion." It did not matter to Brielle who the accusation came from, because her mentor had exhibited such consistent sound character that Brielle completely believed in her.

Gwen, on the other hand, was one participant who did not give loyalty to her mentor completely. However, she did not believe this was due to her mentor's character or actions, but rather her own life experiences which shaped her beliefs:

Say his character was attacked or he was caught doing something questionable, which never happened, I feel safe to say I wouldn't have just jumped to defend him because I don't do that with just anybody and I think that's because of my own personal experience with like, I mean I've had things at church happen before where like leaders in the church had done some very questionable things and you know, at a young age, and so it was just very like, I've always been—I'm not really sure that I trust people in authority to like—that they're the perfect person because I learned from an early age like nobody's perfect.

Gwen's explanation helped to understand a lack of loyalty does not necessarily mean a mentor is ineffective. Instead, loyalty is a dimension of mentorship which comes with consistent results over a length of time. Due to Gwen's prior experience in her church where leaders were accused of questionable behavior, her outlook on loyalty was tainted and she admitted it takes her longer to trust others with authority.

### ***Professional Respect***

Professional respect was evident in the relationships in which the participants identified formal or vocational mentors. However, a level of personal respect was still evident in effective psychosocial, personal mentors. Throughout all four life stages examined in this study, the respect participants had for their mentors was extremely high.

Ralph explained the reason he respected one of his mentors so much by writing, "This person had great experience, relatability, technical skill, teaching skill, work/life balance, etc. Everything he did in that job seemed to be done with purpose." Ralph appreciated how much effort and intentionality his mentor put toward his work and knew this mentor was competent, successful, and someone who could serve as a role model.

Nora discussed the respect she had for two different mentors in her life, Nico and Nelly. Nico was the mentor identified during Nora's NO year, and Nelly was her mentor for "today." Beginning with Nico, Nora noted having an immense amount of professional respect for her mentor during her NO year. She discussed specific trainings this mentor would create for the participants as they started a new season of their year of service. Specific to the training she received, Nora said, "It was the best, most dynamic, insanely life changing training I have ever had and never had one like it since." While Nora seemed to agree with the decisions her mentor made throughout most of this life season, she acknowledged professional respect did not always mean there was agreement between the mentor and Nora.

Nora also talked about respecting the actions and decisions of a different mentor, Nelly, without always agreeing with her style. She stated, "Even though we don't always see eye to eye, I know all her actions do others so well!" Going further, Nora considered she has not always had the best interactions with her mentor, but she recognized the bigger picture and saw the positive impact Nelly had on the greater community, so she still held Nelly in high respect. In all four life stages examined in this study, participants held their mentors in high respect.

### ***Age and Maturity***

The four life stages in this study also yielded results about the growth and maturity in the participants as they learned how effective mentorship should or could look. For example, Brielle realized her age in the first life stage influenced the level of quality in the different dimensions of her relationship. She noted that with her first mentor, Brooke, she had a higher level of contribution and tried to impress her mentor:

I think a lot of it had to do with my age, you know, I was young, very young and like right out of high school and that was really, like other than a teacher...that was the first time I ever had someone that was kind of overseeing, but not like my boss, type of role if that makes sense...I

think all of that led to me feeling like I need to like really prove my value and my worth and prove that I add...value to the situation.

She went on to say, "I think that relationship would have looked so much different if I did it today, you know, which is—is life. But I think being 19-20 had a huge influence on that." Brielle said throughout her other life stages examined in this study, she learned more about how to be more authentic and vulnerable to allow her mentor to aid in her development, and she learned more about what mentorship could be. She did not believe Brooke was an ineffective mentor but noted it may not have been the most authentic relationship between the two of them.

Staci reflected on the first mentor she identified for the life stage prior to national FFA office. She realized during this life stage, Staci felt the person she identified was a good mentor and deeply cared about her, but now understands the way she perceived her mentoring relationship was due to having limited experience with mentors up to that point:

I like, looking back now, I see—I don't want to say the word toxic but like kind of. Um, it was definitely like a people pleaser relationship for us, but I thought that was normal at the time. Like I didn't know any different. I didn't have anybody that cared about me. So I just figured like that's what mentorship was.

As Staci progressed through other life stages in the context of the study and experienced the mentorship of other individuals, she realized better, more effective mentors existed in the world and her first mentoring relationship may have been toxic. Due to the participants' levels of experience with mentorship, mentors in the beginning life stages could have had a perceived high-quality relationship even if they were performing at lower standards than later mentors.

## **Conclusions and Discussion**

Mentorship has been defined in previous literature as a process in which a more experienced person, usually older, guides a less experienced person by providing advice, counsel, support, and challenging the protégé in a given area (Byington, 2010; Johnson, 2016). Data in this study support this definition, but they indicate the definition from previous literature does not completely encompass mentorship holistically. According to the descriptions from the participants, effective mentorship also requires intentional investment from the mentor and an explicitly defined relationship with specific expectations. While Lambert (2018) asserted mentorship develops a protégé in a specific context area, the participants indicated the investment from the mentor should also be intentional to the protégé. The mentor's advice, counsel, and support should take the length of time the mentor and protégé have known each other, as well as the current life stage of the protégé, into consideration. Additionally, previous literature indicated clear expectations are important for effective mentoring (Lamm et al. 2017; Straus et al. 2013), but findings from this study articulated a need for a clear and explicit definition of the purpose of the relationship (i.e., the protégé must ask for mentorship directly, not assume it is occurring).

Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995) indicated LMX occurs in three phases: stranger, acquaintance, and partnership. In the stranger phase, both members of the dyad are getting to know each other and establishing their roles (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). As this grows, so does affect. In the final life stage examined in this study, affect was lower than its preceding life stages. This was attributed by the participants to knowing the mentor only for a short time, putting them into the stranger phase. As the relationship progressed, according to the participants, it mimicked the progression from stranger phase to acquaintance phase and affect and professional respect remained high. Finally, loyalty only sometimes developed in the mentoring relationships, but loyalty recognizes an unlimited amount of influence which would correspond with a full partnership phase.

Through the journey mapping process, affect and professional respect emerged as two very important aspects of effective mentoring. LMX indicated professional respect is necessary for a high-quality dyadic exchange (Dansereau et al., 1975). However, because mentorship can exist in both

vocational and psychosocial capacities (Kram, 1985), respect was not always confined to respect of the mentor as a professional. In psychosocial mentorship, respect still remained high, but the protégé respected the mentor more in their personal life than professional life. Therefore, we conclude the relational respect must develop in the capacity in which the protégé seeks mentorship. Affect was a quality which remained high for the participants' mentors up to the final stage, which yielded a slight decrease. This seemed to be attributed to the short time given for the mentoring relationships to develop, rather than a judgment passed by the protégé. Acknowledging affect takes time to mature in a mentoring relationship is still important, because affect can lead to a better development of trust in the relationship (Jones et al., 2014). This is also supported by Straus et al. (2013), which asserted a personal connection and relationship is important between the mentor and protégé for effective mentoring.

Loyalty is the dimension of LMX which helped understand if a relationship had reached a full partnership, but a lack of loyalty did not automatically suggest ineffective mentoring. Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995) mentioned the highest quality of LMX indicates a partnership, where the leader has almost unlimited influence with the protégé. The presence of loyalty in the mentoring relationships examined often led to high affect, contribution, and respect. However, some participants mentioned they found it extremely difficult to be loyal to someone because of some previous life experiences. Therefore, we argue loyalty is not an essential component of effective mentoring, but its existence does allow the mentor to have a greater influence for development.

Observing the holistic mentorship journey, contribution was a quality which had some of the most noteworthy changes. Mentorship should have consistent engagement between the mentor and protégé (Fletcher & Mullen, 2012), however findings from this study indicated the engagement should encompass some levels of contribution from the protégé. In general, a decrease in contribution occurred in this study's third life stage, following the NO's year of service. This decrease was explained by some participants as burnout, adjusting to life beyond FFA, and trying to redefine their reputation. However, a stark increase in contribution was presented in the final, current life stage, which the participants explained as trying to impress a mentor as they began a new job or other experience. Therefore, mentors with protégés who undergo a significant life or leadership experience, such as serving as a NO, should be considerate of the levels of burnout present and alter mentoring styles in order to develop the protégé without pushing them to over perform.

### **Age and Maturity**

The understanding of age and maturity having an impact of perceived mentoring effectiveness furthers the conversation about effective mentoring. Haber-Curran et al. (2017) noted the life stage in which a traditional college-aged student is attending college as a crucial time in their development. Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995) recognized leaders, and mentors in this study, can have a large influence on the development of their followers and protégés. Since this study focused on traditional college-aged students, we argue college can be a critical life era for mentor-induced development, but students who have experienced some form of mentorship prior to college can reap greater developmental benefits than those who are new to the mentor-protégé relationship.

Mentorship is an intimate relationship between mentor and protégé (Fletcher & Mullen, 2012), which the participants in this study did not have a lot of experience prior to serving as an FFA officer. Acknowledging students are malleable in this age range, there is an important role for the mentor to provide guidance and advice, but to also allow the protégé to seek opportunities for growth outside of the mentorship in order to determine how to best navigate this unique kind of relationship. While there is a need for greater investigation around the age and maturity component, we found the older the protégé is, the more independent life experiences and mentoring experiences they have, which could allow better evaluation of the quality and effectiveness of their current mentoring relationships. Based on our findings, we believe young protégés who are new to the unique mentoring relationship may not

fully understand the purpose and benefits of the relationship; therefore, they may not rely on the mentor for as much counsel and guidance as they could or should.

### **Implications and Future Research**

Some of the major implications from the findings in this study directly relate to the protégé. First, it is important for the protégé to explicitly ask an individual for mentorship, define in what area of life they are seeking mentorship, and articulate how involved the mentor should be. Protégés should seek out mentors with life experience in the context in which they want guidance, as well as someone with an adequate capacity for investment. Because consistent engagement from the mentor helps make the relationship effective, a protégé should find a mentor who has the time and desire to take on a protégé.

Though mentors were not directly interviewed in this study, findings point to a few implications which could be beneficial for individuals who take on a mentoring role for a protégé. For instance, a mentor should consider the current life stage the protégé is in, understand and discuss the expectations the protégé has for the mentor, and acknowledge effective mentoring takes time. Respect, affect, and loyalty are qualities which develop through consistent, sustained effort between the mentor and protégé. Therefore, it should not be assumed the mentorship will reach peak effectiveness early in the relationship.

Many leadership development programs employ a mentorship component to help train younger members. Jones et al. (2014) mentioned the importance of considering a mentor and protégé's personality and trust when deciding on the pairs. Leadership practitioners who facilitate a mentoring program should consider several qualities when pairing up individuals. First, it should be determined if the mentors have enough expertise in a given context to effectively mentor the protégé. Second, the personality of the mentors and protégés should be considered to ensure affect can develop, which will aid in the cultivation of trust. These considerations could help warrant effective results and sustained mentorship throughout the leadership program. Implications for this study could be transferable to other populations of similar college-age, or those who experience a significant life or leadership experience. However, due to the qualitative nature of the study, findings should not be generalized past the sample. To create more generalizable results, future quantitative research should be conducted regarding the quality of mentorship from each LMX dimension in different life stages.

This study added to the work of Liden and Maslyn (1998) by using their identified dimensions of LMX and contextualizing it in a mentoring relationship, which resembles that of a leader and member (Fletcher & Mullen, 2012; Scandura et al., 1996). In this mentoring context, respect was crucial, but it did not always occur as professional respect, as indicated by traditional LMX (Dansereau et al., 1975). Therefore, respect should be further examined by comparing and contrasting professional respect with personal respect in mentorship, to determine the general role of respect as a construct in the creation of high-quality leader-member exchanges and mentor-protégé exchanges. Additionally, determining parallels in Graen and Uhl-Bien's (1995) LMX phases with Kram's (1985) mentoring phases are less clear. Further investigation is needed to determine the touchpoints where the mentoring phases align with those of LMX.

Future research should be conducted to determine how age effects mentoring relationships in which the protégé is older than the mentor, but still a life stage of experience behind the mentor. Participants brought up the idea that a mentor could be younger than them, as long as the mentor had greater life experience. Therefore, a qualitative investigation of mentorship from the point of view of both mentors and protégés, in mentoring relationships with a younger mentor, could provide greater clarity in this aspect. Finally, the study should be backed up with quantitative data in order to determine statistical significance in the importance of different qualities of mentorship to deem the relationship effective or ineffective.

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