# Mentor Experiences in the Community and Representation (CoRe) Program: A Layered and Holistic Approach to Mentoring

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**Abstract**
The Community and Representation (CoRe) program paired underrepresented minority (URM) teacher candidates with URM educators in a yearlong mentoring initiative. Interviews with five mentors revealed benefits including meaningful connections, reciprocal learning, and reflective growth. Findings underscore the value of a layered holistic mentoring approach that affirms and supports mentors.

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A diverse educator workforce has been tied to notable gains for students, particularly Black and Latinx students (Daniels, 2022). In Pennsylvania (PA), around 40% of K-12 students identify as belonging to an underrepresented racial/ethnic minority (URM) group, while only 7% of teachers identify with a URM group (Miller, et al., 2024). Although Shaw-Amoah et al. (2020) documented slight increases in educator racial/ethnic diversity over the past decade, the number of PA's K-12 students who are URMs significantly increased, creating a wider gap between URM educators and students. Furthermore, URM educators leave the profession at higher rates than White educators (Kohli, 2018; Shaw-Amoah et al., 2020). Given this disparity, most PA teacher candidates are not exposed to URM educators during their own K-12 education (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2025). They are also less likely to be mentored by an URM educator during early career internships.

Community and Representation (CoRe) was a pilot mentoring program designed to address the lack of representation in PA's K-12 teacher workforce (i.e., disproportionate racial composition of educators). In this program, URM teacher candidates were paired with URM K-12 educators. At the conclusion of the program, an evaluation was conducted to better understand participant experiences (e.g., perceived benefits of the program). In this article, we focus on the perceived benefits of the program for mentors.

## Literature Review

### Defining Mentoring

Formal mentoring practices are embedded within industries, organizations, and academic institutions worldwide. Kram (1983) named a "developmental relationship" as the primary aspect of mentoring, where an older, more experienced professional teaches a younger individual as well as other forms of mentoring, such as peer mentoring, where the difference in age and experience might be small (Dominguez & Kochan, 2020). Ambrosetti (2014) describes mentoring as an "interpersonal relationship that comprises a series of purposeful, social interactions" (p. 31), while Blake-Beard et al. (2021) emphasize that these interactions "cover the spectrum of career to psychosocial support behaviors," going beyond professional or academic development.

### Mentoring Models

Dawson (2014) noted that there are a variety of ways to cluster mentors and mentees beyond the traditional dyadic mentor/mentee relationship. One critique of the traditional model is that it tends to emphasize the knowledge and experiences of the mentor over those of the mentee (Endo, 2020; Gist et al., 2021). In contrast, "group mentoring" can refer to a small group of mentees paired with multiple co-mentors; co-mentoring can help ease time, experience, and knowledge burdens on mentors, as there is more than one mentor sharing their time and perspective (Ben-Amram & Davidovitch, 2024; Mentor, 2020). In addition, "family style mentoring" can complement group mentoring (Mentor, 2020). In the "family style" approach, mentor-mentee pairs or groups come together for occasional communal activities and meals, allowing for "robust peer interactions and collective experiences" (Mentor, 2020, p. 3). The combination of family style mentoring and group mentoring creates a community approach that others have described as holistic mentoring (Ben-Amram & Davidovitch, 2024). Research has found multiple benefits to the community or holistic approach, including professional growth for mentors (Ben-Amram & Davidovitch, 2024; Lee et al., 2025) and positive "cultural spaces" for Black educators (Dingus, 2008, p. 374).

### Mentoring Underrepresented Minorities

Gist et al. (2021) stressed that URM teachers benefit most from culturally responsive and sustaining mentorship frameworks. Culturally sustaining approaches go beyond resource approaches (i.e., culturally relevant and responsive approaches); instead of maintaining that URM students must learn dominant languages and literacies, culturally sustaining approaches acknowledge and affirm URM's knowledge, cultures, and identities (Paris, 2012). With this framework, mentees' funds of knowledge derived from their lived experiences enable them to be valuable contributors to the mentoring relationship. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory reinforces this idea, highlighting how development is shaped through bidirectional relationships and multiple layers of influence (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). When applied to mentoring, mentors

and mentees affect one another within their broader social and cultural context.

Same race mentorship has also been shown to positively impact URM students. Louis et al. (2014) examined the mentoring experiences of Black female undergraduates and found that both Black and non-Black mentors offered meaningful and supportive relationships. However, the nature of these relationships differed significantly. Black mentors provided both professional guidance and familial-like emotional support, which fostered closeness, affirmation, and validation. In contrast, relationships with non-Black mentors were primarily focused on career development. These practices align with the findings of Blake-Beard et al. (2021), which framed mentoring as a dual role, requiring both psychosocial and career support.

Similarly, Strayhorn (2022) found that faculty mentors, particularly Black faculty at predominantly White institutions (PWIs), can play a critical role in affirming Black students' experiences. Strayhorn (2022) observed that same-race mentors have a unique vantage point for helping Black students make sense of microaggressions, process racist events (e.g., interpret events), and develop healthy coping strategies. These interactions went beyond providing social support; when mentoring relationships helped students feel that they belonged and could navigate challenging contexts, the results were impactful.

## Method

### CoRe Program Description

The Community and Representation (CoRe) program, implemented in 2023, was a structured, voluntary extracurricular, year-long mentorship initiative built around a signed agreement that outlined expectations for both mentors and mentees. Teacher candidates were recruited through an email sent to all URM students enrolled in a teacher preparation program. Mentors were recruited through an email to all teacher preparation program alumni that identified as an URM educator and social media postings. Interested students and educators applied. URM teacher candidates were paired one-on-one with an URM educator. The mentor-mentee pairs were encouraged to communicate regularly and met monthly for whole-group virtual meetings that included breakout rooms for small-group discussion (e.g., multiple mentee-mentor pairs). The program also had monthly mentee activities, ongoing mentor support, and two in-person events, a midpoint meeting for all mentees and a final hybrid gathering for mentors and mentees. Mentors received a $250 stipend each semester and mentees received $25 e-gift cards after each activity.

The program presented a different focus each month that was designed to foster relationship-building, professional growth, and reflective practice. Early sessions emphasized icebreakers, communication preferences, and bidirectional informational interviews, followed by mentee goal setting, strategies for partnering with families, a bias self-assessment shared among all participants and program leadership, goal reflection and follow up, as well as guidance on transitioning to employment and building a professional support network.

### Program Leadership

The CoRe program leadership team was composed of four members. It included two faculty members engaged in educator preparation programs, the Director of Multicultural and LGBTQIA+ Student Support, and an assistant dean who supported educator preparation students.

### University Setting

CoRe was launched at a predominantly White public institution in southwestern Pennsylvania that awards certificates and degrees at all levels (National Center for Education Statistics, 2025). Overall, 20% of the undergraduate students at the institution identify as belonging to an URM group.

### Evaluation Design

The program evaluation aimed to explore participant experiences (e.g., perceived benefits of the program). Given these aims, a qualitative research design was employed to allow participants to share their perspectives in their own words and without constraint. Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the primary data collection method. The interview consisted of nine key questions, with follow-up probes used to explore responses in greater depth (Appendix A). While the evaluation had a broader scope, this article focuses on the perceived benefits of the program for mentors.

### Participants

The CoRe program began with six mentors and six mentees. Five mentors and five mentees completed the program. All six mentors and mentees were invited to participate in the evaluation; however, only the five mentors who completed the program agreed to participate. The evaluation was conducted in the summer, which may have limited mentee response and participation.

All mentors were employed in urban and suburban public schools located in Maryland and across the state of Pennsylvania. Three mentors identified as Black/African American, and two identified as multiracial (i.e., Asian and White/European American; Black, Native, and White/European American). Two mentors identified as male (he/him), and three as female (she/her). Two served in administrative roles, while three were classroom teachers. Years of experience in education varied: one mentor had one to three years, two had seven to 10 years, and two had 15 to 20 years of experience.

### Procedure

Following program completion, Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained. All six mentors and six mentees were invited to participate via email during the summer of 2024. The invitation included a link to a consent form. Once informed consent was obtained, participants were contacted via email to schedule their interview.

Two of the program leaders, also authors of this article, conducted the interviews. Due to scheduling conflicts, three interviews were conducted with two interviewers, and two interviews were conducted by a single interviewer. One of us identifies as Black/African American and the other as White American. The race of interviewers could potentially influence participant responses (Kim et al., 2019). Interviews took place over a four-week period via Zoom and were recorded and transcribed using Zoom's transcription feature. Each interview lasted on average 31 minutes. During the interview, each question was shared one at a time on-screen to support participant comprehension and engagement. All participants were assigned pseudonyms for confidentiality, and all data are stored in a restricted password-protected cloud-based service account.

### Positionality and Conflict of Interest

We acknowledge that all four authors were program leaders, organizing and managing mentoring program activities examined in this study, and two of the program leaders/authors also conducted the interviews and analysis. These dual roles represent a potential conflict of interest and may have influenced participants' responses as well as interpretations offered. To help mitigate this limitation, the study did not begin until the program ended. Furthermore, participants were informed that their participation was voluntary and would not affect their future involvement in this program or other university programs.

### Data Analysis

A thematic analysis approach was used, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework: (1) familiarization with the data through repeated reading of transcripts, (2) generation of initial codes to capture meaningful features of the data, (3) searching for patterns and grouping codes into potential themes, (4) reviewing themes for coherence and alignment with the dataset, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the final report. A thematic analysis approach allows for an in-depth examination of participants' experiences and perspectives but also acknowledges the role of the researcher in the interpretation and analysis of the data (Braun & Clark, 2006).

The interviewers jointly read the transcripts multiple times and developed an initial code list, including a description for each code. We coded the interviews collaboratively, allowing for real-time discussion and consensus-building. During the coding process, additional codes were added, and some existing codes were refined (Appendix B). Taguette, an open-source software, was used to code the data.

## Results

### Community and Connections

A prominent theme across the interviews was a strong sense of community and connection. All five mentors described valuing the relationships they built with their assigned mentees, with other mentors, and/or with mentees outside of their official pairings.

### *Mentor-Mentee Pairing*

One mentor, Eddie, shared, *"I don't know how the mentor-mentee relationship was with everyone, but I felt like me and [my mentee] had a good rapport."* Another mentor, Mark, who was paired with more than one mentee during the program shared a similar sentiment,

> *I think my first [mentee] was very open to [communicating outside of the monthly meetings] because when she ran into her challenges, she definitely did reach out to me, which ... I felt like, okay, I'm connecting with you because you're reaching beyond.*

Mark saw the contact initiated by his mentee at critical times for her as an indicator of a meaningful relationship or connection.

### *Relationships Beyond the Pairing*

While mentors were motivated to develop meaningful relationships with their assigned mentees, the program's holistic structure also supported the formation of additional connections. This model enabled mentors to connect with other mentors, fostering a diverse network of perspectives and expertise (Ben-Amram & Davidovitch, 2024). As one mentor, Melissa, said, *"You get to connect with people that you wouldn't have maybe otherwise been able to connect with."* Melissa also seemed to value the monthly synchronous meetings, which brought together mentors and mentees from a variety of teaching backgrounds, subjects, and roles. She noted that *". . . we were all like focusing on the same topic and then we did get to hear from... multiple perspectives of different mentors and mentees, from various backgrounds of teaching and experience and subjects, etc."*

Another mentor, Erica, shared a similar perspective:

> *We come together as a whole group. So it's not always just your mentor that you're receiving information from, but you can get a range of perspectives... it gives you a wide range of ideas and perspectives to look at while you're building up your own idea of what you're gonna look like as a teacher.*

Both Melissa and Erica described the connections they made and the benefit of coming together as a diverse group.

### *Emotional Connection and Support*

Coming together as a whole group at the end of the program also seemed to reinforce the community bonds formed. The final meeting used a hybrid format, which had not been used before. Two mentors and one of the program leadership team members were on Zoom. The other meeting attendees were in person. Erica described the meeting as deeply meaningful:

> *The last meeting, the in-person meeting, I think that was very impactful to see the people in real life, to see the other mentors. You know, people hugged each other and cried because they were so proud. It was very, very impactful. And it just shows you how important [it is] having someone to support you, who's been there.*

### *Learning Through Connection*

Mentors also valued the opportunity to learn through these relationships. Sasha explained, *"I think it was great to connect with a lot of people."* Sasha continued:

> *. . . I definitely felt like I learned a lot because I got to connect with other mentors, and mentees, and just talk a little bit about their experiences as well. And I felt I personally learned a lot about teaching and a lot of different perspectives.*

Overall, the program's holistic structure created an environment where relationships were not confined to traditional mentor-mentee pairings. This sense of community provided both emotional support and professional growth.

## Mentor as Learner

A second theme was that mentors learned from their participation in the program. This was not an initial goal of the program, nor was it included in an interview question, which made this theme particularly significant. Mentors described learning from mentees, mentors, and the activities themselves.

### *Learning from Mentees*

Sasha described learning from her paired mentee whose academic trajectory and personal responsibilities were different from her own when she was a student:

> *. . . it was definitely eye opening to get the different experiences [of current students], but [see] how they also overlapped [with my prior experiences]. So she was a double major, I believe...and I think she was also a mom of two. She really just blew my mind about like how she was able to do it, and everything that she was going through... because she was a double major. ...I got to learn a little bit about what that looked like.*

Erica described how mentees can provide new inspiration to mentors: "*Mentors will be able to get new ideas because the kids coming out now who want to be teachers, their ideas are way better than ours. I mean they are, and I think that's the way it should be.*"

### *Learning from Other Mentors*

Mentors also described learning from other mentors. For example, Sasha discussed a learning moment when she participated in a breakout session with another mentor and a mentee:

> *I learned something, because that [other] mentor had so much experience. I think he was like a principal at that time, and you know he was saying things that [were] impactful to me. But like I could also chime in and give my own, you know, experiences that [made it] impactful for all of us. I just think the discussion was just so great that, like, I think, all three of us were like actively learning from each other.*

Sasha saw this discussion as a learning experience for all three of them: herself, the more experienced mentor, and the mentee.

### Professional Growth through Structured Activities

Melissa described her learning as an overall takeaway from the program. She shared, "*The activities made me think about teaching in a way that I don't think about teaching on a daily basis.*" She also named her overall learning as one of the benefits of the program: "*I would say it was beneficial to me just to kind of broaden my perspective on teaching.*" Melissa named the activities themselves as what spurred her to broaden her perspective, and she went on to add that the activities pushed her to think about teaching more deeply: "*. . . [the activities] just made me reflect, I guess, on what I do and what I value.*"

CoRe's Layered and Holistic Approach (LHA) to mentoring allowed for a wide variety of interactions and contributions. Ultimately, mentor learning was a substantial element of three out of five mentors' experiences in the LHA, inspired by mentees, other mentors, and the program activities. For the two mentors that did not discuss their own learning, they had the greatest years of experience, and personal learning may not have been a remarkable program benefit for them.

## Discussion

The findings from the CoRe evaluation provide insight into potential benefits of an LHA to mentoring (Appendix C). The sense of community and professional growth were prominent benefits of the program. The professional growth aligns with the work of Lee et al. (2025) who found that activities that were intentionally designed for both mentors and mentees to engage in supported mentor agency and professional reflection. Furthermore, the program's approach allowed participants to connect across roles, backgrounds, and experiences. From a systems theory perspective, the program functioned as more than the sum of its parts, illustrating that the unique characteristics of the whole mentoring system cannot be fully understood by analyzing individual components in isolation (Von Bertalanffy, 1972). Although the CoRe program was designed to address gaps in URM teacher candidates' experiences at a PWI, these findings suggest that an LHA may also address gaps for URM teachers, creating networks for professional learning and reflection that could help affirm mentors' professional worth, growth, and knowledge. This is a strategy worth considering in research on teacher retention, especially that of URM teachers.

## Recommendations and Conclusion

Although this study was limited by a small sample and restricted to one institution as well as one region, future mentoring programs for teacher candidates and URMs may want to consider an LHA. In an LHA, program leaders can create mentor-mentee pairings, but interactions are not limited to pairings. Instead, there are opportunities for small or large group interactions with an emphasis on the holistic community approach (Ben-Amram & Davidovitch, 2024; Mentor, 2020). The

layered approach also values the diverse types of interactions (e.g., mentees only, multiple mentor-mentee pairs), environments (e.g., physical space, virtual), and activities (e.g., shared meal, discussion) that can occur within a mentoring community. The LHA promotes community building as well as bidirectional relationships where mentors can learn and grow alongside mentees and other mentors.

Lastly, research on effective mentorship for URM mentees focuses specifically on mentees' experiences (Blake-Beard et al., 2021; Brown et al., 2021; Louis et al., 2014), but this study raises the question of how mentoring can be culturally responsive, effective, and sustaining for URM mentors. Since URM educators face increased workplace challenges (Dingus, 2008; Shaw-Amoah et al., 2020), it is important to consider how additional leadership roles, such as mentoring, can be designed to support their learning and positive professional identity development. These efforts could lead to systems of support and higher retention of URM educators.

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## Appendix A

## Interview Questions

Appendix A includes the nine interview questions asked in the semi-structured interviews with CoRe mentors.

1. Why were you interested in participating in CoRe?
2. What, if anything, was beneficial about participating in CoRe?
3. What, if anything, was challenging about participating in CoRe?
4. What program activity was the most impactful for you and why?
5. If the program continued, what might support your participation?
6. What advice would you give to a mentor considering the program?
7. What advice would you give to a mentee considering the program
8. If the program continued, what other activities or topics would you recommend?
9. If the program continued, what would you like to gain from the program?

## Appendix B

## Final Code List

| Code Name | Code Description |
|---|---|
| **Commitment-Program** | Expressing or referencing dedication to the program |
| **Connection** | Interaction with other(s) that are viewed as enriching |
| **Connection--Prospective** | Describing possibilities for further connections within the program |
| **Connection-Community** | Referencing group connections within the program |
| **Curriculum** | Educator Preparation Curriculum |
| **Difficulty Responding** | Referencing mentor struggle in responding to prompts or questions |
| **Distance** | Referencing physical distance |
| **Giving back** | Helping others (e.g. in the education field, in an institution, minority students, in the community) |
| **Love for education** | Describing education as a profession with affection or "love" |
| **Mentee as Learner** | Discussing or describing mentee's learning or growth within the program |
| **Mentor as Learner** | Discussing or describing mentor's learning or growth within the program |
| **Mentoring Philosophy** | Referencing their own beliefs/philosophies of mentoring |
| **Personal Values** | Referencing personal code of ethics |
| **Practical Challenges** | Referencing experienced challenges in education |
| **Practical Challenges--Diversity** | Referencing conflict around diversity or race |
| **Professional identity** | Aligning or defining themselves as an educational professional |
| **Professional identity--Perspective on Education** | Referencing their own beliefs/philosophies of education |
| **Professional opportunities** | An enriching professional experience |
| **Race** | Reference to race or ethnicity |
| **Race - Racial identity** | Referring to one's own racial/ethnic identity |
| **Reflection** | Referencing deep thinking prompted by the program |
| **Relationship building** | the process of building a relationship |
| **Representation** | Exposure to non-white educators |
| **Representation-Underrepresentation** | Referencing no or limited exposure to non-white educators |
| **Self-doubt** | Questioning the quality of their mentorship |
| **Solicited Input** | Referencing the program requesting their input |
| **Structure** | Referencing program guidance, content, and potential changes |
| **Time Limits** | Referencing time and schedules |

**Appendix C**

**CoRe Mentoring Program Layered Holistic Approach (LHA) Final Code List**