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Building Bridges and Relationships Through Balanced Communication: Understanding Psychosocial Factors in Positive Public Relations Mentorship

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ABSTRACT

Mentoring relationships are correlated with positive outcomes and career success in both industry and academia. Although public relations mentorship is not studied as broadly as other managerial disciplines, it is a large and growing field. Results of a study of an academic public relations mentorship program indicate that structural factors such as distance or frequency of contact are not as important to perceived positive outcomes as were psychosocial factors. Two surveys (N = 25 and N = 33, 62.5% and 53.97% response rate, respectively) revealed that trust emerged as a central factor for building positively perceived mentoring relationships. However, emphasis is placed on how to build trust through responsive communication. And building trust leads to more positive perceptions of mentoring relationships. Notably, mentors and mentees had significantly different perceptions of relationship outcomes, suggesting the need to further explore power differentials in mentoring relationships. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

Keywords: mentorship, public relations education, skills, trust, mentor

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A significant body of research exists to explore best practices in and outcomes from mentoring relationships, but gaps persist in the literature (Plank Center for Leadership in Public Relations, 2016). For example, scholars have yet to concretely define the concept of mentoring, in part because mentoring can take multiple forms and consist of multiple activities. Further, the Plank Center's white paper on mentoring and best practices specifically points to the "lack of convincing empirical evidence that mentoring programs make a positive difference" (p. 17). Although it only breaks the surface of these issues, this study explores some of these issues through an analysis of a faculty-focused mentoring program housed in a major national communication association.

The Association for Education in Mass Communication and Journalism (AEJMC) Public Relations Division's (PRD) mentorship program began in 2014-2015 with 26 participants (13 pairs) and grew to 36 pairs and 72 active participants by 2019-2020. Annually, PRD members are recruited via the PRD listerv, newsletter, and social media platforms. Program participants complete an online application form and membership committee leaders pair them based on responses regarding mentorship needs (e.g., primary research area interests, job market preparation), demographics (e.g., age, gender, academic status) and interpersonal factors and preferences (e.g., scholar with professional background, female scholar only).

Mentorship pairs are announced via email introductions prior to AEJMC and all are invited to attend an hour-long meet and greet held at the conference. For those able to attend, the "mentorship coffee break" provides a formal face-to-face meeting opportunity for the mentoring pairs to make initial contact before moving into a distance relationship.

During the first five years of the program, PRD leadership followed its progress anecdotally through membership committee feedback (received directly from participants) and surveys. However, long-

term membership committee members noted trends that might provide opportunities for improvement and to share best practices for mentorship with other programs and academic mentors in general.

Mentorship in higher education has long been studied as a pathway to success for junior faculty and doctoral students transitioning into academic positions. Formal mentorship has emerged as a determinant of positive career outcomes (van der Weijden et al., 2015), especially in regard to teaching (Pierce & Martinez, 2012). Contributing factors such as gender, race, the added responsibility of dependents, and the structure of the mentorship relationship (such as co-learning and peer-to-peer mentoring) have been investigated in various academic fields (Ogan & Robinson, 2008; Sarikakis, 2003; Totleben & Deiss, 2015), but few studies have examined mentorship in public relations education to identify best practices or the structure of successful and positive relationships.

To fill this gap, this study examines participant perceptions of relationships formed through the AEJMC PRD Mentorship Program. Two surveys distributed during a five-year period (2015-2020) were used to explore how structural and psychosocial factors such as frequency of contact, responsivity, length of relationship, and trust correlated with positive perceptions of relationships and their outcomes. Additionally, as this program pairs mentoring partners between institutions, distance was considered a factor impacting relationship outcomes. In practice, survey results were used to understand the overall attitudes of program participants and identify any factors that should be addressed or changed in the program's structure to improve both outcomes and participant experiences. Results indicate that psychosocial factors related to relationship building are key to positive mentoring relationships. Further, practical outcomes highlight the need for responsive communication between mentoring partners and the importance of understanding differing perceptions among mentors and mentees.

Literature Review

To better understand best practices and quality in mentoring relationships, this section outlines existing literature on mentoring, mentoring relationships in public relations, and the psychosocial and structural factors that contribute to or inhibit success in these important relationships.

What is mentoring?

Mentoring is considered important for developing skills, gaining psychosocial and socioemotional support, supporting career advancement, and ultimately, encouraging success (Haggard et al., 2001; Jacobi, 1991; Kram, 1985; Packard, 2016). The Plank Center for Leadership in Public Relations' (2017) recent report on mentoring describes mentorship as "when a mentor, or someone with experience in a certain field, creates a bond or relationship with a mentee, an individual who is looking to grow [their] expertise in that field" (p. 2). To note, it is important to distinguish mentoring from advising, which typically emphasizes sharing information about the activities needed to complete an educational program or pursue a career path (Montgomery et al., 2014). Mentoring may include aspects of advising but extends that type of support due to its personal nature and deep engagement (Montgomery, 2017; Montgomery et al., 2014). While mentoring is a term often used in conversation, there is no universally accepted definition of mentoring (Miller 2002; Zimmerman & Paul, 2007), and the term is difficult to define consistently (Crisp & Cruz, 2009; Jacobi, 1991). Some define mentoring as a process (Anderson & Shannon, 1988; Baker, 2015; Baker et al., 2013; Roberts, 2000), while others define it as a series of activities, an intense relationship between a more experienced and less experienced person, or simply powerful informal communication that leads to career or personal advancement (Allen et al., 2004; Bahniuk & Hill, 1998).

One commonality across definitions of mentoring is the emphasis

on one-way, top-down communication (Montgomery, 2017). However, both early career professionals and those in senior positions seek mentoring; and in practice, the benefits of mentoring are often reciprocal (Zachary & Fischler, 2009). Because mentoring is mutually beneficial to both mentors and mentees (see Jones & Brown, 2011; Mullen & Kennedy, 2007; Tong & Kram, 2013), a more holistic definition of mentoring is as a relationship in which one participant shares their expertise and time to help another participant further develop and master skills and knowledge (Kram, 1985).

Ideally, mentoring relationships include a joint sense of caring, sharing, and helping between the mentoring pair. These distinctions allow for mentorship to be viewed as more than a one-way, top-down relationship. To note, because of the strong connections between the Plank Center and the PRD Mentoring Program, program leaders have generally embraced Plank Center research (2016) and values (2017) when developing and maintaining the program and sharing insights into mentoring best practices. These values are routinely communicated at the annual breakfast and in participant-facing communication that happens throughout the year, both to provide context for the values guiding the program and to encourage best practices while mentoring pairs build and maintain their relationships.

Mentors, Protégés, and Mentoring Relationships

In simple terms, a mentor can be described as a more experienced person, while the protégé or mentee has less experience and may be in a junior position (Eby & Allen, 2002). A mentor is someone who teaches, supports, counsels, protects, promotes, and sponsors another person in their career and personal development (Zey, 1984). Scholars have expanded this definition to note that mentors are role models and someone a protégé can seek when they do not know how to work through an issue independently (Noe, 1988; Wilson & Elman, 1990). Although mentors are

often identified and selected based on demographic or structural qualities, research suggests that selecting mentors based on psychosocial qualities can lead to more meaningful outcomes (Allen et al., 2004; Kram, 1985).

For example, while several scholars note that mentors can attend to both career and personal development, some have found that male mentors are more likely to provide career guidance and female mentors are more likely to also attend to psychosocial needs of protégés (Allen et al., 2004). However, such gender-based differences in mentoring may contribute to the continuation of gendered social roles (Pompper & Adams, 2006). For example, public relations is a predominantly female field, but males are more often in leadership positions (Arenstein, 2019). This situation creates a competitive dynamic between males and females, including among females vying for roles to advance their careers. As females are expected to be naturally more nurturing than males, assumptions of female excellence as mentors is often assumed. Unfortunately, this occurrence is not always the case in competitive work environments. Although females report that emotional support is indeed a benefit of same-sex dyads, conflict is also reported due to the competition for advancement (Pompper & Adams, 2006). Arguably, this example highlights the value of seeking mentors based on psychosocial rather than demographic needs.

Specifically, psychosocial needs emphasize interpersonal aspects of mentoring relationships (Allen et al., 2004). Psychosocial needs may refer to functions that are specific to mentoring relationships (Kram, 1985) or, more broadly, social identifiers that individuals bring to relationships (Upton, 2013). For example, psychosocial factors such as social support, loneliness, marriage status, social disruption, bereavement, work environment, social status, and social integration have been identified. However, specific to mentoring relationships, Kram (1985) found that psychosocial mentoring functions included role modeling, acceptance-and-confirmation, counseling, and friendship. And when mentors helped

mentees based on psychosocial needs, the mentor boosted the mentee's confidence, helped them define identity, and helped them evaluate their professional capabilities (Kram, 1985). Mentors who support psychosocial needs are likely to model behaviors and offer emotional acceptance or confirmation while also providing the mentee with counseling and friendship (Allen et al., 2004). Further, compared to career or structural factors, psychosocial aspects of mentoring are more highly related to protégé satisfaction with mentoring relationships and deepen bonds between mentoring partners (Kram, 1985). Additionally, the ability to communicate well and competently is essential for both mentors and mentees (Wiemann, 1977). Mentors must possess self-worth and believe in their abilities to help others (Kalbfleisch & Davies, 1993). Mentees must trust and respect their mentors for mentoring to be successful because emotional connections such as familiarity, closeness, and trust are the foundation of mentoring relationships (Bell et al., 2000; Kram, 1985; Ragins et al., 2000). Both mentoring partners must invest time, energy, and emotions to form and maintain relationships (Schulz, 1995).

Finally, mentoring relationships develop through four phases: initiation, cultivation, separation, and redefinition (Kram, 1985). In the initiation stage, the mentoring pair learns about each other and are more likely to share information akin to advising, such as career or disciplinary knowledge (Dixon et al., 2012). Interpersonal bonds grow in the cultivation stage as the partners exchange ideas and build trust (Dixon et al., 2012). The pair may become co-creators as they share experiences. Next, separation is perhaps the most important phase (Kram, 1985), allowing the mentee to demonstrate their independence and gain confidence (Schulz, 1995). If the mentoring pair does not part after the separation phase, the relationship moves into the redefinition phase. In redefinition, the pair form a long-lasting, perhaps even life-long, relationship of continuous mentoring (Montgomery, 2017). Mentoring

relationships often grow even stronger when the former mentee becomes a mentor themselves (Ragins & Scandura, 1999).

Types of Mentoring

Two types of mentoring relationships—informal vs. formal—exist based on how those relationships were formed. Informal mentoring generally happens spontaneously when people identify a connection and decide to enter into a supportive relationship. This connection can occur whether a mentor approaches a mentee or vice versa (Chao et al., 1992; Edmondson, 2012; Grant, 2015; Monroe et al., 2008; Ragins & Cotton, 1999). However, some researchers caution that informal relationships can allow organizational and cultural barriers to continue (Füger & Höppel, 2011).

Alternately, formal mentoring gained popularity in the 21st century (De Vries & Webb, 2006; Haynes & Petrosko, 2009). In formal mentoring, an independent third party matches mentors with mentees, often using the needs or wants of the mentee to make that match (Chao et al., 1992; Grant, 2015; Monroe, et al., 2008; Montgomery, 2017: Montgomery et al., 2014; Ragins & Cotton, 1999; Redmond, 1990; Wallace, et al., 2014). People in formal mentoring relationships may have weaker emotional connections due to the matching process, and these pairs may focus on career needs rather than psychosocial ones (Ragins & Cotton, 1999).

Although mentoring is typically imagined as being either informal or formal, other types of mentorships exist. Developmental mentoring is considered an effective form of mentoring that builds on learning and experience (Clutterbuck, 2008), focusing on networking and providing guidance and advice (Alean-Kirlpatrick, 2011). Developmental mentors often challenge mentees to take the lead and determine their mentorship goals by planning and acquiring resources. This task empowers the mentee by developing personal accountability, building self-resourcefulness, and leveling the power balance between the mentoring pair (Clutterbuck,

2008).

Among other types of mentoring, comprehensive mentoring refers to when a mentee recognizes many mentoring needs and seeks different mentors at different times to meet these needs (Anderson, et al., 2012; Griffin & Toldson, 2012). Maintenance mentoring helps a mentee advance through a plan of study or career path, working toward accomplishing one major goal, such as earning a college degree (Montgomery, 2017). Similarly, transitional mentoring helps a person move from one career stage to another, such as advancing from graduate student to faculty member (Montgomery, 2017), while aspirational mentors help their mentees plan for future roles or positions, such as a move to administration (Montgomery, 2017; Yosso, 2005). Finally, continuous mentorship reflects long-term relationships between mentoring partners that may span the entirety of a mentee's career (Montgomery, 2017).

Benefits and Importance of Mentoring

While mentoring relationships often emphasize benefits for mentees, they also benefit mentors, organizations, and society (Schulz, 1995). Because mentoring allows for collaboration and experiential learning, it may be one of the most important developmental aspects of adulthood (Bova, 1987). Mentorship is often bidirectional or reciprocal in nature, and both mentees and mentors benefit from their engagement and experiences (Chesler & Chesler, 2002; Greco, 2014; Lechuga, 2011; Long et al., 2013; McGee, et al., 2015; McKinsey, 2016). Research broadly suggests that mentorship can lead to career advancement, a sense of satisfaction and belonging, and boosted confidence (Plank Center for Leadership in Public Relations, 2017), but there are also more nuanced benefits for both mentees and mentors.

As expected, mentorship benefits mentees in various ways. Mentoring allows mentees to learn and grow from failure in safe environments (Schulz, 1995). Mentees may ask mentors questions they

are afraid to ask of others, such as seeking advice about or protection from political or other uncomfortable situations (Kram, 1983; Schulz, 1995). Mentees also benefit from their mentor's shared knowledge, career planning, improved professional skills, and competence awareness (Schmidt & Faber, 2016). Good mentorship can also help mentees advance their careers through networking and visibility (Schmidt & Faber, 2016). In addition to gaining self-confidence from mentoring, mentees often strengthen their well-being by learning more about life-work balance from their mentors (Schmidt & Faber, 2016). When mentees receive good mentoring, they are often inspired to give back and, in return, offer their time as mentors, building a source of mentorship for a new generation (Plank Center, 2017; Schulz, 1995).

Notably, the bidirectional and reciprocal nature of mentoring relationships also yields distinct benefits for mentors. Research suggests that mentors achieve self-awareness and learn to capitalize on their personal strengths through mentoring duties (Schmidt & Faber, 2016; Kram, 1983; Schulz, 1995). As mentors are typically established in their careers, they often share their experiences and knowledge with others, affording the mentor added respect (Schulz, 1995) and recognition as a leader or knowledge expert (Kram, 1983). Mentors also improve their leadership, collegiality, and communication skills through mentoring engagement (Schmidt & Faber, 2016). Additionally, mentors learn from their mentees as they become exposed to new skills, ideas, and self-discoveries when they answer questions, think through their career paths, and re-examine how and why they made certain choices (Schulz, 1995). Expanded networks, stronger relationships, institutional recognition, increased awareness of gender structures, and personal satisfaction are also outcomes of mentoring relationships for mentors (Schmidt & Faber, 2016).

This is not to say that there are only positive outcomes from

mentoring relationships; however, scant research exists examining the negative effects of mentoring (Eby & Allen, 2002). For example, research shows that distancing and manipulative behaviors and poor dyadic fit are consistent factors leading to perceived negative mentoring experiences (Eby & Allen, 2002). And research on graduate student mentoring suggests that poor mentoring can have negative career and psychosocial effects (Tuma et al., 2021). Even so, because this area of research is still growing and generally privileges the protégé perspective, and because most mentorship research focuses on positive outcomes and best practices, the negative effects of mentoring are not fully discussed here.

In short, mentoring relationships cannot be defined in simplistic terms or linear constructs. They are dynamic, needs-based, reciprocal relationships that are as defined by time and experience as they are by emotional and psychosocial factors important to both mentoring partners. And it is with these qualities in mind that the PRD mentoring program has been designed and developed. Although the program is formal because it serves as an independent third party that recruits and pairs mentoring partners, the goal is to facilitate the growth of less formal mentoring relationships. Both mentors and mentees can indicate which demographic characteristics, psychosocial factors, and professional issues they wish to prioritize. Each year, mentoring pairs are encouraged to meet during a planned conference event, which is designed to facilitate the initial contact between participants while sharing best practices for maintaining the relationships. Finally, there is no system for tracking the progress or outcomes of mentoring relationships, although program managers share resources and tips throughout the year to encourage mentoring pairs to meet in some capacity. With this context for the study in mind, it also seems discipline-specific factors should be included in any understanding of mentorship.

Mentoring in Public Relations Education

Formal mentorship is considered a determinant of positive career outcomes (van der Weijden, et al., 2015), especially regarding teaching (Peirce & Martinez, 2012). Contributing factors such as gender, race, the added responsibility of dependents, and the structure of mentorship relationships (such as co-learning and peer-to-peer mentoring) have been investigated in various academic fields (Ogan & Robinson, 2008, Sarikakis, 2003; Totleben & Deiss, 2015). For example, research on female public relations professionals shows that while there are distinct career-related benefits to mentoring relationships, many in the field do not have meaningful mentoring relationships (Meng & Neill, 2021). Yet, few studies have considered mentorship in public relations education, which often requires professionalization in both corporate and academic contexts.

The few studies of public relations scholar-to-scholar mentorship have focused on the learning modalities involved (Pardun et al., 2015) and the impacts of gender and ethnic identity on mentoring pair relationships (Pompper & Adams, 2006; Waymer, 2012). For example, the importance of factors such as shared racial identity experiences and ongoing emotional support can make academic mentors into close friends or even role models (Waymer, 2012). To date, no formal research of public relations mentorship has produced best practices to emulate or has considered the topic from a longitudinal perspective, examining how relationships evolve as participants' careers progress.

Based on this review of mentorship, types of mentoring, and mentoring outcomes, there exists an opportunity to understand the quality and experience of public relations scholars participating in a formal mentoring program. Mentoring partnerships can focus on both professional and personal development opportunities. Additionally, because mentoring partners in the target program are encouraged to build partnerships that best meet personal needs, both structural and

psychosocial factors that impact the success and positive perceptions of mentoring relationships can be examined. These items can include the structure of the relationship (e.g., frequency of contact and physical distance between partners) and the importance of psychosocial factors (e.g., responsivity, confidentiality) leading to satisfaction in mentoring partnerships. This study examines these concepts to identify the factors shaping perceptions of positive mentorship relationships and relationship outcomes in the context of an academic public relations mentoring program. Three broad research questions guided this exploratory study:

RQ1: What structural factors are associated with positive PR educator mentoring relationships?
RQ2: What psychosocial factors are associated with positive PR educator mentoring relationships?
RQ3: How do perceptions of mentoring relationship outcomes differ between mentors and mentees?

Method

To understand perceptions of the mentoring program, two surveys about the program were used to understand program participant experiences. This section includes an overview of mentoring program participant data. Next, data collection and analysis methods are described.

Mentoring Program Data

Data collected since the beginning of the PRD Mentorship Program shows a relatively consistent number of participants per year (see Table 1). Since 2017, n = 96 individual members have participated in the program. Mentoring partners were primarily female (n = 75, 78.12%). Following a concerted recruitment effort in 2019-20, the program saw a significant jump in mentoring pairs (n = 36). That year, n = 7 (7.29%) participants participated as both mentors and mentees. Additionally, three mentoring pairs formally continued in the program starting in 2017-18;

however, anecdotal evidence shows that additional mentoring relationships have continued outside of the program.

Table 1: PRD Mentor Program Participation

Year	*N* = Pairs	*N* = Unique Participants	*n* = Dual Mentor/Mentee
2014-15	13	26	N/A
2015-16	30	62	N/A
2016-17	16	32	N/A
2017-18	20	38	2
2018-19	14	28	0
2019-20	36	63	7

Mentoring Program Survey

To monitor the growth of the mentoring program, the PRD membership committee distributed surveys to explore participant perceptions of their experiences. These surveys were designed to understand participant engagement with the program and opportunities for program growth. Of the distributed surveys, those sent in 2016 and 2020 received meaningful response rates, offering this opportunity for longitudinal analysis.

Surveys were distributed with minimal modifications. Changes to the 2020 survey were based on open-ended responses to the 2016 survey, an interest in exploring anecdotal evidence, and an effort to include items that align with existing mentoring literature. Data was collected anonymously, and both mentors and mentees were recruited via email addresses provided via program applications. To understand the quality of the program, participants were asked whether they found the program useful, would recommend the program, and would participate again. They

were also asked about the results of their mentoring relationship including whether they put enough time into the relationship, planned to stay in touch with their mentoring partner, and found their relationship successful. Items exploring psychosocial relationship-building factors focused on whether partners were responsive to communication, seemed committed to relationships, and fostered a sense of trust. Items were also designed to understand structural factors such as how communication occurs, including which partner was more likely to initiate contact, which tools were used to communicate, and how frequently communication occurred. Participants were asked about the areas in which they received mentoring (e.g., strengthening scholarship, strengthening teaching, strategizing job searches). Due to the number of participants in the program, and to protect participant anonymity, the only demographic information gathered in 2016 was academic rank. Additional demographic data was gathered in 2020. Table 2 shows participant data from both the 2016 (62.5% response rate) and 2020 (53.97% response rate) surveys.

Table 2: Survey Participant Demographics

		2016		2020	
		n	%	*n*	%
Role	Mentee	12	48.0%	20	60.6%
	Mentor	13	52.0%	14	42.4%
Academic Rank	Graduate Student	5	20.0%	10	30.3%
	Assistant Professor	8	32.0%	9	27.3%
	Associate Professor	5	20.0%	8	24.2%
	Full Professor	3	12.0%	5	15.2%
	Professor Emerita(us)	1	4.0%	1	3.0%
	Other	1	4.0%	0	0%

Gender	Female	Gender and Race Data Not Collected in 2016 Survey	24	72.7%
	Male		9	27.3%
Race	African-American		1	3.0%
	Asian-American		3	9.1%
	Caucasian		19	57.6%
	Hispanic		1	3.0%
	Non-Hispanic		8	24.2%
	Other		6	18.2%

Results

In this section, results from both the 2016 and 2020 surveys are presented concurrently. The results explore the structural and psychosocial factors addressed in the research questions. Additionally, why participants chose to be part of the mentoring program is outlined for context.

Among the most popular reasons for seeking mentorship, participants sought support for strategizing job searches, strengthening scholarship, and adjusting to faculty positions. Further, additional categories were added to the 2020 survey based on "Other" responses provided in 2016. As shown in Table 3, the range of motivations for joining the mentoring program shows a balanced need for both structural and psychosocial outcomes.

Table 3: Motivations for Joining Mentoring Program

	2016		2020	
Motivations	*n*	%	*n*	%
Strengthen Scholarship	15	60%	12	36.4%
Strengthen Teaching	5	20%	7	21.2%
Evaluate Strengths/ Weaknesses	6	24%	10	30.3%
Strategize Job Search	11	44%	13	39.4%

Talk About Tenure	10	40%	9	27.3%
Adjust to Faculty Position	8	32%	11	33.3%
Talk About Promotion	3	12%	6	18.2%
Adjust to (non)Diverse Campus	2	8%	2	6.1%
Adjust to Doctoral Program	4	16%	3	9.1%
Consider Career Paths	6	24%	10	30.3%
Work/Life Balance		N/A	7	21.2%
Research Direction		N/A	7	21.2%
Scholarly Material Review		N/A	2	6.1%
Dealing with Specific Situations		N/A	10	30.3%
Enhance Professional Experiences		N/A	7	21.2%
Other	9	36%	9	27.3%

Structural Factors Influencing Mentoring Relationships

To begin understanding qualities that contribute to positive mentoring relationships, RQ1 focused on exploring the structural factors that lead to more positive mentoring experiences. Structural factors of a mentoring relationship may include organization-based influences such as location of the program, physical distance between mentoring partners, and frequency of contact. As expected, the mentoring program examined in this study is just one source of mentoring for public relations educators. Most participants completing the 2020 survey indicated they received mentoring at their home institutions (*n* = 24, 72.7%), and others received non-academic mentoring (*n* = 10, 30.3%).

First, 2020 participants (*n* = 33) somewhat agreed they put enough time into the mentoring relationship (*M* = 4.73, *SD* = 1.68) and found their mentoring partner was responsive to communication (*M* = 4.76, *SD* = 2.09). These findings represented a small dip in perceptions from the 2016

survey, when participants ($n = 24$) agreed they put in enough time ($M = 5.29$, $SD = 1.73$) and found their mentor responsive ($M = 5.88$, $SD = 1.70$). However, using a bipolar scale with 1 indicating the participant was most likely to initiate contact and 7 indicating the mentoring partner was most likely to initiate contact, 2020 participants generally indicated they were more likely than their partners to initiate contact ($M = 2.76$, $SD = 1.786$). However, mentees from both surveys indicated they were slightly (but not significantly) more likely to initiate contact (**2016:** $M = 3.0$, $SD = 1.81$; **2020:** $M = 2.54$, $SD = 1.67$) than mentors (**2016:** $M = 4.25$, $SD = 1.87$; **2020:** $M = 3.00$, $SD = 1.89$).

Next, participants in both surveys indicated that communication primarily occurred via email, but phone and in-person conversations were also used for mentoring meetings (see Table 4). Video conferencing was reported by fewer participants, although it is worth noting that data was collected prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Regarding frequency of contact, participants indicated various communication timeframes, with most participants indicating that communication occurred at varying frequencies (see Table 4). For example, some participants met once, such as at AEJMC. Others met at frequencies that "varied throughout the year," while some participants reported making initial contact but never actually having a meeting.

Another structural factor considered here is the academic rank of participants. As expected, Chi-square analysis showed that in 2020 mentors were significantly more likely to be senior faculty members at the rank of associate professor ($n = 8$, 24.2%) or higher ($n = 6$, 18.2%), while mentees were either graduate students ($n = 10$, 30.3%) or assistant professors ($n = 3$, 9.1%), $\chi 2 = (8, N = 33) = 27.73$, $p = .001$. The same trend occurred in the 2016 survey, ($\chi 2 = 15.49$, $p = .008$).

Table 4: Communication Methods and Frequencies

		2016		2020	
		n	%	*n*	%
Method	Email	22	88%	30	90.9%
	In Person	12	48%	12	36.4%
	Phone	9	36%	12	36.4%
	Skype/Video	6	24%	4	12.1%
Frequencies	Monthly	5	20%	6	18.2%
	Quarterly	7	28%	5	15.2%
	Each Semester	6	24%	6	18.2%
	Other	6	24%	16	48.5%

to recruit mentees to begin serving as mentors, which also helps enhance perceptions of mentorship satisfaction (Plank Center, 2017; Schulz, 1995). And, if there were problems with the partnership, these could be confidentially reported to the program so it can continue to monitor and adjust recommendations for building successful mentorship relationships.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Despite the insights provided, notable limitations exist in this study that warrant further exploration. First, the differences noted between mentor and mentee perceptions in the 2020 study may be attributed to the fact that more mentors than mentees responded to the survey (n = 20 mentors, n = 14 mentees). This potentially skewed the data regarding perceptions among the mentor group. This is also noted because the 2016 survey had a better balance of mentors and mentees participants. Future research should aim for a more balanced set of participants to identify whether the statistical patterns hold.

Next, because the 2020 survey data showed marked differences in perceptions of relationship outcomes and program benefits between mentors and mentees, qualitative analysis may help illuminate why those differences existed. Data showed that even among mentees

there appeared to be significantly different perceptions of the program quality and outcomes. However, among mentees, there may have been a sincere interest in reporting honest, if unfavorable, feedback to provide opportunities to strengthen the program. This is posited because participants found the program valuable overall, even when they did not have positive individual experiences. Continued longitudinal analysis supplemented with qualitative research may illustrate how and why such different perceptions emerged.

Similarly, the small number of minority-identifying and male participants in the study prevented an analysis of potential differences in mentoring experiences compared to those of white females. For example, although the ratio of female to male participants reflected the general ratio of program participants based on gender, this difference in participation could speak to gender gaps that exist in practice. This evokes existing public relations scholarship that suggests gender and racial identity often influence both the quality and the long-term career relevance of mentoring relationships (Pompper & Adams, 2006: Waymer, 2012). Initial findings from this study suggest additional research on this and similar mentoring programs could provide a fruitful avenue of research both because public relations is a predominantly white, female field and because many of the psychosocial factors related to mentoring are often gendered (whether fairly or accurately) as female. Future research should consider whether males or females are more willing to participate in mentoring programs, and why; the experiences of minority-identifying mentoring partners and whether that influences their willingness to participate in formal programs; opportunities to make mentoring programs more inclusive; and how to address gender and other identity-based influences in mentoring relationships, particularly in public relations.

Finally, this study was limited in scope as it focused on one mentorship program. Future research should consider using both

quantitative and qualitative methods to explore the factors influencing successful mentorship programs being developed for other membership associations or professional and academic organizations such as the Public Relations Student Society of America or on-campus mentoring programs.

Psychosocial Factors Influencing Mentoring Relationships

To continue exploring qualities that contribute to positive mentoring relationships, RQ2 emphasizes an analysis of psychosocial factors. Psychosocial needs generally include attending to more personal issues such as boosting confidence, defining identity, or evaluating abilities. Results suggest that building interpersonal relationships and fostering a trust-based environment were key psychosocial factors influencing the perceived quality of mentoring relationships.

In the 2020 survey, participants were asked to reflect on the quality of their mentoring relationships to set a baseline understanding of participant perceptions. On average, participants neither agreed nor disagreed that their mentoring partner seemed committed to the relationship ($M = 4.45$, $SD = 2.11$) but they somewhat agreed they were able to have confidential conversations with ($M = 4.76$, $SD = 2.08$) and trusted ($M = 4.85$, $SD = 2.05$) their mentoring partners. Notably, large standard deviations suggest that participants had widely varying experiences in the program.

Both surveys also showed that participants were interested in receiving mentoring about issues beyond how to meet specific job requirements related to teaching, research, and service (refer to Table 3). As previously outlined, participants were particularly interested in strengthening scholarship and strategizing job searches. However, they also sought mentoring for adjusting to faculty positions, considering career paths, and dealing with specific situations. Notably, participants' responses suggested that psychosocial factors such as having shared life experiences (such as being a mother) and shared academic goals and ambitions were

beneficial to both positive outcomes and relationship development. Unsurprisingly, and as will be discussed, trust was a significant factor for both mentors and mentees who reported positive partnership outcomes. In 2016, strong relationships emerged among those who would continue participating in the program; they were more likely to recommend the program ($r = .916$, $p < .000$) and find the program useful ($r = .916$, $p < .000$). Those who planned to stay in touch with their partner were also more likely to report the relationship leading to positive results ($r = .911$, $p < .000$). However, these numbers dipped in the 2020 survey. Those who would continue participating in the program were somewhat less likely to recommend the program ($r = .776$, $p < .001$) and find the program useful ($p = .612$, $p < .001$).

Correlation analysis from both the 2016 and 2020 surveys showed that increased responsivity and trust correlated with more positive mentoring relationship experiences and longevity. For example, in 2016, the strongest relationship existed between trusting one's partner and the partner being responsive to communication ($r = .955$, $p < .000$). There was little change to this relationship in the 2020 survey ($r = .830$, $p < .001$). This finding was notable because other relationships related to trusting the mentoring partner existed but were not as strong. For example, trusting a partner correlated with increased plans to stay in touch (**2016:** $r = .884$, $p < .000$; **2020:** $r = .815$, $p < .001$) and believing the relationship led to positive results (**2016:** $r = .881$, $p < .000$, 2020: $r = .819$, $p < .001$).

Building on the 2016 results, the 2020 survey showed the importance of mentoring partners being responsive to communication and offering a sense of confidentiality in the relationship. Those who experienced responsive relationships were significantly more likely to recommend the program ($p = .800$, $p < .001$), believe their relationships were successful ($p = .796$, $p < .001$), and believe their relationships led to positive results ($p = .894$, p < .001). Further, those who trusted their

partners were significantly more likely to recommend the program (p = .849, $p < .001$), and believe the relationship was successful (p = .884, $p < .001$). Trust was also positively related to being able to have confidential conversations (p = .924, $p < .001$) and perceiving the mentoring partner as responsive (p = .830, $p < .001$). And being able to have confidential conversations with mentoring partners increased the likelihood of believing the mentoring relationship was successful (p = .906, $p < .001$). In short, psychosocial qualities of both responsivity and confidentiality were key factors related to trust in these relationships, and pairs that planned to continue their relationship were more likely to report benefits and consequently recommend the program to others.

Perceptions of Mentoring Outcomes

Existing definitions of mentoring emphasize one-way, top-down communication (Montgomery, 2017), wherein a mentor with more experience supports a mentee who may be a junior colleague (Allen et al., 2004). This nature of mentoring relationships may lead to power differentials between partners. Because of this situation, RQ3 explored how perceptions of mentoring relationship outcomes differed between mentors and mentees. To answer this question, results are described both among and between groups.

Overall Perceptions of Mentoring Outcomes

Participants in both surveys indicated they would recommend the PRD's mentorship program and would consider participating in the program again (See Table 5). However, in 2020, they only somewhat agreed that their mentoring relationship was successful (M = 4.55, SD = 2.03) and that the mentoring program led to positive results (M = 4.61, SD = 1.92). Large standard deviations suggest a wide range of perceptions about success of the relationships. Even so, participants across both surveys agreed they planned to stay in touch with their mentoring partner; and in 2020, n = 16 (48.5%) participants indicated they planned to continue their partnership.

Table 5: Perception Comparisons from 2016 and 2020 Surveys

	2016			2020		
Item	*N*	*M*	*SD*	*N*	*M*	*SD*
I would recommend the PRD's mentorship program to colleagues.	24	6.29	1.16	33	5.06	1.80
I would consider participating in the PRD mentorship program again.	24	6.25	1.07	33	5.55	1.68
I plan to stay in touch with my mentoring partner.	24	6.0	1.67	33	5.12	2.0
I believe my mentoring relationship was successful.	24	5.83	1.61	33	4.55	2.03
My mentoring relationship led to positive results for me.	23	5.70	1.58	33	4.61	1.92
The PRD mentorship program is useful.	23	6.3	1.19	33	5.61	1.48
I trust my mentoring partner.	24	6.0	1.45	33	4.85	2.05

Next, although both mentors and mentees agreed the program was useful (**2016:** $M = 6.3$, $SD = 1.16$; **2020:** $M = 5.61$, $SD = 1.48$), overall positive perceptions of the program were not as pronounced in the 2020 survey (See Table 5). Additionally, results from the 2020 survey showed significant, practical differences between mentor and mentee perceptions of positive program outcomes.

Differing Perceptions between Mentors and Mentees

In 2016, independent samples t-tests showed no significant differences in perceptions of partnership outcomes between mentors and mentees. However, significant differences between mentor and mentee perceptions emerged in the 2020 survey results.

As previously discussed, trust was a key psychosocial factor related to positive outcomes. However, mentors were significantly more likely to agree that they trusted their partners (see Table 6). Similarly, across multiple items mentors at least somewhat agreed they had positive

experiences, whereas mentees reported somewhat disagreeing or neither agreeing nor disagreeing with the same items. Additionally, large standard deviations among mentee perceptions also suggest that mentees had widely varying experiences—more than participating mentors. On average, mentees were significantly less likely to consider participating in the program again, were not sure of whether they planned to stay in touch with their mentoring partners, and did not consider their relationships successful. For example, among the noted discrepancies, mentors (*n* = 12, 36.4%) were more likely than mentees (*n* = 4, 12.1%) to plan to continue their partnership. Moreover, among the *n* = 4 (12.1%) participants who did not plan to continue their partnership because it was not a valuable experience, *n* = 3 respondents were mentees. Additionally, mentees generally disagreed that their mentoring relationships were successful, while mentors somewhat agreed their relationships were successful. Mentors were also more likely to feel they could have confidential conversations and that they trusted their mentoring partners.

Table 6: t-Test Results Comparing Mentor and Mentee Perceptions of Program Outcomes

	Mentor		Mentee				
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*df*	*t*	*p*
I would recommend the PRD's mentorship program to colleagues.	5.74	.991	4.31	2.25	30	2.46	.020
I would consider participating in the PRD mentorship program again.	6.26	.733	4.77	2.09	30	2.89	.004
I plan to stay in touch with my mentoring partner.	5.89	1.29	3.92	2.36	30	3.05	.005
I believe my mentoring relationship was successful.	5.26	1.33	3.69	2.50	30	2.32	.028
My mentoring relationship led to positive results for me.	5.16	1.26	4.0	2.45	30	1.76	.089
The PRD mentorship program is useful.	5.95	.97	5.0	1.91	30	1.85	.075

My mentoring partner was responsive to my communication.*	5.26	1.82	4.23	2.32	21.72	1.35	.192
My mentoring partner seemed committed to our relationship.*	5.16	1.74	3.62	2.29	21.14	2.05	.053
I was able to have confidential conversations with my mentoring partner.	5.47	1.50	3.92	2.43	30	2.23	.033
I trust my mentoring partner.	5.68	1.38	3.85	2.34	30	2.80	.009

*Levene's Test for Equality of Variances not assumed

Despite these differences, results suggest similar perceptions of mentoring relationship outcomes on a few key items. For example, both mentors and mentees somewhat agreed that their mentoring relationships led to positive results and that the program is useful. These findings suggest that while there are potential differences in perceptions of nuanced partnership outcomes between mentors and mentees, a holistic analysis of mentoring partnerships yielded generally positive responses.

Discussion

This study offers an opportunity to explore perceptions of an academic public relations mentoring program across a five-year period. Analysis of two quantitative surveys distributed to program participants suggest the value of emphasizing psychosocial factors over structural factors when evaluating the positive perceptions of mentoring relationships. Specifically, key findings point to (1) the importance of building trust in relationships and (2) the need to understand differing perceptions among mentors and mentees. Practical recommendations for guiding participants in mentoring programs are provided.

The Need to Build Trust

Unsurprisingly, trust emerged as a key factor in evaluating the quality of mentoring relationships. Most important, however, are the

factors that contributed to building trust and the outcomes of building trust in these relationships.

Trust seemed particularly influenced by a simple act: responsivity. Simply hearing back from mentoring partners seemingly set a tone in relationships. It allowed participants to feel they could more confidently communicate with their mentoring partners, for example by reaching out with random or unplanned questions. Additionally, responsivity and trust were positively related to participants feeling more confident about having confidential conversations, building to a sense of openness in relationships. And, overall, the more participants felt a sense of trust, responsivity, and confidentiality in their mentoring relationships, the more likely they were to plan to stay in touch with their partner and believe their relationship led to positive results.

This finding suggests that psychosocial factors based on positive interpersonal interactions contributed to successful mentoring partnerships, strengthened relationships, and greater satisfaction. This aligns with foundational mentorship research that suggests meeting psychosocial needs, rather than structural factors, leads to more satisfying and deeper mentoring relationships (Kram, 1985). Existing mentorship research highlights the importance of role modeling, acceptance, counseling, and friendship (Kram, 1985). Arguably, the simple act of being responsive could create an environment in which these psychosocial needs are met. Being responsive might model best practices, create a sense of acceptance for mentees, and foster an environment that helps mentees feel comfortable seeking counseling and advice. And the more a mentor fosters a sense of trust, particularly in a smaller academic circle such as that found in public relations, then the more opportunity there might be to develop friendships. This finding builds on the literature that defines mentorship as a dynamic, reciprocal relationship based on trust and sharing (Bova, 1987; Chesler & Chesler, 2002; Greco, 2014; Lechuga, 2011; Long et al., 2013;

McGee, et al., 2015; McKinsey, 2016). And this is suggested particularly because structural factors related to time, distance, or communication modality had little effect on the perceived positive outcomes of the mentoring relationships.

The Gap Between Mentors and Mentees

Although the findings suggest that responsivity, trust, and confidentiality are positively related to increased positive perceptions of mentoring relationships, notable gaps existed in perceptions between mentors and mentees. Findings suggest that naturally occurring power differentials not only impact that quality of relationships, but also may need to be addressed by mentors.

First, large standard deviations in the data show that participants had widely varying experiences in and perceptions of the mentoring program. These differences became particularly noticeable when parsing the data between mentors and mentee participants. Existing research provides evidence that mentees do not always perceive positive benefits to mentorship (Tuma et al., 2021). Further, negative personal behaviors and good dyadic fit can lead to poor mentorship experiences (Eby & Allen, 2002). Here, standard deviations were much larger for mentees, suggesting that they had a greater variety of experiences in the program. Previous research exploring graduate student perceptions (Tuma et al., 2021) is relevant here because many participants in the program identified as doctoral students. The unexplored issues here are why mentees felt they had different experiences. For example, mentees were significantly less likely to recommend and keep participating in the program. They were also less likely to stay in touch with their partner and believe the relationship was successful. Existing research has found that negative mentoring experiences can lead to negative career and psychosocial outcomes (Scandura, 1998; Tuma et al., 2021). As will be discussed, future research might consider exploring why and how participants had

such different individual experiences and whether career and psychosocial or other factors influenced perceptions of the mentorship participants received. This is recommended in part because mentees still found the program useful even though they had mixed beliefs about whether their relationship led to positive results.

To that end, mentors had significantly more positive perceptions of their relationships and outcomes. They reported being more comfortable with confidential conversations and felt they were more responsive. However, this arguably speaks to the natural power differentials that exist in mentoring relationships. Mentors are more experienced (Allen & Eby, 2002, Allen et al., 2004; Montgomery, 2017) and likely have less to lose in these relationships; conversely, mentees may feel unsure of the degree to which they can speak about confidential or sensitive issues. Academic communities—especially public relations—can feel very small, which may lead mentees to feeling less power and control in formally established mentoring relationships. This dynamic may lead to mentee concerns about sharing confidential information, while mentors more likely see themselves as an open book and font of knowledge willing to share their learned experiences. The concern, then, is how to break down perceived power differences and more closely align mentor and mentee perceptions.

Building Better Mentoring Partnerships

Based on the findings, multiple strategies can be used to strengthen both relationships formed through formal mentoring programs and the structure of mentoring programs through which these relationships are formed. These are discussed in turn.

Strengthening Individual Mentorship

Research shows that formal mentoring programs can lead to weaker psychosocial connections between mentoring partners because of the structured matching process (Ragins & Cotton, 1999). To counter this, building responsive communication should be emphasized, and

both mentors and mentees can adopt practices to help foster positive, mutually beneficial relationships regardless of the type of mentoring being performed (Montgomery, 2017; Yosso, 2005).

First in regard to suggested practices, if the base behavior to building trust is responsivity, it is notable that mentors perceived themselves as more responsive than mentees judged them to be. Data from both surveys showed that mentees felt they were more likely to initiate contact. Considering responsivity is a simple approach to building trust, and considering the role of power in mentoring relationships, having the mentor initiate contact can show a recognition of and attempt to break down these barriers. At its base level, this step involves the mentor initiating contact; at that point, the mentee should offer the same level of responsivity as is valued from the mentor. Next, early in the relationships, the mentoring partners should mutually define the structure of the relationship and communication expectations. This definition includes addressing the preferred frequency and method of contact to set expectations and provide a defined structure for communication. Goals for the partnership should also be shared early in the relationship.

Next, to facilitate confidential conversations, create openness, and build trust, the mentor should be responsible for assuring the mentee both verbally and non-verbally that conversations are confidential and designed to support the mentee both professionally and personally. Many mentees—especially if they are new to formal mentoring programs and are paired with someone they do not know personally—may be hesitant to share sensitive information. This can involve confirming the confidentiality of conversations or offering opportunities for the mentee to communicate using tools that evoke a feeling of safety (for example, communicating by voice rather than email).

Additionally, the mentor should consider how they can support their mentee by reflecting on what they learned through mentoring (Alean-

Kirlpatrick, 2011; Clutterbuck, 2008). For graduate students and new tenure-track faculty, it can be difficult to know what type of mentoring to seek or questions to ask: We don't know what we don't know. This is not to suggest that mentees should adopt a stance of tabula rasa, but to acknowledge that professional growth and learning often happens through experience that mentees may not have. Here, the role of a mentor can be to consider what information they wish they had known, or perhaps ask about specific topics that may be important to mentees based on their career standing or trajectory. Further, results suggest that more than seeking mentorship on structural expectations related to teaching, research, and service, mentees often seek support for psychosocial needs related to these areas. Sometimes the mentee simply needs someone to help them build confidence, define their identity, and sincerely evaluate their professional abilities (Kram, 1985). In this context, mentees may be interested in considering how to balance personal experiences (such as parenthood or partnership) and full-time academic work. They may seek advice about types of service needed to meet long-term goals or how to overcome challenges related to completing research at different types of institutions. More personally, they may seek advice for dealing with issues related to discrimination based on gender, race, or other diversities. A mentor who has had these experiences or can speak to these professional development issues can foster an environment of trust by being open about their own experiences and broaching issues they wished someone had addressed with them (or were fortunate enough to have someone address).

Finally, if the mentee knows that psychosocial factors are a key reason for seeking mentorship, they should consider sharing information about the specific and transitional issues for which they want support with both their mentor and those organizing the formal program (Montgomery, 2017; Yosso, 2005). For example, one may ask to be paired with someone who is a mother of young children or works at an institution that lacks

diversity. By sharing this information early in the mentoring relationship, the mentee can help the mentor understand how to support their development and foster a partnership that eventually leads to a balanced, mutually beneficial, and satisfying relationship.

Strengthening the Mentoring Program

Results also point to potential recommendations for strengthening both the AEJMC Public Relations Division and other mentoring programs.

First, the program should take into consideration both the value of psychosocial mentoring functions (Kram, 1985) and the challenge that arises wherein formal mentoring programs often emphasize pairing partners based on career rather than psychosocial needs (Ragins & Cotton, 1999). In recent years, the PRD Mentoring Program has added options for both mentors and mentees to identify what characteristics and support they seek in and from a partner. For example, mentees can indicate they would like a female mentor who has a family or children. By creating partnerships based on psychosocial factors, and by informing participants these were the guiding factors, it may be possible to enhance the emotional connections that sometimes get lost when third party matches are made.

Next, it may be valuable for the program to define more concretely how participation in the program can play an active role in diversifying mentoring options for faculty. For example, comprehensive mentoring occurs when a mentee recognizes they have different mentoring needs that may require different forms of advice or mentorship (Anderson, et al., 2012; Griffin & Toldson, 2012). A program such as the one run by the PRD may benefit from specifically outlining how it offers a service that can provide individuals additional mentoring options based on their specific mentoring needs.

Finally, mentoring relationships often develop through four phases of initiation, cultivation, separation, and redefinition (Kram, 1985). A review of program practices suggests that initiation and cultivation

opportunities may be fostered by the program, but less is done to facilitate separation and redefinition—this could potentially lead to feelings of dissatisfaction among program participants. Specifically, the program facilitates the initiation stage by giving partners a chance to meet at the annual conference. At that time, program leaders present information about best mentoring practices and share a tip sheet and the Plank Center Mentoring Guide (Plank Center for Leadership in Public Relations, 2017) with participants. It may also be helpful to create a mentoring worksheet that asks mentoring pairs to outline what psychosocial and structural goals they have for the year. Next, the program attempts to support relationship cultivation by sharing mentoring resources and sending check-in reminders during the year. This has been met with positive feedback from participants, who have indicated it serves as a reminder to stay in touch with their mentoring partners. However, the program does not yet have in place resources for facilitating the separation and redefinition phases. Although mentoring partners are offered the opportunity to continue their pairings from year to year, no information is shared regarding how to end the mentoring relationship and what to expect. This can lead to relationships ending abruptly, which may lead to an increased sense of dissatisfaction among participants who may have less mentorship experience. The program should consider hosting an end-of-year event or check-in opportunity that encourages mentoring partners to reconvene and discuss whether and how mentoring goals were met. This could also help partners consider whether they wish to redefine their relationship (Montgomery, 2017) or possibly serve as an opportunity for the program to recruit mentees to begin serving as mentors, which also helps enhance perceptions of mentorship satisfaction (Plank Center, 2017; Schulz, 1995). And, if there were problems with the partnership, these could be confidentially reported to the program so it can continue to monitor and adjust recommendations for building successful mentorship relationships.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Despite the insights provided, notable limitations exist in this study that warrant further exploration. First, the differences noted between mentor and mentee perceptions in the 2020 study may be attributed to the fact that more mentors than mentees responded to the survey (n = 20 mentors, n = 14 mentees). This potentially skewed the data regarding perceptions among the mentor group. This is also noted because the 2016 survey had a better balance of mentors and mentees participants. Future research should aim for a more balanced set of participants to identify whether the statistical patterns hold.

Next, because the 2020 survey data showed marked differences in perceptions of relationship outcomes and program benefits between mentors and mentees, qualitative analysis may help illuminate why those differences existed. Data showed that even among mentees there appeared to be significantly different perceptions of the program quality and outcomes. However, among mentees, there may have been a sincere interest in reporting honest, if unfavorable, feedback to provide opportunities to strengthen the program. This is posited because participants found the program valuable overall, even when they did not have positive individual experiences. Continued longitudinal analysis supplemented with qualitative research may illustrate how and why such different perceptions emerged.

Similarly, the small number of minority-identifying and male participants in the study prevented an analysis of potential differences in mentoring experiences compared to those of white females. For example, although the ratio of female to male participants reflected the general ratio of program participants based on gender, this difference in participation could speak to gender gaps that exist in practice. This evokes existing public relations scholarship that suggests gender and racial identity often influence both the quality and the long-term career relevance of mentoring

relationships (Pompper & Adams, 2006: Waymer, 2012). Initial findings from this study suggest additional research on this and similar mentoring programs could provide a fruitful avenue of research both because public relations is a predominantly white, female field and because many of the psychosocial factors related to mentoring are often gendered (whether fairly or accurately) as female. Future research should consider whether males or females are more willing to participate in mentoring programs, and why; the experiences of minority-identifying mentoring partners and whether that influences their willingness to participate in formal programs; opportunities to make mentoring programs more inclusive; and how to address gender and other identity-based influences in mentoring relationships, particularly in public relations.

Finally, this study was limited in scope as it focused on one mentorship program. Future research should consider using both quantitative and qualitative methods to explore the factors influencing successful mentorship programs being developed for other membership associations or professional and academic organizations such as the Public Relations Student Society of America or on-campus mentoring programs.

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