



## **Mentorship Matters: Transformative, Equity-Centered Pathways to Leadership for Doctoral Women of Color**

Stacy-Ann T. Campbell  
Louisiana State University

Petra A. Robinson  
Louisiana State University

Edinah N. Sigira  
Louisiana State University

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### **Abstract**

The persistent underrepresentation of women of color in academic leadership reflects enduring structural inequities embedded within doctoral education and faculty development pipelines. This conceptual paper advances a justice-oriented argument for mentorship as a critical intervention for leadership development among doctoral women of color. Drawing on Black Feminist Thought, Critical Race Theory, Community Cultural Wealth, and Transformative Leadership Theory, the paper reframes mentorship as a liberatory, relational, and institutionally accountable practice rather than a peripheral or individualized support mechanism. Through synthesis of interdisciplinary scholarship and practitioner insight, the authors identify systemic barriers, including cultural isolation, implicit bias, epistemic marginalization, and inequitable access to mentoring networks, that constrain leadership advancement. In response, the paper proposes a mentorship ecosystem model that centers culturally responsive mentoring, collective care, and inclusive leadership development. Implications are offered for higher education institutions seeking to move beyond performative diversity toward structurally embedded, equity-driven mentoring practices that expand leadership pathways and support institutional transformation. This work aligns with AABHE's mission to advance Black leadership, equity, and justice in higher education.

**Keywords:** Mentoring, mentorship, inclusive leadership, doctoral women of color.

## **Introduction**

Women of color pursuing doctoral degrees are navigating complex terrain within institutions historically rooted in exclusionary practices. A key component of a successful university experience is graduate student mentoring. Specifically, this improves student retention, completion, and satisfaction (Hall & Liva, 2021). While higher education has made strides toward diversity, representation in leadership remains overwhelmingly white and male. Systemic inequities continue to hinder the progress of women of color (WoC) in doctoral programs. A plethora of challenges ranging from cultural isolation, implicit bias, underrepresentation in leadership, and limited access to mentors who reflect their lived experiences remains cyclical. An accessible, well-established, and publicized WoC community of work and leadership in academia seems non-existent. Since success in the academy does not allow room for error; and if made by women scholars of color, they will undoubtedly suffer enduring consequences (McLane-Davison et al., 2018). So where are the pioneers who used social networks, webs of affiliation, mutual aid, self-help, and racial uplift as community organizational strategies to address racial and gender inequalities? How can mentorship reframe the leadership journeys of doctoral WOC?

The success of doctoral women of color is significantly influenced by access to mentorship and strong social networks. According to Reisch (2002), successful scholars undergo a socialization process that prepares them to assume the role of educator and researcher. Without this mentorship and socialization process, doctoral students are likely to struggle in the “cloistered and cerebral space” of academia (Seymour, 2006, p. 460). Furthermore, without targeted interventions, these challenges can result in attrition, stunted leadership potential, and a continued lack of diversity in academic leadership.

Mentorship, when structured and responsive serves as a transformative mechanism that goes beyond simple guidance and advice, fostering self-confidence, skills development, and a deeper understanding of oneself and the world. This paper explores how transformative mentorship, a relationship where a mentor significantly impacts a mentee's personal and professional growth, leading to positive and lasting change, rooted in equity and cultural responsiveness, can empower doctoral women of color to lead in academia and beyond (Luo & Stoeger, 2023).

## **Literature Review**

The term “mentor” was originally described by Homer as “the wise and trusted counselor.” Although often used interchangeably with "advisors," the term "mentors" carries a distinct meaning. For this paper, we consider a mentor as someone who takes special interest in helping another person who is less experienced and often younger, develop holistically into a successful professional (National Academy Press, 1997). Mentorship or mentoring is considered the patronage, influence, guidance, advice, or direction given by a mentor. In an organizational setting, a mentor influences the personal and professional growth of a mentee, serving as a more experienced guide who supports the mentee's development (Crisp & Cruz, 2009).

### **Transformative Mentorship**

Transformative mentoring in higher education extends beyond traditional academic advising by centering relationality, critical reflection, and equity. Rooted in the principles of transformative leadership, this approach emphasizes mentorship as a collaborative, liberatory process that fosters mutual growth and challenges structural inequities. Rather than positioning the mentor as a gatekeeper to institutional norms, transformative mentoring reimagines the relationship as a space for empowerment, where both mentor and mentee engage in dialogue

about identity, power, and purpose. It is especially impactful for doctoral women of color, whose experiences are often shaped by systemic marginalization and cultural isolation. As Hall and Liva (2021) state, graduate student mentoring can be perceived as a transformative experience whereby mentors not only facilitate academic progress but also empower mentees to navigate institutional systems, advocate for themselves and pursue aspirational goals.

Transformative mentoring intentionally affirms the lived experiences of mentees, incorporating culturally responsive practices, emotional support, and advocacy. It involves co-constructing goals that honor the mentee's community values, leadership aspirations, and scholarly voice, rather than assimilating to dominant academic paradigms. Such mentoring fosters resistance to exclusionary norms and cultivates a sense of agency within academia. Ultimately, transformative mentoring is not just about persistence, it is about preparing leaders who are equipped to reshape institutions toward greater justice and inclusion.

### **Importance of Mentorship**

Mantai (2017) highlights the importance of support beyond the supervisory team for doctoral studies. She noted the significance of a community in raising a PhD student. While supervision and mentoring are distinct roles (Holland, 2009), the diverse support needs of doctoral students and mentees often extend beyond what a single mentor or supervisory team can provide, making it essential for a broader, more interconnected support network (Atenas et al., 2023). Studies have shown that mentoring positively influences retention, confidence, and professional development (Kutchner & Kleschick, 2016; Roberts, 2000).

According to Belcher et al. (2022), Mentoring is a key developmental relationship that fosters academic and professional growth and success. Whether formal or informal, mentoring in higher education helps students develop trust relationships to which they may feel an increased

sense of belonging, and experience a state of being and becoming beyond perhaps perceived institutional control (Atenas et al., 2023). In observing the literature around mentoring in cross-cultural mentorship, we see the importance of mutual openness and respect play in mentoring relationships to develop trust and feel connected (Batiste et al., 2022; Calafell, 2007).

### **Mentorship for Women of Color**

A growing body of research highlights the significant role mentorship plays in the academic and professional development of racial and ethnic minority doctoral students. For women of color, culturally competent mentorship provides not only academic guidance but emotional validation and a roadmap for navigating institutional norms. Through these mentorships, WOC are equipped with varied strategies for personal survival while simultaneously holding institutions accountable for work environments that are hostile and unwelcoming (McLane-Davison et al., 2018).

In a qualitative study by Chan et al. (2015), mentorship that is characterized by multicultural competence, time investment, and long-term commitment was linked to greater satisfaction, productivity, and overall success among ethnic minority students in counseling and clinical psychology programs. Similarly, Rogers and Molina (2006) found that psychology departments with established mentoring programs were more successful in recruiting and retaining students of color, especially when they had partnerships with historically underrepresented institutions.

Additional studies reinforce the positive impact of strong mentorship, citing improved confidence, clearer professional identity, stronger leadership capacity, increased well-being, better dissertation experiences, and heightened interest in academic careers (Clark et al., 2000; Lunsford, 2012). Furthermore, Hollingsworth's quantitative research demonstrated that

mentorship and self-efficacy served as key mediators between a supportive research training environment and increased research productivity among counseling psychology doctoral students.

While most of these findings are from the area of a counseling and psychology doctoral program, they underscore the essential role of culturally responsive, sustained mentorship in advancing equity, academic success, and leadership readiness in all programs for doctoral students of color.

### **Cultural Isolation and Systemic Barriers**

Research has consistently indicated that women of color experience a sense of cultural alienation in academic environments that fail to affirm their identities or recognize their lived experiences as legitimate epistemologies (Gildersleeve et al., 2011) With their voices often marginalized in scholarly spaces, women of color experience decreased confidence and heightened stress levels as they navigate rigorous demands while contending with systemic exclusion and microaggressions. Implicit biases whether classroom dynamics, mentorship pairings or evaluation processes restrict opportunities for academic advancement.

These biases can manifest in subtle ways, such as being overlooked for research collaborations, or more overtly, through disparities in funding decisions and professional recognition. For example, Ginther et al. (2011) and Moss-Racusin et al. (2012) provide evidence of systemic racial and gender biases that disadvantage female and scholars of color in funding and mentoring opportunities despite similar qualifications with their male and white counterparts. Over time, the cumulative impact of these barriers not only contributes to attrition, but also discourages women of color from pursuing or sustaining leadership roles in academia.

This underrepresentation at senior levels not only limits individual career advancement but also hinders institutional diversity, innovation, and equity in higher education.

### **Models of Effective Mentorship**

Choosing the right mentorship models for institutions will depend on various factors such as school culture, ethnicity, policies and programs. Most importantly, the goal of these models must align with overall mission and vision of the school. Many universities operate from a notion of “I” rather than “we” paradigm according to Atenas et al. (2023). This is based on competitiveness and a focus on a single academic and their academic promotion, where individual work in the area of research, teaching or scholarship is rewarded and collaboration is discouraged and not recognized. In contrast, the “we” focuses more on fostering and recognizing collaboration (Pérez & Pasque, 2013) which align to the values and principles of mentorship. Consequently, it can be deduced that the dominant reign of “I” paradigm could be the many reasons universities do not have or have less formal mentoring schemes or mentoring as a support mechanism (Atenas et al., 2013).

Institutions that have adopted transformative mentoring models have seen promising outcomes. For example, the University of Florida’s Inclusive Mentoring Initiative embeds cultural responsiveness, structured mentorship training, and equity-centered reflection into its mentor-mentee relationships, particularly for underrepresented doctoral students (O’Connell, 2023). Similarly, the University of Washington’s Center for Communication, Difference, and Equity fosters mentoring relationships grounded in critical race and feminist theories, focusing on affirming students lived experiences and scholarly agency. At the University of Cambridge, the Race Equality Network has launched mentoring initiatives that pair faculty and graduate students across departments based on shared cultural and research interests, emphasizing social

justice and community-centered leadership (Cambridge Equality Report, 2022). Another model at the University of Westminster: Future Ready Mentoring Program pairs students up with an expert in order to develop their skills, gain insight into professional future, and even has a focus on networking, which is a highly beneficial skill to learn at the beginning of their career (Oconnell, 2023). Also, the Career Mentoring Program at the University of South Hampton, geared towards training students to become mentors, rather than being mentored fosters leadership skills for doctoral students and relationship building by helping students in areas where the mentor has had similar struggles, such as career planning (Oconnell, 2023).

These models reflect key elements of transformative mentoring: cultural validation, intentional pairing, institutional accountability, and the development of critical consciousness. When mentorship is designed to challenge dominant ideologies, support identity development, and build capacity for systemic change, it becomes a powerful tool not just for academic survival, but for thriving, leading, and transforming higher education institutions. Institutions like the University of Cambridge, University of Florida, and University of Washington have developed targeted mentorship programs that offer holistic development, professional networking, and leadership training (O’Connell, 2023). These models provide a foundation for inclusive and sustainable mentorship programs tailored to the needs of underrepresented students.

## **Methodological Orientation**

Although this paper is conceptual in nature, it draws upon qualitative and quantitative literature synthesis and practitioner insight to frame the discussion. Relevant peer-reviewed studies, reports, and theoretical works were identified through searches in major education and social science databases, including ERIC, PsycINFO, JSTOR, ProQuest, Taylor & Francis

Online, and EBSCOhost. Sources for this study were selected for their conceptual relevance, methodological rigor, and alignment with the paper's focus on mentorship, equity, and leadership among doctoral women of color in higher education. Foundational texts from Routledge, NYU Press, and the National Academies Press were also included to provide theoretical grounding. Additionally, practitioner perspectives were integrated through reflective analysis of professional practice and mentoring experiences, offering grounded insight into how the literature connects to real-world contexts and informs the paper's conceptual arguments. The search terms used were "mentoring", "inclusive leadership", "mentorship" combined with "doctoral students" and "women of color".

### **Conceptual Framework/Theoretical Foundations**

This paper draws from four theoretical traditions to frame its conceptualization of mentorship: Black Feminist Thought (BFT), Critical Race Theory (CRT), The Community Cultural Wealth (Yosso, 2005), and Transformative Leadership (Burns, 1978). Grounded in the work of Patricia Hill Collins, BFT (2022) centers the knowledge, voices, and lived experiences of Black women. It argues that knowledge is situated and shaped by intersecting oppressions, and it emphasizes the importance of community, storytelling, and collective empowerment. BFT provides a lens to understand how mentorship can honor the intellectual and cultural agency of doctoral WoC.

CRT asserts that racism is ingrained in the fabric of institutional life, including academia. It challenges dominant ideologies of neutrality and meritocracy and calls for the centering of marginalized voices (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Through CRT, we see mentorship not as a benevolent add-on but as a counter-hegemonic practice that disrupts exclusion and affirms equity. The Community Cultural Wealth (Yosso, 2005) framework identifies six forms of capital

(aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational, and resistant) that communities of color possess. Mentorship that taps into and validates these capitals can help doctoral WOC leverage their strengths and lived experiences as sources of power and resilience. Transformative Leadership (Burns, 1978) is a values-based approach that centers equity, ethical practice, and the dismantling of systemic oppression within educational and organizational settings. Rooted in social justice, this leadership model calls for critical reflection, moral courage, and inclusive collaboration to challenge dominant power structures and create meaningful change (Shields, 2010).

As illustrated in Figure 1, the model demonstrates how equity-based theories underpin transformative mentoring practices that foster leadership development among doctoral women of color. Black Feminist Thought, Critical Race Theory, Community Cultural Wealth and Transformative Leadership Theory serve as the conceptual foundations, framing mentorship as an instrument of equity and systemic change, particularly in the context of doctoral women of color, whose academic and leadership journeys are often shaped by intersecting social and institutional barriers.

These frameworks inform mentorship practices such as culturally responsive pairing, counter-storytelling, and leadership coaching with identity affirmation which are approaches that validate their lived experiences and cultivate belonging. When enacted intentionally, these practices yield transformative outcomes, including academic resilience, leadership capacity, systemic navigation skills, and collective empowerment. In this way, the model affirms that mentorship matters as a purposeful, justice-oriented strategy for empowering doctoral women of color to develop as confident, equity-driven leaders within and beyond the academy.

**Figure 1**

*Pathways of Transformation: From Theory to Mentorship Outcomes*

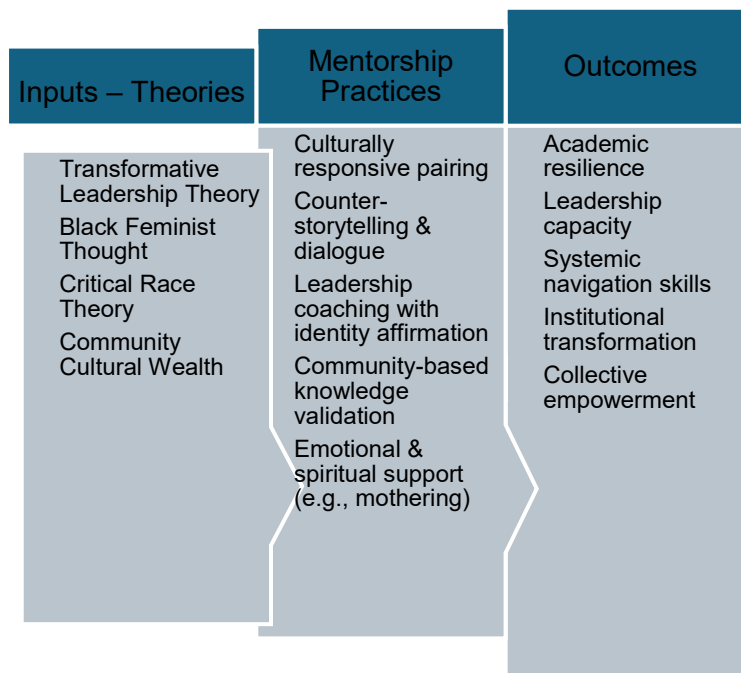


Figure 1: Pathways of Transformation

## **Methodology**

This is a conceptual paper grounded in qualitative literature synthesis and informed by practitioner insight. The authors, all scholars with lived experience in navigating doctoral programs as women of color, reflect on empirical studies and institutional practices to identify mentorship strategies that promote leadership and academic resilience.

## **Conceptual Argument: Reimagining Mentorship for Empowerment**

To reimagine mentorship as a tool for justice and equity, we must first interrogate how empowerment and leadership are traditionally defined and consider how these definitions fall short for women of color navigating academic spaces.

## **Redefining Empowerment and Leadership**

For doctoral WoC, leadership is often expressed not through traditional titles or authority but through advocacy, service, community-building, and cultural authenticity. Empowerment in this context is about reclaiming one's voice, agency, and vision in spaces that often attempt to silence or diminish it. Mentorship, then, must go beyond academic guidance, it must cultivate epistemic confidence (the belief in the value of one's knowledge), foster resilience, and affirm the legitimacy of diverse leadership styles.

Rather than framing WoC as needing to "fit" into existing systems, mentorship should prepare them to transform those systems. As such, empowering mentorship requires "breaking conventional boundaries" by challenging the deficit narratives that often surround doctoral WoC and replaces them with narratives of brilliance, resistance, and innovation. By redefining empowerment to include voice, community, and cultural identity, we make space for mentorship to be not just developmental, but liberatory, a practice that supports self-determination and resistance.

## **Mentorship as a Liberatory Practice**

Mentorship that empowers doctoral WoC is not a one-size-fits-all endeavor. It must be intentional, intersectional, and relational. Drawing from hooks (1994), mentorship becomes a practice of "teaching to transgress", a space where both mentor and mentee engage in co-learning, reflection, and critical inquiry. This kind of liberatory mentorship validates the racial, cultural, and gendered experiences of the mentee and encourages leadership development as identity development. Additionally, it connects academic success with social responsibility and community uplift while disrupting gatekeeping and fostering access to networks, knowledge, and opportunities.

Mentors who share lived experiences with their mentees (racially, culturally, or socioeconomically) may be uniquely positioned to provide this type of support. However, cross-cultural mentorship can also be liberatory when approached with humility, cultural responsiveness, and a commitment to justice. When mentorship is approached as a liberatory act, it naturally becomes a vehicle for transformation shifting not only individuals but also the structures and ideologies that shape their academic journeys.

### **Mentorship as a Transformative Tool**

As a transformative tool, mentorship must be more than a transactional relationship, it must function as a transformative partnership where development is consistently happening. Effective mentorship for doctoral women of color involves intentional pairing, structured programming, culturally responsive practices and peer faculty collaboration. Intentional pairing embodies matching mentors with mentees (this can be more than one) based on shared goals and cultural understanding. Structured Programming includes incorporating retreats, seminars, and consistent check-ins to foster growth. Culturally Responsive Practices involves acknowledging and honoring the lived experiences of mentees while Peer and Faculty Collaboration is leveraging both horizontal (peer) and vertical (faculty) mentoring for layered support.

### **Mentorship Ecosystem Model: A Framework for Empowerment**

In contrast to the traditional dyadic (one-on-one) mentor-mentee relationship, a mentorship ecosystem is a multi-layered, dynamic network of support that reflects the diverse needs and strengths of doctoral women of color. This ecosystem approach values the multiplicity of mentorship sources, both formal and informal, and recognizes that different mentors serve different purposes across a scholar's personal, academic, and leadership journey.

This model comprises four interconnected components:

### 1. Peer Mentoring and Sister Circles

Peer mentoring among WoC doctoral students fosters mutual support, accountability, and collective survival. “Sister circles” (McLane-Davison et al., 2018) create safe spaces for emotional expression, critical dialogue, and shared celebration. These spaces counter the isolation often experienced in doctoral programs and provide affirmation through solidarity. They are grounded in cultural practices of communal care and collective leadership.

Peer mentorship also functions as a leadership incubator. Through peer guidance and collaborative problem-solving, WOC students cultivate their own mentoring capacities, which are essential for future leadership roles.

### 2. Faculty and Professional Mentors (Inside and Outside the Academy)

Faculty mentorship remains essential for navigating institutional culture, securing research opportunities, and preparing for careers in academia. However, WOC doctoral students frequently report difficulties finding culturally competent mentors within their departments. As a result, some seek mentorship beyond their institutions or disciplinary silos.

When effective, faculty mentors, especially women or people of color can model resilience, leadership, and scholarly identity. Cross-institutional mentorship programs, affinity-based networks, and faculty of color alliances expand access to such guidance. Outside the academy, professional mentors in nonprofit, community, or policy spaces can also provide valuable perspectives on leadership that transcends academic borders.

### 3. Community Mentors and Cultural Anchors

Culturally grounded mentorship acknowledges the important role that family, spiritual leaders, cultural elders, and community members play in shaping the leadership identity of doctoral WOC. These mentors may not have academic credentials but offer moral support, cultural

grounding, and wisdom rooted in lived experience. Phillips (2006) posit womanists' methods of social transformation are based on restoration, reconciliation, and healing properties of different groups, environment, nature, spiritual and transcendental realms. Like the sister circle, these community relationships serve as a means of resisting violence and aggression and restoring harmony through everyday practices such as dialogue, mediation and arbitration, spiritual engagement, acts of hospitality, mutual support, self-help, and caregiving or mothering (Phillips, 2006, p. xxvi).

Recognizing community mentorship affirms the idea that knowledge and leadership are not confined to institutions. Instead, doctoral WOC are often shaped by intergenerational traditions of leadership; activism, storytelling, caretaking, and organizing that are vital assets in their academic and professional paths.

#### 4. Institutional Structures and Accountability

Mentorship ecosystems are not self-sustaining; - they must be cultivated and supported by institutions. This includes:

- i. Structured mentoring programs with built-in equity goals.
- ii. Funding and recognition for mentoring work, particularly among faculty of color.
- iii. Leadership development workshops designed for doctoral WOC.
- iv. Inclusion of mentoring metrics in tenure and promotion policies.
- v. Creation of identity-affirming spaces (e.g., cultural centers, affinity groups).

Institutions must move beyond performative diversity statements and invest in sustained, equity-driven mentoring practices that address both individual and systemic needs.

Building on the mentorship ecosystem model, the next step is to consider how such interconnected support structures not only foster academic success, but also cultivate inclusive leadership, leadership that is culturally grounded, relational, and committed to systemic change.

The mentorship ecosystem thrives when it is intentionally designed to promote inclusive leadership at all levels. This ecosystem includes layered mentoring relationships (peer, faculty, community), institutional recognition of mentoring work, and culturally affirming policies. Within this environment, doctoral women of color are not only supported, but they are also developed as leaders who carry forward the values of inclusion, equity, and collective uplift. Inclusive leadership emerges organically from ecosystems that validate identity, encourage collaboration, and recognize leadership as a shared, ethical responsibility rather than an individual pursuit. In this way, mentorship is both the seed and the soil from which inclusive leadership grows. This is where transformation truly takes place. Figure 2 shows this act situated at the intersection of deep-seated inclusion, empowerment, identity affirmation, and leadership development.

### **Inclusive Leadership Development**

Inclusive leadership development is essential for preparing doctoral women of color to lead with authenticity, cultural awareness, and a commitment to justice. Traditional leadership paradigms often prioritize individualism, hierarchy, and competition, norms that can marginalize those whose leadership styles are rooted in relationality, collaboration, and community care. In contrast, inclusive leadership emphasizes the importance of empathy, ethical responsibility, and collective empowerment, challenging conventional definitions of what it means to lead (Kruse & DeMatthews, 2024).

Effective inclusive leadership training equips emerging scholars with the skills necessary for cross-cultural engagement, global competence, and socially responsible decision-making. These include conflict resolution through dialogue, intercultural communication, the ability to navigate diverse institutional landscapes, and the critical reflection required to identify and dismantle inequitable practices. As doctoral women of color often hold multiple, intersecting identities, inclusive leadership training affirms their lived experiences as assets and positions them as uniquely equipped to build bridges across difference.

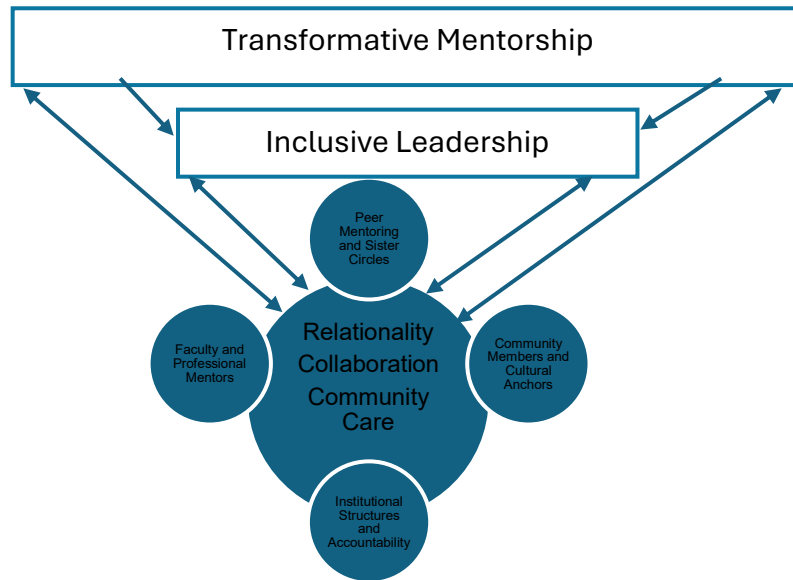
Furthermore, inclusive leadership development must be embedded in institutional cultures, not treated as an add-on. This includes integrating mentorship, identity-affirming spaces, and leadership coaching into the academic pipeline, as well as recognizing and valuing emotional intelligence, cultural humility, and community engagement as vital leadership competencies. By shifting the leadership narrative to include diverse epistemologies and practices, higher education can better cultivate resilient, visionary leaders who are equipped to transform systems, not simply navigate them.

Finally, this model (Figure 2) depicts how transformative mentorship fosters inclusive leadership among doctoral women of color. Grounded in relationality, collaboration, community, and care, mentorship operates through interconnected networks of support, including faculty and professional mentors, peer mentoring and sister circles, community and cultural anchors, and institutional accountability structures (Crook, 2022; Lin & Kennette, 2022; Maia et al., 2024). These relationships create spaces of affirmation and shared growth that cultivate leadership grounded in equity and empathy (Bellevue, 2025). The figure illustrates that inclusive leadership emerges as both an outcome and extension of transformative mentorship, underscoring that

mentorship matters as a critical mechanism for empowering doctoral women of color to enact systemic change and lead with justice-oriented consciousness (Attwal, 2024).

## Figure 2

*A Relational Ecosystem of Support for Doctoral Women of Color*



## Implications

Advancing mentorship equity requires institutions to move beyond rhetorical commitments and adopt structures of accountability that recognize and reward effective mentoring. Drawing from both research and practitioner perspectives, institutions might consider implementing measurable indicators, such as mentee retention and advancement rates, participation in mentoring programs, and qualitative feedback from mentees, to assess the impact of mentoring practices. Incorporating such key performance indicators (KPIs) into institutional evaluation systems can make the invisible labor of mentorship more visible and valued.

Measurable indicators, such as retention rates of mentees of color (e.g., 92% retention for mentored faculty versus 58% for non-mentored (Phillips et al., 2016), advancement and career

progression (e.g., leadership skill development and job satisfaction), perceived mentor support, psychological well-being and ethnic-racial identity development, and diversity in mentor-mentee pairings (Garcia-Murillo et al., 2023), provide tangible benchmarks for mentorship effectiveness. Furthermore, establishing incentives for mentoring excellence, such as awards, professional development credits, or integration into promotion criteria, can reinforce a culture of shared responsibility for equitable mentorship. Incorporating clear metrics and incentives into institutional frameworks ensures that mentorship is both relational and strategically leveraged, fostering diversity, leadership growth, and transformative institutional change.

### **Practices for Higher Education**

For institutions, faculty, and practitioners, several action points emerge:

- Design programs that reflect intersectionality: Mentorship programs must be tailored to the racialized and gendered experiences of doctoral WOC, not generic one-size-fits-all efforts.
- Validate multiple mentoring pathways: Encourage and support peer mentoring, cross-institutional mentoring, and community-based mentoring alongside traditional faculty models.
- Invest in leadership development: Leadership training for doctoral WOC should include coaching, opportunities for advocacy, exposure to diverse career paths, and reflective spaces to explore identity and voice.
- Train mentors: Faculty and staff need preparation to serve as culturally responsive mentors. This includes understanding power dynamics, active listening, and acknowledging bias.

- Recognize and reward mentoring labor: Institutions must honor the invisible mentoring work disproportionately done by women of color through compensation, reduced service loads, or recognition in evaluation processes.

Mentorship initiatives that aim to advance equity may also benefit from cultivating critical literacies, as articulated in the Critical Literacies Advancement Model (CLAM) (Robinson, 2020, 2021). From this perspective, mentoring supports doctoral women of color in developing the capacity to critically analyze institutional power, affirm identity, and translate knowledge into leadership action.

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### **Future Research in Higher Education**

This conceptual model opens several avenues for empirical inquiry:

1. What are the lived experiences of doctoral WOC who participate in mentorship ecosystems versus traditional models?
2. How do cultural identity and community connection shape leadership identity development in academic settings?
3. What metrics can assess the effectiveness of mentorship programs that prioritize equity and empowerment?

4. How do peer and cross-generational mentorship practices evolve over time among WOC in higher education?

To address these questions, institutions must move beyond diversity rhetoric (Breen et al., 2025) to implement actionable, equity-focused mentorship initiatives such as funding affinity-based mentorship programs and recognizing mentorship in tenure and promotion criteria. This could mitigate the gap for doctoral WOC who grapple with finding mentors “fit” for their journey. Additionally, facilitating formal cross-institutional mentorship collaborations for WOC and use this platform to elevate the voices of women of color in institutional decision-making.

Furthermore, future research should prioritize more qualitative methodologies such as narrative inquiry, participatory action research, and critical ethnography to amplify the voices of doctoral WoC and co-produce knowledge about mentorship. The female voice is validated through storytelling, proverbs, affirmations, idioms, song lyrics, and other culturally relevant forms of expression that are essential for conveying knowledge (McLane-Davison et al., 2018). Storytelling serves not only as a tool for community building but also as a form of resistance through counter-narratives (Phillips, 2006). Those who have personally lived the experiences are often seen as more credible and knowledgeable than those merely reporting on them (Banks-Wallace, 2000). As such, engaging in emancipatory research methodologies like Womanist Ethnographic Research (WER) helps to improve the quality of life and foster meaningful, positive outcomes for women (Banks-Wallace, 2000; Collins, 2004; Phillips, 2006).

## **Conclusion**

Empowering doctoral women of color through transformative mentorship is not only a matter of equity or strategy for academic persistence, but also essential for the future of leadership in higher education. By dismantling systemic barriers and promoting culturally

affirming mentorship, institutions can foster inclusive excellence (Bettez et al., 2024), build resilient leadership pipelines, and transform the academic landscape for generations to come. When grounded in frameworks like Transformative Leadership Theory, Black Feminist Thought, Critical Race Theory and Community Cultural Wealth, mentorship becomes a radical act of inclusion and empowerment.

As academia grapples with calls for accountability and systemic change, mentoring must be positioned as a catalyst for cultural transformation, a system of support, resistance, liberation, and leadership in action. Therefore, it is incumbent upon institutions to invest in this work, not only to diversify leadership but to ensure that the knowledge, vision, voices, and brilliance of doctoral women of color shape the future of higher education.

Higher education institutions must move from intention to implementation by embedding mentorship equity into their core policies and practices. Establishing clear accountability measures, such as mentorship performance indicators and institutional incentives, can ensure that mentoring becomes a sustained and valued priority rather than an optional act of service. Policy frameworks should formally recognize mentoring as essential to faculty advancement, student success, and leadership diversity. In alignment with Zambrana's (2018) call to interrupt neoliberal temporality, institutions should reimagine mentoring as a practice of collective care and liberation rather than a mechanism for efficiency or individual achievement. Ultimately, institutionalizing accountability for mentorship excellence is both an ethical imperative and a strategic pathway toward a more inclusive and equitable academic community.

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