Voices of the ‘“Othermothers”: Reconsidering Black professors’ relationships with Black students as a form of social exchange

Kimberly A Griffin, University of Maryland - College Park

**AUTHOR**
VALERIE C. LUNDY-WAGNER is Assistant Professor/Faculty Fellow, Higher Postsecondary Education, at New York University.
All comments and queries regarding this article should be addressed to valerie.lundy-wagner@nyu.edu

**Voices of the “Othermothers”: Reconsidering Black Professors’ Relationships with Black Students as a Form of Social Exchange**

Kimberly A. Griffin University of Maryland

This qualitative study of 28 Black faculties across two institutions explores how professors perceived their unique relationships with Black students. Participants noted the challenging and beneficial aspects of their relationships in ways consistent with “othermothering” frameworks, noting their close relationships based on similar experiences in the academy, commitments to community uplift, and high expectations. While there were time and energy costs, participants also cited personal and professional benefits associated with student interaction, including social support, research insights, and connecting them to their communities in meaningful ways.

**Keywords:** mentoring, faculty, student-faculty interaction, higher education

Several scholars have highlighted the importance of Black faculty as mentors and role models for Black students, noting students’ desire to form relationships and interact with Black faculty as much as possible (e.g., Banks, 1984; Friis-Brunt & Griffin, 2007; Patton & Harper, 2003; Tinto, 1993). While professors from any racial or ethnic background can and should be encouraged to mentor and advise Black students (Brown, Davis, & McClendon, 1999), relationships between Black students and White faculty can sometimes be marred by cultural insensitivity and a lack of understanding of students’ experiences, particularly with racism and discrimination (Bowman, Kite, Bruncombe, & Williams, 1999; Guiffrida, 2005). Black faculty often have encountered struggles similar to their students, making them particularly well equipped to offer Black students a unique form of support and encouragement (Friis-Brunt & Griffin, 2007; Guiffrida, 2005; Patton, 2009, Patton & Harper, 2003; Reddick, 2005).

Guiffrida’s (2005) study offers insights into these relationships, highlighting the ways in which Black students perceive their interactions with Black faculty. Students described their relationships with Black faculty as more student-centered than their interactions with faculty from other backgrounds, comprised of a set of behaviors that implied commitment to students’ growth and development, such as comprehensive academic and sociomotional support, advocacy and student encouragement, and high academic expectations. Borrowing from Black feminist literatures, Guiffrida (2005) framed these relationships as a form of “othermothering,” likening the behaviors of Black faculty to the women who supported a child’s blood relatives in childrearing although faculty behaviors are not described as gendered phenomena within the context of his study.

Although there is some understanding of how Black students perceive the nature and importance of their relationships with Black faculty, there is little scholarly work that interrogates the motivations, observations, and perspectives of Black professors as they engage in these relationships. Therefore, the purpose of this work is to document “othermothering” from the faculty perspective, exploring how Black professors understand the nature and influence of their relationships with Black students. The few scholars examining faculty perspectives of faculty-student interaction are largely focused on the negative outcomes associated with those interactions, particularly for Black professors (e.g., Banks, 1984; Blackburn & Lawrence, 1995; Tierny & Benson, 1996). Little research addresses how Black professors perceive the positive and negative aspects of their interactions. This qualitative study gives voice to Black...
professors' understandings of their interactions with Black students, addressing how these relationships are both costly and beneficial to professors' lives.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social Exchange Theory

This study is guided by a social exchange framework, which emphasizes the reciprocity present in human interactions. Social exchange perspectives suggest that humans are self-interested actors focused on their own goals and objectives, seeking opportunities to maximize personal outcomes (Molm, 2006; Young & Perrewe, 2000). This leads to individuals engaging with one another to enable goal attainment, particularly when goals are challenging to obtain (Emerson, 1981; Lawler & Thye, 1999). In other words, interactions are based on the anticipated receipt of some "benefit" or access to resources one might value or otherwise be denied. Receipt of benefits is contingent on providing the other party in the exchange with something of value; thereby, every relationship has some form of "cost" (Emerson, 1981). Based on this understanding, individuals will only behave in ways that encourage relationships if they anticipate a significant "profit," with the benefits of interacting outweighing the costs (Ehrich, Thomas, & Murphy, 2001; Gehr, 1999; Hotman, 1998). When viewed through a social exchange framework, it can be assumed that Black faculty who work closely with Black students will experience both costs and benefits associated with their relationships.

Lohse and colleagues (2007) suggested social exchange frameworks have much to offer in the study of academic mentoring relationships, particularly when assessing quality, scope, and motivation to engage beyond expectations. Furthermore, social exchange frameworks allow for deeper exploration of the specific benefits faculty value and can gain access to through faculty-student relationships. Costs and benefits are subjective and determined by an individual actor's values and needs (Molm, 2006), making it difficult to determine whether a relationship will be formed and successful based on an outsider's analysis alone. Understanding motivations and goals of mentoring costs and benefits do Black professors identify in their interactions with Black students, and how are these costs and benefits unique or distinctive?

This project was conducted as an interpretive multi-case study, allowing researchers to go beyond describing phenomena to collecting and coding data in ways that support, challenge, or develop theory about events, experiences, and outcomes (Merriam, 1998). Multi-case studies include data collection and analysis of more than one case (i.e., more than one professor), which permits comparison across cases and enhances external validity of findings (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Merriam, 1998). These strategies are appropriate for this study, enabling comparisons among participants across fields of study and professional rank, as well as comparisons of the experiences and perspectives of respondents to previous research on African American faculty and the propositions of social exchange theory.

Institutional Sites

In-depth interviews were conducted with 28 African American professors employed at two public research universities of similar size and institutional mission: Oceanside University and Columbia University (pseudonyms). Both institutions are categorized as "Research Universities -- Very High Research Activity." Oceanside University is a public institution that was founded in the early 1900s and is located in an urban community in the western United States. It serves over 37,000 students; in which approximately two-thirds are undergraduates. In 2005, almost 2,500 individuals were employed as faculty members at Oceanside University. The majority of professors are White, and almost one-third of the faculty members at Oceanside are from minority groups. Columbia University is located on the East Coast in the mid-Atlantic region, and is the flagship institution in its state's higher education system. Columbia enrolls approximately 35,000 students and 25,000 are undergraduates. Almost 2,000 faculty members were employed education, this research can provide interesting insights into the potential ways in which faculty can benefit from student interaction.

Those studying student interaction in higher education have also suggested that Black faculty may perceive a unique set of benefits associated with these relationships, motivating them to work closely with students from underserved backgrounds. Guiffrida (2005) connected Black professors' holistic, intense mentoring patterns to a historical emphasis within the Black community on shared responsibility for educating, supporting, and uplifting the next generation. Basz (2000) found evidence of a similar commitment to community in his study of faculty of color, noting that they perceived personal benefits associated with race-related service, which included engaging students of color. These relationships offered professors a cultural outlet and created opportunities for them to find interpersonal support for the challenges they face at predominantly White campuses. Similarly, Redick (2005) found African American professors felt a special connection to their African American students because of their shared experiences, and reported learning and feeling a sense of satisfaction from mentoring them.

METHODLOGY

The documented studies begin to address some of the personal and psychosocial benefits that Black professors potentially accrue when interacting with African American students; however, whether there are any unique professional benefits associated with student interaction remains unclear. Less attention has been focused on the influence of working with protégés on the professional outcomes of mentors in the scholarly literature generally, and there appear to be no studies examining the potential positive influence of student interaction on faculty promotion and success. Therefore, this study addresses the following questions:

- How do Black professors' describe the nature of their interactions with Black students?
- What personal and professional benefits do Black professors identify in their interactions with Black students, and how are these costs and benefits unique or distinctive?

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at Columbia in 2005. While having a smaller population of minority faculty, Columbia employs a higher percentage of African American professors (5% vs. 2%).

Participants

Prior to participant recruitment and data collection, Internal Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained for this study from the University of California, Los Angeles Office of the Human Research Protection Program. Interview participants were selected and recruited using purposeful rather than random sampling (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998) to produce a sample with diverse representation by gender, rank, and discipline. Key administrators at Columbia and Oceanside universities assisted with participant identification and recruitment by distributing recruitment materials (Oceanside) and identifying Black faculty employed at the institution (Columbia). Snowball sampling (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998) was also used to recruit participants. This included asking participants to recommend other African American faculty who could provide additional insight through their involvement in the project. Nominate faculty were contacted by their recommenders, and asked to directly contact the principal investigator if interested in participating.

Seventeen Oceanside professors (10 males, 7 females) and 11 Columbia professors (6 males, 5 females) agreed to participate. All participants are referred to by pseudonym in the reporting of this study’s findings, and demographic information is available in Table 1. Twenty-six were full-time professors, and 25 were tenure-line at the time of their interview. Five participants were assistant professors, 11 were associate professors, and 12 were full professors. Faculty were from a diverse group of departments and programs, with the largest proportion teaching in the social sciences (n = 12), followed by professional programs (n = 6).

Procedures

Each participant engaged in a 60- to 90-minute semi-structured interview (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). The interview protocol was developed based on a review of the literature about experiences of African American faculty, particularly their participation in developmental relationships. Particularly relevant to this study, participants were asked questions about past experiences as a mentor and protégé, the types and quality of relationships they have with African American students and their thoughts on the influence of these relationships on their personal and professional lives and development. Interviews were recorded for verbatim transcription. Reflective memos were completed within 24 hours of each interview’s completion to capture immediate thoughts and feelings on the discussion, as well as emerging connections between participants and themes.

Once transcribed, participants’ narratives were organized through a systematic coding process (Maxwell, 2005), integrating inductive and deductive processes. In the deductive phase, the scholarship on mentoring, faculty–student interaction, social exchange, and Black faculty was reviewed and distilled into an initial list of codes. Then, in the inductive phase, the interview transcripts were reviewed and the coding schemes were revised to include emerging themes. These codes were used to organize the data and were applied to participants’ narratives using ATLAS ti software (http://www.atlasti.com/index.html). Once codes were applied, quotations categorized within the same code were re-read to identify findings and divergent perspectives within the data. Data obtained from interviews were then further analyzed using the “pattern matching” technique (Yin, 1994), where data are compared to existing literature and theory. In this case, findings were compared to existing theory and research on social exchange and student–faculty interaction.

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Table 1: Participant Demographic Characteristics
Trustworthiness of Findings (Personal Observation)

According to Maxwell (2005), "in qualitative research, the researcher is the instrument of the research," and it is important to acknowledge that this project interacted with my participants in multiple ways (p. 83). When evaluating the space I occupy on the participant—observer continuum (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998), I see how my relationship to this project has shifted over time. At first, I was more of an observer with limited engagement in the activities of my participants, but I had some level of participation due to my previous experience in mentoring relationships. I collected data as an African American woman and graduate student who had benefited greatly from my relationships with Black faculty, and I hoped participants gained access to some beneficial outcomes when interacting with students. The data were re-analyzed for this article, which was drafted as I transitioned to faculty life. Over time, I moved closer to the participant end of the continuum, sharing the experience of academic work and life with my participants, and my own beliefs and hypotheses about what would be costly and beneficial about building relationships with Black students became more salient.

While having recent experiences on both sides of the relationships under study certainly had the potential to shape how I viewed and interpreted the data, several steps were taken to promote trustworthiness and validity of the findings. First, a member checking strategy was used to validate findings (Maxwell, 2005); all participants were e-mailed a summary of emergent findings and were invited to further discuss these findings. In addition, a test of intercoder reliability was conducted to ensure reliability of interpretation and understanding of professors’ narratives (Fink, 2006; Lombard, Snyder-Duch, & Bracken, 2005). Kappa statistics, which assess the agreement between coders beyond chance (Fink, 2006) were calculated for individual codes with the help of a volunteer. The average kappas for all codes was within the moderate range (.716). Two items had kappa statistics below .40, and were discussed and revised to enhance clarity and accuracy.

Limitations

As with any study, there are several limitations to these analyses. The qualitative methodology limits the generalizability of this work. While this study strongly indicates certain experiences and perceptions are common among Black professors employed at predominantly White research universities, these findings must be confirmed through further study. Additionally, despite efforts to recruit a diverse group of participating faculty, small numbers of untraditional faculty participated, making it more challenging to distinguish the differences between the costs and benefits of mentoring pre- and post-tenure.

Perhaps the most significant limitation of this study stems from self-selection. Professors could choose whether they had the time, interest, or inclination to participate in this study. All participants identified with the racial aspect of their identity, and it is possible that those who were more strongly identified with their cultural/ racial identities were more inclined to participate. It is important to acknowledge that while many African Americans feel a deep commitment to service for personal and community reasons, there are also those who feel no special obligation to engage in service activities in ways different from their White colleagues. Those who perceive their race as less central to their identities, who were not well-represented in this study, may have very different views and perspectives on their relationships with Black students. Furthermore, it is also possible that those who had strong positive feelings about working with students or were more actively engaged in mentoring were more likely to participate in this study. For example, the majority of participants engage students in research, which may not generally be the norm. This does not invalidate the study’s findings; however, and may best be seen as reflective of the perspectives of Black professors with centralized racial identities who feel strongly about mentoring and less representative of those who feel less connected to their communities or those in which student interaction has limited importance.

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Findings

Black faculty at both Oceanside and Column Universities describe working with Black students in similar ways. They offer advice and counsel, work on students’ research projects, and involve students in their own research projects and teams. While the actual activities are often quite similar, the nature of the interactions appears to be somewhat different when working with Black students. Their narratives indicate a unique set of interactions between Black students and faculty that differ in key ways from the interactions they have with students from other racial and ethnic backgrounds. These differences lead to a different understanding of the costs and benefits when working with Black students, which ultimately have personal and professional implications.

Uniqueness in Interactions

Two emerging themes appear to drive and shape the ways in which Black faculty engage Black students. First, professors often speak to their desire to see Black students perform well and succeed, expressing their commitment and sense of obligation to support their development. Second, professors discuss the distinct closeness and sense of comfort they feel with Black students. How these underlying motivations seem to shape Black faculty engagement with Black students are described below.

Commitment to success. While participants share their general care and desire for all of their students to do well, they are especially focused on the development and achievement of Black students. For example, Eileen Smith expressed her concern about the performance of her Black students by saying: “I’m probably more concerned about the welfare of Black students just because, you know, I’m concerned about our success in the academy.” When Professor Smith says “us,” she references the Black community of which both she and the student are a part. Therefore, Professor Smith makes a specific connection between the concern she has about the achievement of Black students individually and her larger concern about African Americans and their achievement. Much like Professor Smith, Jonathan Baker described his interest in the academic success of Black students as part of his desire to see members of his community excel: “. . . I have a sense of Black Pride, and you know, it’s important to me our Black students do well.” Professor Baker connects his commitment to Black students to his own identity, noting that he wants to see members of his community succeed.

Furthermore, participants’ knowledge of the issues faced by members of the Black community within the academy appears to shape their commitment to Black students. Marilyn Taylor admitted caring a bit more about the success of her Black students, citing her awareness of their challenges, such as feeling isolated and underrepresented at a predominantly White school, which were similar to what she had experienced. Paula James also described her interest in working with Black students because their path through academic was more difficult. Examples are also offered by both Keira Bailey and Michael Stuart, who express that their own experiences and observations of others suggests African Americans are held to a different academic standard in higher education. Dr. Bailey highlights how important it is for students to understand this, and strives to share this information with students so that they can acknowledge it, accept it, and adequately prepare themselves:

. . . it’s harder out here for us [African Americans] and that they [Black students] are held to a different standard, and while that’s not fair, it’s real. And so, kind of helping people know that and come to terms with that and develop the skills so that they can do that and really put themselves in a position to have the kind of record that will be solid in a lot of people’s eyes is important.

For Dr. Bailey, it is important that students understand the challenges that will be facing them not only generally as students, but as Black students, and that she shares her knowledge about how to excel beyond individuals’ lowered expectations. Participants generally acknowledge the
overlap between their Black students' struggles and their own, and express a commitment to helping them, in the words of Iris Hayes, not make the same mistakes.

Closeness and informality. Participants vary in their level of informality with students. While many were comfortable with more friendly and less hierarchical relationships, some maintained clear boundaries and established themselves as a professor or mentor, but not a friend or confidante. Regardless, participants tend to describe themselves as less formal and easier with Black students. Leonard Freeman explains that while he has been close to minority students over the years, "I'm closer to the Africans and African Americans, though." For Alice Butler, she can let her guard down and be more nurturing with Black students because:

of the bond that I think we feel... We have our own unique challenges. So I'm much more likely to want to feel maternal and nurturing and also allow my weaknesses and insecurities with them.

Shared experiences seem to serve as a foundation for a certain level of trust between Dr. Butler and her Black students. She perceives them as understanding her and her experiences, and feels close to her Black students based on these similarities.

This closeness participants feel when working with Black students is also revealed in their use of family-related terminology when describing their relationships. For example, Michael Stuart describes the advice he gives and the lessons he seeks to teach his Black students as being "not vastly different from what African American parents have done for their children for centuries in this country." Alice Butler, Teryn Mitchell, and Felicia Adams all had relationships with young women in which they describe themselves as serving as a mother-figure. Eric Carter describes a paternal relationship with one of his Black students, which involved balancing his efforts to both challenge and support this student, pushing him when necessary.

I felt it was sort of a paternal kind of relationship that I had started to develop with him. You know, just to kind of advise him and sometimes quite frankly chastise him and say "Look, you can't do that... don't do that, why are you doing that?" You know, that's not going to get you to where you want to be... I ended up even lending him a few hundred dollars... So that just tells you that this was a different relationship for me.

This was not typical for Dr. Carter; however, the closeness he felt to this student is clear in his narrative and he felt a strong connection, and consequently a desire to help this student with personal and financial problems plugging him outside of the classroom. It seems that for these professors, Black students can take on a position that goes beyond pupil or mentee; some are like family. This did not happen frequently; however, when faculty used family-related terms to describe their relationships with students, the students were Black.

Costs of Working with Black Students

It is important to note that several participants were uncomfortable with indicating any unique costs associated with working with Black students; for these scholars, students have needs that are part of a professor's job to fulfill. However, there are recurrent themes within the narratives of those who did indicate there are challenges associated with their interactions with Black students, including: the extra time and energy these relationships sometimes took and the disappointment and frustration which accompanied a lack of reciprocity in effort and work ethic.

Time and energy. Professors generally perceive their interactions with students as requiring a great deal of time and energy; however, there is some indication interactions with Black students can be even more challenging. While they often have high aspirations and drive to succeed, the education many Black students receive at low-socioeconomic urban schools leads to disparities in academic preparation between Black students and their classmates (Allen, 1988; Frankenberg & Lee, 2002; Solórzano & Orellana, 2004). Black students may enter academic programs in need of extra help and support to reach their goals. Marilyn Taylor acknowledges many of her Black students are first-generation college students with a great deal of potential, but need support in building the academic skills and knowledge to be successful. Karla Trent, who works with a research team, which is mostly African American, also noticed that many of them need academic help and support. Reflecting on this situation, she noted:

I have noticed over the years that... I end up getting the students who need a lot of work academically... that's different kind of work I have to put in. And it's a different role to be in as well. I haven't quite figured out what all that means, but I know it's more time consuming on my part.

While she feels Black students' development is important, Professor Trent acknowledges that these relationships are more time-consuming and potentially less beneficial in terms of her research than working with students who are better prepared. Aaron Dodd's experiences are similar to Karla Trent's and he describes the extra time expended working with Black students as a problem for not only himself, but for other Black professors. In his view, the intense academic and personal mentoring many Black students need is disproportionately done by Black professors and that these interactions have the potential to be professionally costly in that they distract them from other professional responsibilities.

The extra time and energy Black faculty spend working with Black students is not always focused on academic development; participants recounted time-intensive occasions driven by their closeness and engagement in students' personal lives. For Alice Butler, having close, personal relationships with her Black students can lead to more time spent talking and connecting, but leaving less time to complete her work:

... when you have these extra connections you might have a meeting that you have 45 minutes set aside to meet about your research, but then you might have another 45 minutes because you're telling about some personal issue... the time in a day, there's only a certain amount of time. And the more you spend on one thing, the less there is for another.

While acknowledging that women generally seek her out for psychosocial support, Teryn Mitchell acknowledges Black female students are particularly likely to ask her for help, stating that they often come to her just needing stuff. "What do I do? Where do I go? What do you think about this? I don't know if I like it here. How do I navigate this? Oh, my God, my mother died; I mean, you just name it." Dr. Mitchell described this extra work as "cultural work," which she also perceives as draining and distracting from other tasks she needed to complete:

... cultural work requires a lot and when you're doing that kind of cultural work and you're trying to finish your own work and teach courses and publish and do all the things that our professional requires of us, it really is a lot.

While often engaging in close personal and relationships with Black students, participants clearly acknowledge that this can draw time away from other important responsibilities professors have that are necessary for their advancement.

Lack of reciprocity. The concept of reciprocity is vital in social exchange; both individuals in a relationship are expected to be giving and receiving benefits for an interaction to continue (Emerson, 1983; Ember, Thomas, & Murphy, 2001). One might suggest that a lack of reciprocity can be frustrating in any interaction a professor has with a student; however, Black professors discuss this frustration specifically in regards to their relationships with Black students. Professors indicate this does not seem to happen often, although Wallace Pearson notes that it "happens more than I wish that it would." Regardless, this is a problem Eileen Smith perceives as one that African American professors just have to face:

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This is probably an issue for all Black faculty—whether or not Black students are expecting special treatment from a Black professor. And clearly, you know, on some occasion, you will find somebody who thinks that you should be more forgiving.

Despite noting its rarity, some participants could offer specific examples of times when Black students did not seem to give their best effort, expected favoritism, or did not perform up to their standards. Marilyn Taylor admits there are times when she works with Black students on her research, but they tend to leave her frustrated by their work ethic. Wallace Pearson also considers a lack of effort on behalf of some of his Black students as a drawback, especially if he makes a commitment to mentor and guide them. Professor Pearson expressed his frustration while recounting the occasional encounters he has with Black students who expect him to grant them a bit more latitude:

I think that there’s an expectation of some African American students sometimes that because I’m an African American faculty member that I’m supposed to [be] a little more lax and not be as demanding and not expect as much. It’s really kind of bothers me when I think Black students take advantage of that because they assume that because they’re Black and I’m Black I’m supposed to, you know, “look it up.” I’m like, ain’t nobody asked me up. I mean, I’m going to, I’m going to mentor, but you still gotta put in the time to do what you got to do.

Therefore, Dr. Pearson has high expectations of his African American students and sees his relationships with his students ideally as reciprocal, leading him to be disappointed when students are not willing to put as much effort into their training as he did into his own.

**Benefits of Working with Black Students**

Although the research literature tends to emphasize the costs associated with student interaction for Black faculty, participants also describe the unique benefits. Consistent with their commitment to serving the larger Black community, participants benefit from the positive feelings associated with fulfilling a commitment to their communities. They also describe their relationships with Black students as providing them with access to social support and thoughtful researchers who have inside knowledge about their area of scholarship.

**Fulfilling commitments.** Most participants take great joy in the development of their students; however, they discuss how they specifically perceive the gains of their Black students as being benefits for themselves. When asked about the benefits that she gained from interacting with Black students, Diane Willis explains the achievement of her Black students is very important and is personally helpful. Corinne Davis also describes her various opportunities to help Black students understand their identity and position in academe through classes and conversations. She uses words like “pleased” and “honored” to have these interactions, and identifies being able to help students develop in this way as a personal benefit.

For those who place importance on contributing to the Black community, being able to actually work with Black students and fulfill those commitments is a distinct benefit connected to a host of positive emotions. For example, Jonathan Baker sees interacting with African American students as personally beneficial because it allows him to fulfill his broader commitment to the Black community. He shared:

...as somebody who cares about Black people and the Black community, I feel it gives me some psychic benefit to know that I am working with Black students and talking to them and they’re in my classes and I’m contributing.

In other words, Professor Baker’s interactions with Black students leads him to experience good feelings because he is fulfilling his desire to make a positive impact on the African American community. Theresa Evers adds one of the reasons she entered academe was to make a

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"contribution to society, especially African Americans and people of color," thereby, she makes the hard work of mentoring and spending time with students a priority. When her Black students do well, it makes her feel like "perhaps it’s [her hard work] is all worthwhile.

**Support.** Although they do not indicate that they seek social support from their students and express a significant reluctance to burden them with this responsibility, some participants share Black students promote their happiness and are helpful to their well-being. In Alice Butler’s comments, she reminded students that while faculty do not necessarily seek it out they often welcome the support of Black students. Participants were also able to offer specific examples of times they felt supported and appreciated by Black students. For Kayla Trent, the support she received from her Black students at times was unsolicited, but palpable. On other occasions, their support is more vocal, with her students telling her: "We’re here to do whatever—we would do whatever you need," and threatening to protect and light the building on fire if she were not awarded tenure. Her work with Black students and the special way they support her keeps Dr. Trent centered and happy, and has been particularly important to her when facing challenging times in her department.

...to be honest with you, working with the students of color, particularly Black students—it bordered me. It gave me—it helped me to stay healthy, to no speak. It was almost like we both needed each other, that there’s a love and a caring that’s difficult to put your finger on it, and they kept me sane...they wanted you to be successful.

Therefore, despite her desire for her students not to be overly demonstrative or self-sacrificing, Professor Trent and others appreciate the support of her Black students, expressing that it brings joy and comfort.

**Research contributions.** In addition to more personal benefits, interactions with Black students can potentially be professionally beneficial, especially when related to research. The unique benefit associated with research collaborations with Black students seems to be related to their ability to understand and conceptually contribute to the process. Twenty-two of the 28 professors were actively engaged in research directly relevant or focused on the experiences of people of color broadly or African Americans, specifically. Some respondents describe Black students as more able to readily grasp concepts related to race and equity than their White peers. Reflecting on the benefits of working with Black students on research, Wallace Pearson said,

I think the biggest advantage is that when you talk about certain issues, I mean, they get it. When I talk about...the ways in which access is provided or not provided, equity issues of issues, the ways race plays out in schools or institutions of higher learning, most [of them] understand where you’re coming from...they understand where you’re going and why it matters.

Teryl Mitchell similarly notes that Black students (specifically Black female students) are more likely to have been exposed to courses and research that supports the work she is doing; they have a preliminary background in the areas she is interested in, making them easier to work with. According to Eileen Smith, Black students “have a particular perspective that other students of color might not have,” based on their experiences, and Black professors find these perspectives quite valuable. Alice Butler also talked about how Black students add to her work, noting that her Black students often help her to make sense of her research on issues affecting the Black community, explaining that “It’s not that you have to be African American to study African Americans’ issues, but I think it sure helps.” Since many Black students are part of a larger, shared African American experience, these professors see them as able to both grasp key
Much like the Black students who identified the “othermothering” they received when interacting with Black professors, Black faculty clearly described what created those conditions for them:

Academic “othermothering” is constituted by several behaviors, including: comprehensive academic and sociomotional support, active advocacy and student support, and high academic expectations. Data collected from both Black male and female participants confirm participation in these activities, as they described caring deeply about students’ success, attending to students’ challenges inside and outside of the classroom, and demanding effort and hard work from the students with whom they were working. It certainly could be argued that it is likely that participants interacted in these ways with students who were not Black. However, they repeatedly recounted occasions when they engaged in “othermothering” with Black students, but few to no occasions with students from other racial/ethnic backgrounds. These findings suggest that Black faculty–student interactions are not only distinctive from the student perspective; they may also be unique in the eyes of the faculty member.

In addition to supporting Griff rids’s (2005) framing, the data provide a deeper understanding of the forces that motivate “othermothering” behavior and how they translate to Black faculty costs and benefits associated with mentoring. First, commitments to community uplift appear to play a significant role in shaping interactions with Black students. Participants described their interest in working with Black students as more than an interest or a goal; it is closer to an obligation. Several go beyond the efforts they generally make to support their Black students, offering psychosocial and academic support informed by participants’ similar experiences based on their shared membership in the Black community. In many ways, the study supports previous research, which suggests Black faculty are able to offer a deeper level of support to Black students based on their similar struggles and barriers faced in education (Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007; Griff rids, 2005; Patton & Harper, 2003; Patton, 2009; Redding, 2005).

Findings also suggest that the shared understanding of each other’s experiences creates space for some level of reciprocity in the psychosocial support Black professors offered, adding depth to the understanding of the beneficial support interactions. Students can offer their professors.

Researcher Antonio (2003) hypothesized that a diverse student body can reduce the isolation faculty of color feel and contributes to a more positive campus environment and racial climate with their presence. Consistent with this thought, participants were pleased and at times surprised by the closeness of their relationships. Participates were more relaxed around Black students in a way that they could not with others, understanding one another on a deeper level because of the similarity of their experiences in academia.

The closeness and commitment Black faculty felt is also visible in the frustration they express when efforts to teach and mentor are not reciprocated by their students. Although this does not necessarily happen often, Black professors expressed the anger and frustration they feel when Black students do not respond with a strong commitment to their own success.

Interestingly, professors do not express similar frustration when discussing their relationships with students from other backgrounds. This is not to say that Black students are the only ones different, higher level of commitment to the relationships between Black faculty and students. In addition to shedding light on the nature of the relationships between Black faculty and students, this study can inform scholarly understandings of faculty–student interaction as a form of social exchange. Although social exchange frameworks have been applied to understand mentoring relationships in business, the findings of this study suggest highlighting their efficacy in promoting understanding of the motivation and outcomes associated with these relationships and could be a useful framework for future study in this area (Johnson, Rose, & Schlosser, 2005). The time- and energy-related costs of mentorship recounted by participants were relatively unsurprising. Higher education scholarship frames student interaction as costly, largely because it drains time and energy away from activities more closely related to tenure and promotion, namely research (Oakes, 1984; Blackham & Lawrence, 1995; Manges & Exam, 1983; Tiemeyer & Benson, 1996). Similar to other scholars (e.g., Allen et al., 2000; Banks, 1984), this study reminds higher education leaders and policymakers they must continue to be cognizant that Black faculty are spending significant time and energy on student interaction with potential negative implications for their advancement.

However, consistent with principles of social exchange, Black faculty were able to identify both costs and benefits associated with student interaction. This study contributes new understandings of how students can support faculty in ways that are positively related to their professional outcomes. Mentoring literature, particularly in business, has largely focused on the psychosocial benefits of mentoring (e.g., Erez, Thomas, & Murphy, 2001; Ragni & Scarbrough, 1999). However, there may be underrecognized professional benefits of mentoring and student interaction. Interactions with Black students appear to be uniquely beneficial based on their ability to assist professors engaged in race-related research in ways that improves the quality of their work. Black students are described as using their experiences to make profound insights and draw unique conclusions from professors’ data. Increased understanding of the ways in which Black students can provide benefits professionally can and should be explored in future research, and then used to develop interventions to directly address the costs associated with these interactions.

Finally, these findings also highlight the importance of subjectivity and relativity in social exchange. The emphasis Black professors place on mentoring may not initially appear rational; however, this study reminds us that one cannot predict another’s behavior based on one’s own understanding of what is costly or beneficial (Molm, 2006). The value placed on scholarly productivity at research universities (Tiemeyer & Benson, 1996) would suggest that Black professors could only interact with students if they were able to assist them with tenure or promotion advancement; however, this is not the case. Participants emphasized the improved state of the Black community and their own satisfaction as also factoring into decisions about the extent of their mentoring. Productivity is not necessarily equivalent to professional satisfaction, and limiting personal goals to facilitate professional gains may leave Black professors disenfranchised with academia, encouraging them to seek other means or professions in which they can make a difference in their communities. This is reminiscent of Baes’s (2000) findings about faculty agency in choosing to engage in race-related service. While they were partially driven by a sense of obligation to their communities, they reap benefits such as diminished isolation, increased campus connections, and cultural outlets that were otherwise challenging to find at predominantly white institutions. Institutional leaders must be mindful of the implications when they tell Black professors to say “no” to service requests. It may not be so easy, particularly when it appears that the personal support and satisfaction faculty may experience contrasts with the professional risk they may be exposed to due to the time and energy expended as a result of these relationships.

“Othermothering” is important to student outcomes and, based on the findings of this work, can potentially promote some positive outcomes for faculty as well. Therefore, institutions must reconsider how they can allow Black faculty to engage in this work without it translating to negative outcomes, particularly by rewarding them for their commitment to service in the tenure and promotion process. Furthermore, institutional leaders may develop strategies to facilitate research-based interactions between Black faculty and students based on their potential for mutual benefits, which include contributions to the development of the Black community. Opportunities to obtain small grants to fund these collaborations and workshops to provide
students with preparatory training as researchers, making them more able collaborators, may be successful strategies in this regard.

The author would like to thank the Interdisciplinary Relationships Science Program at UCLA, the NSF IGERT Program, UCLA Institute for American Cultures, Bunche Center for African American Studies, and Penn State’s Minority Faculty Development Program for generous financial support in the completion of this research.

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AUTHOR

KIMBERLY A. GRIFFIN is Associate Professor in the Higher Education, Student Affairs, and International Education Policy Program at the University of Maryland, College Park.

All comments and queries regarding this article should be addressed to kgri129@umd.edu