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Finding "your" people: The impact of mentoring relationships in overcoming barriers to academic achievement in underrepresented student populations

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Abstract

First generation college students, especially those with intersecting identities within other marginalized groups, face many barriers in navigating academia. Among these barriers is the long-established set of negative beliefs about the self, known as Imposter Syndrome. Imposter feelings are often invisible to others, but manifest as anxiety, self-doubt, self-handicapping, or irrational fear of failure in light of previous successes (Craddock et al., 2011). Through an autoethnographic study, this paper explores how mentoring relationships facilitate persistence and academic achievement for underrepresented students. I will analyze the manifestation of imposter feelings in my academic activities and how I was able to overcome these with the assistance of mentoring relationships. This study contributes to the existing literature on the impact of mentoring in overcoming imposter syndrome by providing a unique perspective through the lived experience of both mentor and mentee.

1. Introduction

Although I did not come to learn about or understand imposter syndrome until later in life, I had always felt like an imposter before I even knew its definition. Whether it is the fact that my parents left everything behind in Brazil to give me the

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opportunity at an education that they never had, the fear that followed living undocumented in the United States for close to a decade or experiencing first-hand the racism and discrimination that is part of the life of many students that come from working-class immigrant families; at every turn of my life, since a wide-eyed 9-year-old me arrived in the U.S, I have fought against imposter syndrome whether I realized it or not.

I consider myself extremely fortunate to have had the stars align for me in my academic journey to where I found several mentor figures; all strong women that I saw myself in. Figures that I wholeheartedly believe were integral to me becoming a proud, albeit anxious, PhD candidate today. These women were unapologetically smart, resilient, and dedicated. Women that came from poor families, that had immigrant mothers or parents born in other countries or were the first in their families to go to college, just like I was. Despite whatever obstacles they had faced, they had made it to where I aspired to be. These mentoring relationships were crucial in understanding and overcoming the infamous imposter syndrome and developing a sense of belonging that ensured my persistence and continued academic success.

I often question if the stars had not aligned for me to collect all these experiences, would I have completed my undergraduate degree? Would I have applied to graduate school? Would I now be authoring this paper as a 1st year PhD candidate? As a present-day higher education professional working with underrepresented students, I see me in so many of the students that I work with daily. In this paper, I present a self-reflection on my experiences over the years in overcoming imposter syndrome as a student through the mentorship of Dr. J, Dr. T and Dr. F. In exploring my lived experiences as a first-generation college student with intersecting identities as an immigrant, Latinx woman, I would like to explore the impact of mentoring relationships within a higher education context to strengthen the educational pipeline for underserved students.

2. Literature review

As this study focuses on mentoring as a way to overcome imposter syndrome, the literature review has been separated in two sections to support this main theme: First, understanding imposter syndrome, and how this condition relates to academic achievement. Second, overviewing mentoring in an educational context and the link to academic success.

2.1 Imposter syndrome and academic achievement

The term Imposter syndrome (IP) was first coined by Pauline Clance & Suzanne Imes (1978) to define the internalized experience of intellectual phoniness especially present amongst high achieving women. In working with highly accomplished women in various fields, Clance and Imes found that those experiencing imposter syndrome maintained a strong belief that they were intellectual frauds whose lack of ability could be exposed at any moment (Wilkinson, 2020). While early studies focused on IP as only affecting women, subsequent research shows that men experience these feelings at a comparable rate and that gender is not a contributing factor (Clark, Vardeman & Barba, 2014). Other reported symptoms were of generalized anxiety, lack of self-confidence, depression, and frustration related to the inability to meet self-imposed standards of achievement (Clance & Imes, 1978). There is substantial research indicating that any one or a combination of these symptoms can negatively impact the potential for academic success in various student groups.

The research shows IP manifesting in all student groups from young undergraduates (Kolligan & Stemberg, 1991), doctoral students (Craddock et al, 2011), mature students (Champman, 2014), minorities (Peteet, Montgomery & Weekes, 2015) and first-generation students (Garder & Holley, 2011). Those suffering IP are prevented from achieving to their fullest potential, whether academically or professionally. IP sufferers do not have a realistic sense of their own competence and are not fully empowered to internalize their strengths (Clance & O'Toole, 1988) and if these feelings are strong enough, this could result in IP sufferers turning down advancement opportunities or giving up on their dreams to instead settle for what in their view is certain or deserved. Anxiety, self-doubt, fear of failure and guilt about success undermines their ability to function at their highest level (Clance & O'Toole, 1988).

IP has been identified as one of the barriers to academic achievement in various student groups, especially underrepresented students. While examining the experience of students that began at a Community College and transferred to a four-year university, Shaw et al (2019) identified overcoming self-doubt and uncertainty of belonging associated with IP as a great challenge for student success. Another study by Ramsey & Brown (2017) also identified this inability to internalize accomplishments and its adverse effect on academic performance in a variety of student types, including first generation students, minorities, and other marginalized groups. Research has also shown a commonality between underrepresented groups and lower

rates of academic persistence, low retention, and graduation rates.

Although there are many contributing factors to the underperformance of Latinos and other underrepresented groups, IP may certainly be included as one of these factors. It is projected that by 2025 nearly a quarter of all US public school students will be Latino and although the number of Latino students in college is in an upward trajectory, retention rates for these students is stagnant (Zalaquett & Lopez, 2006). According to census data compiled by Zalaquett & Lopez (2006) in 2000, only 64.1% of all Latino 18–24-yearolds completed secondary education compared with 92% of white young adults. A more recent analysis by *Excelencia* in Education (2020) has shown that a decade later, while progress has been made, there is still a 22% equity gap in degree attainment for Latino students compared to their white non-Hispanic peers. Interestingly, the top degree awarding institutions for Latinos identified by *Excelencia* are mostly Hispanic serving institutions (HSI) located in states with predominant Latino populations such as Texas, Florida, and California. According to the US Department of Education, HSIs are colleges or universities where Hispanic students comprise at least 25% of the total full-time undergraduate enrollment. An HSI is one that expands educational opportunities for and is intentional about improving the attainment of its Hispanic/Latino students. In looking at IP as a possible factor for underperformance of Latinos in higher education, the data from *Excelencia* supports this. We see that that Latinos are indeed performing better at environments that are intentional about creating opportunities such as mentoring programs, where they will feel a sense of belonging, be more empowered to internalize their strengths and overcome imposter feelings.

2.2 Mentoring and academic success

Mentoring is inarguably seen as having a positive effect on academic achievement and persistence. The issue of student attrition is a withstanding problem for higher education. In response to the large number of college students failing to persist to graduation, many mentoring programs have been established at colleges and universities across the country to resolve this issue (Nora and Crisp, 2007).

Mentoring relationships provide a space for students to feel connected, supported and empowered. They may be facilitated through formal programs or be informal in nature; developing spontaneously between students and their mentor figures. While these figures tend to often be faculty, mentoring relationships can develop between students and staff, peers, family, religious figures, and others outside of the campus community. According to Lunsford, Crisp and Wuetherick (2017) mentoring relationships may take a variety of forms and be distinguished by their duration, function, and source(s) of mentoring. Most research focuses on formal mentoring programs at university campuses. These formal programs can vary greatly in terms of structure, frequency, mentor training and mode of interaction. Crisp et all (2017) identify these as: orientation programs, mentoring programs designed to support targeted populations (STEM, First-Gen etc.), peer mentoring, undergraduate research, and honors programs. Some programs may meet frequently and provide support from high school through graduation, such as the College Success Program, part Boston Foundation's Success Boston initiative, which offers participants year-round one-on-one coaching by trained mentors beginning senior year of high school and ending at college graduation. Other programs may be less structured, count on volunteer mentors or like many first-year programs, only be available for students through their first year of college. The amount of contact and duration of mentoring relationships can also vary greatly, anywhere from one meeting to lasting over a decade.

Overall findings indicate that mentoring efforts, in one fashion or another, increase student retention rates (Nora and Crisp, 2007). In their case study focused particularly on undergraduate Latino/a students, Zalaquet and Lopez (2006) identified mentoring as one practice that can aid students in attaining successful educational outcomes and they stress the social and ethical responsibility of implementing mentoring programs to help at risk minority students to pursue higher education (2006). Mentoring can also help students renegotiate their academic identities which in turn can assist in overcoming IP. Sense of belonging is an important aspect of student retention. A student that is suffering from IP, is going to feel out of place or disenfranchised and the fear and anxiety of being discovered are going to make it so that it is less likely for the student to connect with existing services that could help them succeed and persist at the institution as IP "undermines the ability to negotiate a resilient academic identity and also impedes the growth of a sense of belonging" (Ramsey & Brown, 2017). On the other hand, if the student can connect with someone they see as a mentor figure, that mentoring relationship may aid in renegotiating the IP sufferer's self-image to include a sense of their essential place in academia and belief in their ability to successfully complete their academic goals (Ramsey & Brown, 2019).

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2.3 Gaps in the literature

Mentoring literature seems to have evolved in the past decade, however there are still limitations in the development of a more cohesive definition of mentorship. Research seems to be disconnected due to the varying definitions, methods, and theories within mentorship research. Definitional, methodological, and theoretical issues have made it difficult to accurately measure the impact that mentoring has on college students or to understand the components and aspects of mentoring that are associated with positive student outcomes (Crisp, 2009; Crisp & Cruz 2007.) Although there is substantial research that indicates mentoring relationships have a positive impact on underrepresented students (Nora & Crisp 2005; Zalaquett & Lopez, 2006; Hagler, 2018; Mishra, 2020), such as promoting educational success and attainment for student groups with historically low high school and college graduation rates in the U.S. (Hagler, 2018) there is a lack of research providing a deeper analysis into what aspects of mentoring relationships are associated with positive experiences and to which extent.

Much of the literature on the impact of mentoring on underrepresented student groups seems to be concentrated on students in high achieving academic paths such as Engineering and Medicine. Additional research is needed to understand the experiences of all underrepresented students and not only those the literature categorizes as "high achievers," which are students with above average grade point averages, attending highly selective universities or highly competitive programs. These are smaller subsets of students and more research is needed on the experiences of underrepresented students across the spectrum. The experiences analyzed in this study are important in providing this needed perspective of marginalized students outside of the "high-achieving" spectrum. Addressing this knowledge gap is important for the development of high impact mentoring programs and practices across campuses to support underrepresented students and aid in closing the achievement gap for this important group.

3. Theoretical framework

To define what constitutes a mentoring relationship and its definitional characteristics, the data for this research will be analyzed using Crisp and Colleagues' (Crisp & Cruz 2009; Nora & Crisp 2007) four constructs of undergraduate mentoring relationships. This theoretical framework builds upon Kram's (1988) work, which defines what mentoring is and what aspects of the mentoring relationship promote growth and development. Crisp et. al (2007; 2009) developed a framework based on Kram's model, grounded within the higher education context, which made it the evident chosen framework to evaluate these experiences.

The following four constructs will be applied to evaluate my mentoring experiences:

1. *Psychological and Emotional Support*: a sense of listening, providing moral support, identifying problems, providing encouragement and the establishment of a supportive relationship in which there is mutual understanding and link between the student and the mentor. This construct also incorporates Kram's view that a" mentoring experience incorporates feedback from the mentor regarding certain fears and other issues on the part of the student" (Crisp & Cruz, 2009).
2. *Goal Setting and Career Paths* (Degree and Career Support): represents the idea that mentoring encompasses an assessment of the student's strengths, weaknesses, abilities, and includes assistance with setting academic/career goals and decision-making. Crisp et. Al (2007,2009) provide six perspectives as the main variables as the focus for this construct: (1) a detailed review and exploration of interests, abilities, ideas, and beliefs (2) stimulation of critical thinking skills with regard to envisioning the future and developing personal and professional potential (3) reflective process (4) discussing specific suggestions regarding current plans and progress in achieving personal, educational, and career goals (5) a respectful challenge of explanations for specific decisions or avoidance of decisions and actions relevant to developing as an adult learner (6) facilitation in the realization of the mentee's dream.
3. *Academic Subject Knowledge Support*: Centers on the acquisition of necessary skills and knowledge; educating, evaluating, and challenging the mentee academically.
4. *Existence of a Role Model*: Focuses on the presence of a role model in the mentee's life as well as the opportunity for the mentee to learn from the mentor's current and past actions, achievements, and failures. Crisp et al (2007, 2009) note that in this variable, the emphasis is on sharing, or self-disclosing, life experiences and feelings by the mentor to personalize and enrich the relationship between himself/herself and the mentee.

4. Methodology

Traditional forms of analytical and evocative autoethnography were adopted as the methodology for this study. In an

analytic autoethnography, the autoethnographer is a member of the community being studied, reflects on experiences to provide theoretical analysis, and uses the research to gain insight into some broader set of social phenomena. The self-reflective process of autoethnographical research allows one to fully recall, retell and analyze experiences from an insider's perspective in a way that "outside" researchers never could (Adams et al, 2014). An evocative approach, where the narrative is styled as to create a personal connection with the reader and provoke an emotional response, was employed primarily in the retelling of my experiences and in the interview dialogue. Through this autoethnographic account, I deconstruct my experiences, relationships, and their impact on my academic development. I also reflect on how they relate to available research on known barriers to academic achievement such as imposter syndrome and sense of belonging.

4.1 Research questions

- What are the challenges that students from marginalized groups face in terms of persistence and academic success in HE?
- To what extent does imposter syndrome impact the persistence and academic success of marginalized students in HE?
- What are different supports marginalized students receive through mentioning experiences in HE?
- To what extent do these supports impact marginalized students' overcoming imposter syndrome?

4.2 Sampling method

Data collection employed my personal recollections of several points throughout my academic career, starting from high school through present day. These recollections centered around three mentors I have had (Dr. J, Dr. T and Dr. F) and the impact of these relationships. Additionally, a face-to-face semi-structured interview was conducted with one of the mentors, Dr.J. This interview was conducted at the participant's home on May 1, 2021, lasting approximately 2.5 hours. The interview followed a semi-structured format, with the conversation focused primarily on her recollections of our mentoring relationship and her experiences as a mentor of underrepresented students. The conversation was recorded and later transcripted for data analysis.

4.3 Data analysis

A thematic approach was applied to data analysis. I divided all the data into themes according to Crisp et al's (2007,2009) four constructs (Psychological and emotional support, Goal setting, Academic subject knowledge and Existence of a role model) and employed reflexivity as I compared my experiences to that of my mentor. Relevant excerpts from the interview are woven into the discussion of my recollections. To further interpret the findings, I drew from the literature on impostor syndrome by Clance & Ines (1978) Clance & O'Toole (1987) Shaw, Spink & Chin-Newman (2018) to categorize my experiences and isolate any recollections associated with imposter feelings (e.g. feelings of self-doubt, inadequacy and not belonging) and to what extent did the mentoring relationships in question assist in overcoming these feelings. In analyzing my mentoring relationships and their impact on my academic performance/achievement, the data was compared against the literature on mentoring and academic achievement by Zalaquett & Lopez (2006), Crisp & Cruz (2010) and Ramsey & Brown (2017).

In order to ensure a more comprehensive data set, the initial plan for this study was for interviews with all three mentors from my recollections. Due to scheduling availability, only one mentor was able to participate in the face-to-face interviews. The lack of participation from the two mentors provides a limitation in the data as their participation would provide further validation of the data or different outcomes of the study.

All of the mentors mentioned in the study continue to actively mentor students. Given their active roles in higher education, more specifically in their close work with students, it was important to protect their identities. In order to ensure this, mentors' names were removed from the study and aliases assigned.

5. Results

I remember feeling like my heart would jump out of my chest the first time I visited North Shore Community College, in the summer of 2005, to register for classes. I had to ask my mother to come with me. I did not tell her at the time, but I needed her to walk in with me so that I could overcome the urge to run away from there and sabotage my dreams once again.

I did not know it then, but that crippling desire to run away, was the anxiety brought on by imposter syndrome.

I had felt this before. I had been a stellar student in high school, learning had always come easily, and I had big dreams of becoming a veterinarian. The only problem? I

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had no idea how, and the more I thought about it, the more this felt unattainable. I was an immigrant whose parents did not speak a word of English. They had never finished high school, let alone gone to university. I had no references to start from, no one to turn to, how could I make it? And my dream of becoming a veterinarian seemed to be just that. During my last year of high school, I received a full scholarship to a public university due to high standardized test scores. While I was excited about the possibility of not paying for school (one less obstacle to overcome) I immediately began to think that I was not fit to go to any of the public universities I had guaranteed admission to. I was not good enough, this must have all been a mistake, right? So, I enrolled at the local community college.

5.1 I didn't make it past my first semester

An academic advisor gave me a sheet of paper and told me to check off which classes I wanted to take that semester. At the first 75 mark on a statistics exam, I decided I was going to fail out of school and to save myself the embarrassment, I stopped going to class. I stopped going to all my classes, that I had straight A's in, because of one "bad" grade. Oh, if only I had known that this feeling of utter failure and the depression that followed me for the next few years had a reason and a name!

Well, it is 2008 and here I was at North Shore to try again. Only this time, it was different. The woman who was helping me register for courses could see that I needed assistance beyond just which section of PSYCH101 I should take. She registered me for a class and told me that I would like Dr. J, she was easy going and fun. Little did she or Dr.J know that they had just changed my academic trajectory forever. In our interview, I ask Dr. J if she is aware of this with me or with any of her students:

> "I never formally mentored a student, even when I tried to participate in formal mentoring programs, they've always been informal. And to be honest I did not know I was doing it. I did not know that that was what was happening, it is my role as an educator to empower people. That is my job... I see my role as mentoring everybody. With that being said, I do think the mentoring has been probably more impactful for women and particularly minority women and women of color. I think it has been much more impactful for them, which makes me feel good, but I don't know that there was something purposeful there, it wasn't intentional, not intentional at all."

As a minority woman of color, I certainly felt that connection immediately. Here was this incredibly smart, talented, hilarious woman. Dr. J. I was immediately taken with Dr. J as she introduced herself to the class as a black feminist with Jamaican roots. She was a woman of color with immigrant relatives, and she had a PhD. I wanted to be her; I needed to be her. In my most recent conversation with Dr. J, I asked if she found that students latch on to her because they see a connection, do they see her like I did, like someone they can look up to and be inspired by? Her answer was as if she had studied Nora and Crisp's (2007) first construct herself. As a clinical psychologist, Dr. J is naturally drawn to treat her students as clients. She described how she listens, tries to understand their perspective and what else in their lives might be impacting their academic disposition.

> "When I meet with a student, my mindset is not that this is my student, my mindset is this is my client. my approach is very therapeutic."

5.2 Finding support as an imposter

Dr. J's approach is the definition of the psychological/emotional support construct, encompassing the sense of listening, providing moral support, identifying problems, and providing encouragement while establishing a supportive relationship in which there is mutual understanding between both parties (Nora and Crisp, 2007). And establishing a supportive relationship is what we did. She understood that I did not raise my hand in class because I was crippled by the thought of being discovered as a fraud. That I would say something, and everyone would discover that I was dumb. Or that the fact that I sat quietly and never said a word did not necessarily mean I was not listening or paying attention, simply that I was so consumed with all different symptoms of imposter syndrome, that I could not speak up in class and she never called me out for it. It was quite the opposite. Dr. J constantly told me I was smart, so much so that eventually I had no choice but to believe her.

> "I don't know that I have ever seen myself formally as a mentor. I mean with you I just saw somebody who had such incredible potential. I feel like I was feeding off of you. You inspired me to help you and I Just went with your lead. I thought, wow she's really talented and she has a lot of aspirations and I want to be a positive influence on that person."

It is so interesting to hear Dr. J talk about feeling like she had to empower students, like she was being driven to do this for us. She says that "*My desire to empower people and being able to do that as a woman of color is not lost on me*."

At the time, as her mentee, and even now a decade later, I only saw this powerful woman of color that I could look up to, that I saw as an example of all that I could become. Especially as we became closer, and she told me about her background and her own struggles in academia. Dr. J started out in a completely different academic and career path; she gave up on her aspirations to work in sports due to lack of representation. For most of her life she was the only black woman in the room and then the only black woman with a PhD, she was also an outsider like me and despite all these obstacles she made it and she got it. She got me.

> "When I applied to my PhD, I had also auditioned for this touring group that went around the world, singing and dancing about how great humans were. This was perfect for me! to travel around the world singing and dancing about love and acceptance and coming together.
>
> They offered me a position. I called my mother to tell her I was going to defer my PhD for a year to tour. She said "Dr.J, there are so few black women with PhDs, you are going to be a role model. Not by touring, but as a woman with a PhD and you need to do it." and so I did. And I am not going to lie; it was a lot like a burden. To be a role model...but when I started working, l was like: you are absolutely totally right, mom. *My presence is mentoring*."

Zalaquett and Lopez (2007) talk about the importance of the mentoring process for Latino students to navigate the educational system where it allows them to learn how to cope with the everyday pressures that arise. This process was crucial for me in building confidence and learning how to silence the inner voice that told me I was a fraud. Back in 2010, while I was still at North Shore Community College, Dr. J introduced me to Dr. T, or as Dr. J calls her: the smartest person I know. Notorious for being astute and a hard grader, taking her classes and developing a close mentoring relationship with Dr. T was my preparation for the next step in my academic journey. Unlike Dr. J, we did not have much in common, but Dr. T still got students like me. She is incredibly knowledgeable, perceptive, and sensitive to each of her students' needs and how to empower them. Through her mentorship and guidance, and Dr. J's constant compliments, I was able to develop enough confidence to believe in myself enough to finish my Associate degree at North Shore, transfer to a four-year university, apply to the Oxford University visiting scholar program and eventually make it across the pond.

> "Part of being a mentor is countering that narrative, being a person of color and a woman is to always counter that narrative. If you are mentoring first Gen women of color, assume that they have the narrative of they don't belong and counter it. Always." (Dr. J)

And yes, us sharing so many intersecting identities, Dr. J perhaps "got me" at a different level that somebody else might not, but I would argue that it does not necessarily mean that every mentor needs to match the background of their student, but they need to get it. Jennifer's story models the second construct dealing with degree and career support and another mentor would do the same a few years later. The goal setting and career paths construct represents the notion that mentoring includes an assessment of the students' strengths and weaknesses and developing their personal and professional.

Anyone can be a mentor if they understand the need for empowering the student, understanding what they need and where they are coming from. When I was looking at different colleges to transfer to for completing my bachelor's degree, I made a list of esteemed colleges in the Boston area and some of those names just seemed like the right thing to do, for no reason other than this is where all these smart people go, and I need to show that I am a smart person. I was still so caught up in my own self-doubt and need to belong, my need to overcome, and that feeling of being a fraud. I will never forget a conversation I had with Dr. T where she said:

> "I want you to understand that I don't doubt for a minute you can get into these places, but you are not going to do well there, this school is not right for you. It is not that you will not do well academically, you're going to be fine academically but personally, I don't know that you are going to be happy there".

I really took that to heart and began to look at places considering all of what made me, me. I looked at places where I thought I would feel that sense of belonging and where I could counter that narrative. and I thank her every day for telling me that, because she was right. I chose the University of Massachusetts, an institution that is known for being minority serving, and I was extremely successful there. I flourished and I am certain that the main reason for my success was due to my mentor Dr. F, whom I met on my second week at the University, and the sense of belonging in being in a place where I could see myself in not only my peers but faculty and staff. I am certain that had I been anywhere else, I would have not been able to overcome my imposter feelings and applied to the Oxford University visiting scholar program.

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5.3 Finding new supports

I graduated from North Shore Community College in the summer of 2011. By that point I felt confident, like a true part of the campus community and comfortable in my own skin. As a last piece of advice, Dr. T told me to "*remember that UMass is not North Shore. It is a much bigger pond. The resources are there but they will not be in your face like here. You will have to advocate for yourself and find your supports*," and that is exactly what I did. The years spent with Dr. J and Dr. J empowered me to not be ashamed to maximize the resources available to me. As soon as I started at UMass that fall, I sought opportunities at the campus where I could "find my people" and create a sense of belonging at this new place like I had done at North Shore. I found a mentoring program through my department where they would pair up undergraduate students with graduate student mentors. I filled out the application and a few weeks later I received an email from Dr. F, a PhD candidate in Clinical Psychology, to schedule our first meeting.

On paper, Dr. F and I had nothing in common. She was an international student coming from a very privileged background, but she was an extremely empathetic and insightful person. While we did not share many commonalities, I could still see a mentor figure in her and she still had sensibility to understand what students like me were going through. As the years passed, our mentor/mentee relationship conquered all of the four constructs. Dr. F. served as an invaluable emotional support, with our weekly meetings turning into therapy sessions when my IP feelings were especially strong. As a graduate student, Dr.F was crucial in assisting with goal setting and providing academic support. She challenged me to take advanced glasses, participate in research projects and make an academic plan beyond just my undergraduate degree.

In 2013 I was accepted to be a visiting scholar at Oxford University, and I broke down crying in Dr. F's office. I told myself that the reason I was crying was because I could not afford to go, the program was too expensive. The real reason was that once again, I was overcome by IP. I could never make it there, if there was one place in the world I could be discovered as a fraud, it would be at Oxford. Like Dr. J's mother, Dr. F sat me down and explained what this experience would mean for me, how many doors it would open. Perhaps her clinical training allowed her to see right through me, to get what I was going through. Like I needed my mother to come with me to register for classes so that I would not give up and run away, Dr. F was there to make sure I did not run away from this incredible opportunity that would open so many doors for me.

And this is a worldview that you are not going to get oftentimes in a formally structured mentorship program. When Dr. T advised me to seek my supports once I arrived at UMass, she knew that I would need the supports in place to continue to succeed as I had done at North Shore. She understood who I was as an individual and what my own struggles with IP were. Because we found each other, or rather, I found her and saw something in her and she understood what someone like me was struggling with and how to work through it, that mentoring relationship was more powerful and effective than any one size fits all model. Due to the lack in research, formal mentoring programs follow a one size fits all model of topics to be covered across a number of meetings between mentor and mentee without taking into consideration the nuances of these relationships and the individual's needs such as Dr. T felt in that conversation and had the foresight to warn me. In her 2007 conceptualization of the college mentoring scale, Nora Crisp suggests that mentoring scales and/or interventions that are not specifically designed for different groups of students might be invalid, concluding that a "one size fits all" approach to mentoring may not be effective for a diverse group of students. A diverse group of students like me and the many students Dr. T and Dr. J and come across daily.

5.4 One size does not fit all

This lack of specificity in mentoring program design is where underrepresented students miss out. Where programs use a standard that was not created for them, ignoring the entire ecosystem around this person, without considering what might be best for them and their academic achievement. As a poor, Latina immigrant who was working 45+ hours a week while I pursued my undergraduate degree, I had the opportunity to join a generic mentoring program run by the student activities office at UMass. It was a program designed with only one subset of students in mind, all meetings were scheduled in days and times that only students without jobs or other responsibilities could attend. I tried joining, attended two meetings, and was left with an extreme sense of failure when I reached the realization that I could not keep up with those scheduled meetings and formulaic engagements.

When programming is created in a one size fits all model that does not consider the diverse backgrounds and needs of students like me, who have so many intersecting identities; they are immigrants, they are parents, they are working full time and they are doing all these other things that a traditional mentoring program is not enough. Instead of helping, it becomes a burden. It is one more worry, one more thing to fit in their schedule and when eventually they cannot fulfil

this commitment, it becomes one more reason for them to feel inadequate, left out and a failure. This could lead to the opposite outcomes of what the program was intended. In order to remediate this, we must understand what kinds of interactions will empower the student, something Dr. J does quite well:

> "As an educator, my role isn't to teach you about the difference between operating classical conditioning, no. No. No. that's not my job. My job is to empower you, so that YOU can learn the difference yourself. To empower you so that you find some confidence in your ability to learn how to learn because you can take that and do whatever you want with it."

The confidence that Dr. J talks about, is the most important piece when it comes to the impact of mentoring for underrepresented students. Looking at the multitude of identities I carried, and constantly dealing impostor syndrome, with this feeling of "I'm not good enough" and "I can't do this;" building confidence is crucial for academic success. Building confidence goes beyond just the moral support that comes from the praise of telling someone they are doing a good job. Confidence building happens at every stage of the four mentoring constructs. In addition, the reflexivity and challenge that comes with constructs two and three, Goal Setting and Academic knowledge, also assist in confidence building. As soon as you find someone that challenges you to take that advanced class or commit to that semester at Oxford, when they say: "you can do it, you're smart" then you are able to silence that voice telling you that you are destined to fail. You see them as a mentor, as a figure to aspire to and perhaps see yourself in that person, then your reaction is to say: "OK ! I believe you, you're in charge, you wouldn't be telling me this if I didn't know better." and this is the point where you feel a sense of belonging, of identification. You start to believe that you can indeed succeed, that you are able to suppress those feelings even if momentarily, because you genuinely believe that you can do it. This sensation is hugely important in carrying over to the finish line. Individuals like me, who suffer from IP, even if they are performing at the highest level, do not believe it, they will find every excuse to justify their success and self-sabotage. My interview with Dr. J highlights the importance of mentors understanding this:

> "When I see somebody like you, somebody who is really nailing it, the expectation is Franci DaLuz level of work, right? that's the expectation, so I don't praise you because you're doing what is expected. Because people like you don't know that you are doing fantastic work."

For me, I still need these reminders that I am worthy, even now. Years later and I still feel inferior and out of place, those feelings are still there, I've gotten to a point where I can acknowledge that the feeling isn't real, but it took a very long time to get to that place and it would not have been possible without the mentorship of women like Dr. J, Dr. T and Dr. F and others whom I seek for advice to this day.

> "I had this other student that went to Smith College, and the perspective that she brought to class that even her professors didn't get. Her professors didn't know what to do with her challenges and her worldview being, you know, a single mother immigrant from Africa."

For a student who is already struggling with feeling like they are a fraud, to have their professors, advisors, or anyone they contact with that could serve as a potential mentor unable to understand where they are coming from it just further exacerbates that alienating feeling of being an imposter. The sense of belonging of having a mentor figure or someone that marginalized students can relate to is crucial in their success. As Dr. J points out, it's your job as an educator. It should be part of your training to understand where your student is coming from. *And if you can't do that, then what is the point?*

6. Discussion and conclusion

Brown and Ramsey (2018) present a clear link between imposter syndrome and lower rates of academic achievement between first-generation students and other marginalized groups in higher education. The fear of failure is just one of the many negative effects of imposter syndrome. The anxiety that comes out of this fear of fear failing or living up to the negative stereotype for the students is a detriment to their success and academic achievement. Ramsey and Brown (2018) note that "out of this fear, "imposters" tend to either overwork, spending more time than necessary on assignments, or underperform out of a sense of the inevitability of failure". I find it extremely ironic to read these words as I put together this research. As I began to write this autoethnography, I thought of my experience as an example of someone that lucked out and found the formula to overcome the impact of imposter syndrome. Needless to say, this is not exactly the case. I find myself at 2 AM days before my deadline and still I must fight to not give into the fear of failure by self-sabotaging. I find myself acting out Ramsey and Browns words, where I spend countless hours over analyzing every thought about this study, to the point where I have been crippled for an entire day before I could finally,

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silence that inner voice, push through and sit down at 2:00am to write about all of it.

While I thought my research would take form by analyzing my experience, what I did not realize is that the process of carrying out this research would be part of it as well. But this is the role of an autoehnographer, to reflect on hindsight, call on memory and dive deep in order to talk to others about occurrences they might otherwise not be privy to. One cannot properly reflect on lived experiences without bringing feelings to the surface. Especially given that the subject matter, IP, deals with feelings and thoughts that are ongoing. I find myself taken over by the anxiety and other feelings I have learned to recognize so well. The self-sabotaging, overworking, and the underperformance that comes with the sense of inevitable doom. This only serves to remind me that while I may have been able to learn how to silence this inner voice, that there is no simple formula to cure "imposter syndrome" it is something we need to learn to recognize and train other higher education professionals to recognize as well. And if we, as educators and higher education professionals want to be able to assist our students in overcoming imposter syndrome so that they can persist and perform at their highest level academically, it is imperative that we understand how to navigate this with our students. That like Dr. J, we understand that no matter how silly it may seem to do so, that our students need to hear that they did a great job speaking up in class or finishing that assignment and that for many of them who are working through silencing that inner voice, it may take three or four times before they believe us when we compliment them.

I invite readers to reflect on the central themes that evolved from this study: imposter syndrome, sense of belonging, mentorship, and academic achievement. While I do not recommend that HE institutions only employ clinical psychologists as mentors, something is to be said about the therapeutic approach of some of the mentors discussed in this study. Having an integrated approach to student interactions, seeing the student as "client," especially in dealing with marginalized student groups is essential in understanding their needs and motivation. Administrators also need to reconsider their training and professional development practices if they genuinely want to bridge the gap of academic achievement for underrepresented students. The entire campus community is full of potential mentors, staff and faculty that fit within these pillars of what constitutes a mentor, that understand exactly what students might be going through and what they need is extremely impactful and important. Administrators should look at all faculty and staff within an institution as potential mentors and should consider embedding Crips and Cruz' constructs of mentorship in training and professional development for anyone that is in contact with students and therefore increase marginalized students' sense of belonging and lessening imposter feelings.

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