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The Critical Pedagogy of Mentoring

Undergraduate Researchers as Mentors in

Youth Participatory Action Research

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Undergraduate research has steadily gained traction in institutions of higher education as a “high-impact educational practice” capable of transforming student learning (Jenkins and Healey 2011; Kuh 2008). By engaging in authentic research, students not only apprentice in real-world knowledge creation; they develop essential skills for an increasingly complex world beyond the ivory tower. They ask significant questions, apply the tools of their disciplines, and experience first-hand the complexity, uncertainty, and excitement of discovering possible answers. Faculty mentors guide this experience, serving as resources and role models as students strive to perform as scientists, anthropologists, historians, literary critics, or other professionals. Undergraduate researchers learn their discipline through embodiment and enactment, moving beyond merely consuming knowledge and toward higher taxonomic modes of thinking—analysis, synthesis, application, evaluation, creation.

In participatory research projects, the position of undergraduate researchers may be further complexified by the recursive nature of researcher/participant roles and the deliberate thrust toward social justice, personal transformation, and advocacy. This article uses critical and reflexive frameworks from anthropology and related disciplines to explore the experience of undergraduate researchers participating in a

youth participatory action research (YPAR) project that brought together undergraduate students, faculty, and staff with high school students to study educational inequities in the local community. In this project, undergraduate researchers acted as both mentees of faculty/staff and important mentors of the younger researcher/participants, a positioning that supported the more traditional outcomes of mentoring relationships in undergraduate research as well as the less common but equally essential processes of critical self-reflection and responsible action. We see this hybrid relationship as one that may be unique to YPAR projects. It was not one that we intentionally developed in the planning stages of our project; however, we watched it flourish as we worked together. We argue here that YPAR projects can benefit from incorporating undergraduate researchers and more intentionally developing them as *mentors* and not merely mentees learning the ropes of research. In this way, undergraduate researchers not only gain the academic benefits of such a project but also deepen and extend the goals of YPAR itself—supporting critical reflexivity and the complex, authentic relationships central to transformative social justice work.

What Is Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR)?

YPAR is research that “provides young people with opportunities to study social problems affecting their lives and then determine actions to rectify these problems” (Cammarota and Fine 2008: 2). Because YPAR’s goals include youth development and education, the paradigm—or as Nygreen (2009–10) calls it, the “tactic”—focuses specifically on critical pedagogies rooted in Paulo Freire’s work on *praxis*:—critical reflection and action (Cammarota and Fine 2008; Freire [1970] 2002). Although YPAR projects range widely in design and implementation, they generally embody a common set of values and principles that we characterize as (1) a *collective and collaborative* team working on a shared problem; (2) a *multivocal* expression of experience, analysis, and interpretation; (3) a *critical* perspective that recognizes structural inequalities; (4) an *emancipatory* orientation focused on future better worlds; and (5) an *active* agenda that includes both personal transformation and social change.

The research on YPAR and examples of its effective use demonstrate the powerful potential of such a paradigm. Young people have created a

Youth Bill of Rights (Ginwright 2008), written books about educational inequity (Torre and Fine et al. 2008), developed a youth-to-youth guide to the GED (Tuck et al. 2008), participated in community talking tours (Tuck et al. 2008), given presentations to school boards about school closures (Kirshner 2010), and co-published academic articles about immigrant student experience (Nygreen 2009–10), among other projects. In other words, they have been successful at deconstructing taken-for-granted inequality, recognizing themselves as potential change agents, acting toward real-world change, and gaining the power that academic skills and education bring.

But this work is not easy. Moving from the beginning stages of a project to transformational resistance, while certainly possible, is far from automatic. As Nygreen (2009–10) has pointed out, YPAR projects do not inherently subvert traditional hierarchies of power. Those involved hope that producing changes in the context of a YPAR project leads to an acknowledgment and building of capabilities in students to be change-makers in the future (Cammarota and Fine 2008). But the designers of such projects must be intentional about doing so and cautious about reproducing existing power relations even as they critique these (Nygreen 2009–10). We suggest that undergraduate researchers' participation in YPAR is one way of intentionally challenging such power relations.

Undergraduate Researchers in YPAR

Undergraduate researchers undertaking YPAR projects negotiate an especially complex researcher identity. Kirshner (2010) argues that YPAR tends to “challenge, transgress, or blur familiar boundaries in educational research—between participant and researcher, youth and adult, novice and expert, community and academy, action and research, and local versus general.” What he calls “productive tensions” arise from this blurring of boundaries. Knowledge creation becomes a shared and multivoiced effort that often can be most generative at the intersections of identities, contexts, and positions within the project—and in those moments when members shift from role to role, from researcher to participant, from outsider to insider, from mentee to mentor, and back again.

In participatory research all of us can and often must serve as both mentors and mentees, moving fluidly between interconnected roles in

our relationships with other participants. The YPAR project described here involved faculty/staff researchers, undergraduate researchers, and high school-aged researcher/participants in examining a social problem in our community—the barriers to college access for limited-income, first generation, and minority youth. This multifaceted research team necessarily blurred boundaries between adults, undergraduates, and high school students as well as between research, reflection, and advocacy.¹ For our undergraduate researchers, this shifting positionality (from mentee to mentor, outsider to insider, participant to researcher to ally) proved foundational for both their and the high school students' development as YPAR researchers—knowledge seekers who are simultaneously critically reflective and prepared to advocate for a more socially just world. In understanding, navigating, and interpreting this praxis, we draw on the work of black feminist anthropologists like Faye V. Harrison (1997), who has argued for “decolonizing anthropology” such that we may “encourage more anthropologists to accept the challenge of working to free the study of human kind from the prevailing forces of global inequality and dehumanization and to locate it firmly in the complex struggle for genuine transformation” (Harrison 1997: 10).

The Research Context: Unequal Access to College and the Elon Academy

Since the 1960s educational research has recognized the problem of unequal access to quality education at all educational levels. Research points to de facto segregation—inequitable school funding; poor representation or misrepresentation of student cultures, languages, and identities in curriculum and the discourses of school policy; lack of bilingual education; and disproportional tracking into vocational and remedial courses—among many other issues that reflect the highly racialized, classed, and gendered perceptions of an educational system shaped almost exclusively by white middle-class epistemologies (Delgado Bernal 2002; Delpit 2006; Kozol 2005; Ladson-Billings 1994; Valenzuela 1999).

The pipeline to higher education is particularly flawed for students from low-income, minority, or first generation families (Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance 2010; Aud et al. 2010; Gándara 2002; Gonzales 2009; Perna 2000). Although the rates of college admission and completion have improved in the last five years, statistics

regarding postsecondary education for historically underrepresented groups remain alarmingly low compared to their counterparts from white, middle-class, or college-experienced families. Approximately 13% of Latinos and 17% of African Americans aged 25 or older have completed at least a four-year degree, but nearly 30% of whites have done so (Ogunwole et al. 2012). Among American Indian and Alaskan Native students who began postsecondary education in 2003–4, 14% had achieved a bachelor's degree by 2009 (Ross et al. 2012). Examining bachelor's degree attainment by socioeconomic status reveals additional disparities: 22% of low-income high school graduates attain bachelor's degrees, but 55% of their middle-income peers do (Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance 2010). For students who are marginalized across a number of indicators, outcomes are particularly serious. For example, only 4% of low-income black males earn a bachelor's degree by their mid-20s (Carey 2008).

In order to address some of these educational disparities, federal and state governments, higher education institutions, and community groups have implemented programs to support college access for historically underserved students. “College access,” as we use it in this article, concerns opportunities available and the barriers students face as they move out of high school and into their futures. Such barriers often begin with discrimination in high school that limits opportunities to build college-ready academic skills, but they also include unclear knowledge of college admissions pathways; entrenched if unsupported beliefs that college is out of one's grasp cognitively, socially, and academically; and the simple inability to pay college costs—from application fees and tuition to the hidden costs of materials and living on campus (Conley 2007; Swail et al. 2012; Tierney and Hagedorn 2002). College access programs seek to redress many of these challenges by developing the skills and capacities of students who are traditionally underrepresented on college campuses and opening the pipeline to college by providing information and advising. Access programs take many forms, from large-scale federal or local initiatives to small one-shot programs. Some of the best known include the federal TRIO programs, Upward Bound, GEAR UP, and the Posse Foundation, but increasing numbers of higher education institutions are hosting unique campus-based programs as well, such as the Princeton University Preparatory Program (PUPP) and Furman University's Bridges to a Brighter Future.

The Elon Academy is a university-based college access and success program designed for academically promising, limited-income high school students with little or no family history of college. Housed at Elon University in central North Carolina and working in partnership with the surrounding public schools, the Academy had served more than 130 students and more than 300 family members by the summer of 2013. Students (called “scholars” in the program parlance) are recruited during their freshman year from seven local high schools and then supported by the program for the next seven years—through both high school and college at an institution that fits their individual needs and interests. Several scholars now attend Elon itself, but the program’s goal is not to grow Elon’s student body. Instead, the Academy directly seeks to challenge the negative effects of educational inequities in its local community by opening the pipeline to college for families who might otherwise have continued to miss opportunities for higher education. It is a supplemental program that scholars and their families choose in addition to their regular high school attendance, and it works with scholars throughout the school year by providing access to academic tutoring, mentoring, and regular college planning and enrichment programming. In the summers it works most intensively with scholars during a four-week residential experience on Elon’s campus, with scholars living in dorms like college students and taking specially designed academic and college planning classes, among other things. (For a more detailed description of the program, see http://www.elon.edu/e-web/academics/elon_academy/.) The project described here was situated under the umbrella of Elon Academy’s enrichment programming and spanned both the school year and summer residential programs as well as expanding beyond the normal time and space boundaries of both.

THE RESEARCH PROJECT

The YPAR project developed in collaboration between a lead research associate, program staff/university faculty, undergraduate researchers, and a team of fifteen high school scholar-researchers in their second or third year of the Elon Academy program. Initially the YPAR project was developed in order to enhance the program’s understanding of the community it served, to suggest program refinements, and to support the young people in the program in further developing college-ready aca-

demic skills and complex critical thinking (Conley 2007). The adult researchers knew from the beginning that they wanted not only to conduct a research project but at the same time to teach the students (undergraduate and high school) about doing research. Additionally, they hoped the project would allow scholars to recognize, redefine, and challenge the ways in which structural inequalities influenced their lives.

Once the project team came together, as described in the next section, they began to develop a shared background knowledge and vocabulary by examining some of the issues around college access in the United States. During the fall of 2010 scholar-researchers read and discussed published research about educational inequalities along the lines of gender, race, and socioeconomic status as a basis for developing their own set of research questions. These became:

1. How does a student's social location(s) influence college access?
 - a. What are the most important factors in shaping students' beliefs about college access?
 - b. What are the most important factors in guiding students' actions regarding college access?
 - c. What are the most important factors that influence students' knowledge about college?
2. Do the challenges and obstacles students face in working towards access to college create opportunities for entering and being successful in college?

Two semesters of workshops (late fall 2011 and early spring 2012) also taught the basics of qualitative research methods, supported scholar-researchers in their ongoing data collection, and trained them in simple data analysis techniques. They studied research ethics, participated in the IRB process, and practiced semi-structured interviewing, life history interviewing, participant observation, survey construction, photovoice, and writing reflective field notes. They transcribed their own interviews and analyzed data using Atlas.ti ethnographic software. Then, during summer 2011, they concentrated on writing up the results of their work. They began with an intensive "research institute" in which they completed their literature review and triangulated their own findings in this broader intellectual conversation. They considered issues of audience, voice, and structure for their findings and outlined the major topics of their final report. During the Elon Acad-

emy's summer residential program, scholars traded one of their classes for a special writing workshop in order to produce their report as a manuscript to be shared with stakeholders and interested others. (The report, titled *Speaking Out: Underrepresented Students Challenging the Inequities of College Access*, is available on Amazon.com.)

From the beginning, faculty/staff researchers knew that a study such as this would require a tremendous amount of time and coordination. In light of that, they solicited the help of three undergraduate students at various points in the project, beginning with one primary research assistant (Molly O'Brien) and later, during the intensive writing stage, two others (Andrew Stevenson and Muhammad Musah) to increase access to intensive mentoring for the high school scholar-researchers. The undergraduates quickly became more important than simply sharing the workload, acting as highly effective researcher role models and developing close mentoring relationships with their high school partners. This applied particularly when the college students came from similar backgrounds to those of the scholars. It was easier for high school students to see themselves as capable of research—and more important, of college—when they saw people not much older than or different from themselves effectively navigating both.

Faculty/staff researchers, undergraduate researchers, and high school scholar-researchers worked together to discover, understand, and share knowledge that potentially advocated for real-world change in the college access program and well beyond. Each group served to mentor and advise the others—faculty mentoring undergraduate researchers and scholar-researchers, undergraduate researchers mentoring high school students and faculty/staff, and high school students supporting and encouraging one another as well as mentoring both undergraduates and adult researchers to be better allies in our collective work to address educational inequities. These concentric circles of researchers each brought new perspectives to the inquiry, each living and mentoring one step closer to the issues on the table.

THE RESEARCH TEAM

The high school students who took part in this research project were those that are typically underrepresented on the campuses of colleges and universities. Underrepresented students may, for one reason or another, be left out of the college-going culture and discussion in their

high schools. They often lack opportunities to engage in the most high-impact educational practices and may be unable to envision themselves in these roles. In preliminary interviews with the scholar-researchers, many indicated that their image of a “researcher” was “a white man in a white lab coat,” someone who looked nothing like them or their families, far removed from their worlds. They did not see themselves as potential researchers of any kind, and yet these same students overwhelmingly said “yes” when asked if they would like to participate in a research project, to learn to become researchers, and to devote substantial time and energy to better understanding the problems of college access in their community.

More generally, they were a highly diverse group of high school students whose individual and collective experiences both exemplified and challenged the disturbing statistics on underrepresented students aspiring to college educations. They were aged sixteen to eighteen, all rising juniors and seniors. Some would graduate from high school during the project and prepare for their transition to college. They were African American, Latino and Latina, Pacific Islander, and white. All were from limited-income families. Most would be the first in their families to attend a four-year college. All of them aspired to higher education in hopes of securing better lives for themselves and their families, and all had chosen to participate in the Elon Academy as one way to improve their chances.

The undergraduate researchers who participated in this project likewise brought a variety of strengths, talents, and backgrounds to the project. They also most closely and frequently crossed adult and youth populations, so their experience proved to be the most fluid and changeable. Sometimes they were mentored by the adults as novice anthropological researchers, new educational critics, and apprentice professional writers, editors, and manuscript designers. Sometimes they mentored the high-school scholars as experts in these same roles, and also represented older, more experienced first generation college students. Sometimes they were neither mentee nor mentor, fully engaging as equal colleagues with the rest of the team, experiencing the surprises and dissonances openly and trying to understand a YPAR researcher’s responsibility to advocate for critical social change.

Molly, the primary research assistant, was a junior anthropology and creative writing double major with a double minor in religious studies and

women's and gender studies, and she began working as an undergraduate research assistant in January 2011. Her role in the study was most intensive, serving as project co-designer and co-teacher in many of the preparation/training workshops for the scholar-researchers, as an interviewer in data collection for the research project, and as project co-designer. A middle-income, white, first generation college student herself, Molly served as an important role model for the scholars who sometimes felt discouraged about their chances for a college future. In particular, she was able to understand the gendered experiences of the high school women as they struggled to overcome assumptions that they would likely end their educational careers to get married and start families.

Additionally, Molly's experience as a consultant in the Elon University Writing Center afforded her the ability to work with the scholar-researchers not only on ways to edit their writing but also on methods for improving their writing skills overall. Although she is the first in her family to attend college, Molly always knew that higher education was something she wanted to pursue, which allowed her to share her experiences with the scholar-researchers, many of whom were beginning their college application process.

Andrew joined the project in June 2011 as an AmeriCorps volunteer, working as a summer associate in their Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA) program. A junior philosophy major with a double minor in political science and international studies, he chose to assist the scholar-researchers through the conclusion of the research process and the difficult next step of writing up the team's analysis. Having worked as a teaching assistant for one of his professors the prior academic year, Andrew brought to the project the skills developed there and greatly expanded the team's ability to provide much needed one-on-one assistance with developing analysis, critical reading, and formal writing skills.

Andrew's background was similar to that of many of the scholars in the Academy program, as a limited-income, first generation, African American college student. While his parents did not attend college, Andrew remembered that they always expressed to him the importance of doing so. Education was the primary focus of growing up for Andrew, and his family moved from Philadelphia to a community in North Carolina seeking better educational opportunities. In part because he shared many similar experiences, Andrew became a natural role model

for the scholar-researchers and an example of how students from intersecting underrepresented identities can indeed attend and succeed in a college environment.

Muhammad also joined Elon Academy through AmeriCorps' VISTA program, serving primarily as a summer program live-in mentor for the seventy-five scholars who lived on campus that summer. In addition to his many other tasks, he came to the YPAR project to mentor writing revisions and added yet another positive role model to the team. Muhammad joined the project as a rising sophomore, majoring in international economics with minors in Middle Eastern studies, political science, and entrepreneurship. He provided an analytical voice for the scholar-researchers to help them convey their ideas at a higher level. Muhammad also used his experiences from a poetry group at Elon to infuse creativity into the reflective writings of some of the scholar-researchers.

Muhammad grew up in the South Bronx, where he faced many of the negative influences that the high school researchers deal with every day. He is the son of immigrant parents from Ghana who inspired him to pursue higher education. Upon entering Elon, Muhammad saw it as his duty to become a role model for scholars who come from similar backgrounds. He particularly provided guidance to the immigrant high school researchers in regard to the challenges of adapting to American culture while keeping their ethnic identities.

The project was led by Mary Alice Scott, who had worked for the Academy as summer faculty and was hired specifically as a post-doctoral research associate for this project. A medical anthropologist by training, she was interested in community-based participatory research, an interest emerging from a commitment to conducting research that has the potential to improve community health and well-being. She designed the research project methodology and led the team throughout the process. Kim Pyne joined the project in her roles as assistant director of academics for the college access program and English education faculty with a scholarly focus in critical and culturally responsive pedagogies and qualitative research. She assisted throughout the research project, working most intensively with the team during the analysis and writing stages as well as during the production of the printed manuscript.²

PROJECT OUTCOMES

Becoming a researcher of any kind is a cognitive challenge. Becoming a YPAR researcher, with its daunting reflective and emotional work, as well as its thrust toward advocacy, has the potential to do more than develop participants' academic skills. As we had hoped, the high school scholars learned about research, built critical reading and writing skills, and found their confidence in their abilities rising—important personal transformations for future college students. In addition, however, they began to challenge their own assumptions about how the world works; they started to see the ways in which they had been disadvantaged by a system that often perpetuates inequalities rather than seeing themselves and other limited-income, first generation students as innately just “disadvantaged.” During one workshop, for example, the scholar-researchers were asked about the students of color in their Advanced Placement (AP) classes. Many of the scholars, after thoughtful consideration, developed expressions of shock as they realized that even at the schools with high percentages of students of color, very few enroll in AP classes. The research team talked through why that might be, and scholars began to glimpse previously invisible structures that they navigate every day as they do what it takes to get into college. Scholar-researchers found their views of the world shifting dramatically as they went deeper into our investigation of educational inequity.

Over the research project year, scholars began to internalize the language, culture, and purpose of research as well as to think more critically about issues of social justice in their community and beyond. The research was simultaneously public and private, created in dialogue with others and in individual reflections, bringing both logical analysis and heartfelt emotion to bear as ways of knowing and shaping a new understanding of the world. Supporting this kind of complex learning and transformation required significant ongoing mentoring and an intentional awareness of academic skill and individual emotional development. Scholar-researchers had to figure out what they planned to do with data from the research but also what to do with new, inspiring, and sometimes frightening perspectives on their own personal lives.

Molly, Andrew, and Muhammad proved essential to the success of the project, serving as role models, supervisors, advanced learners, and experts—but also as friends, fellow questioners, and older representa-

tives of first generation students who could share the emotional journey. Like the scholars, they also needed to look closely at their particular position as college students and see themselves reflected against the younger students' stories and the growing research data. They wrote about their own pathways to and through their first college years, exploring barriers, challenges, opportunities, and privileges in field notes and reflections alongside the high school students. As the undergraduates built competence as YPAR researchers in their own right by co-leading stages of the project, they wrestled with their identities, their responsibilities as mentors, and the dissonance raised by their personal stories. Significantly, they did so from the other side of college matriculation, able to remind scholar-researchers that college was possible, even in moments of frustration or hopelessness and despite the evidence that people like them continued to be underrepresented both on college campuses and in research.

Undergraduate Researchers Mentoring in YPAR

By embodying the sometimes ambiguous role of mentor, the undergraduate researchers met needs and fulfilled the critical aims of YPAR in ways far better than the adults and teens could have accomplished alone. But the mentor role also impacted each of the undergraduates in ways both similar to and different from the impacts on high school researchers. Later in this article we offer the voices of Molly, Andrew, and Muhammad more directly as they explore not only the academic benefits of mentorship but also their growth in two of YPAR's most central aims: the development of critical reflexivity and the navigation of inclusive, authentic relationships in social justice research.

UNDERGRADUATE YPAR MENTORING AS HIGH-IMPACT ACADEMIC EXPERIENCE

Mentoring was built into the undergraduate research experience from the beginning of the project. The undergraduate researchers were hired not just in order to conduct research but also to be mentors and role models for the scholars. Therefore, while there are different outcomes of undergraduate research experience and mentoring experience, the two were essentially one integrated process for our undergraduate researchers. The discussion that follows reflects that complex experience.

As research mentors, the position Molly, Andrew, and Muhammad had in the project was a complex one. Neither purely “faculty” nor fully “student,” they shared characteristics of both. As young researchers in their own right, they identified with the struggles of the scholars and worked to hone their own research craft, but they also taught alongside the faculty and coached a similar kind of learning among the high school-aged team members. This hybrid role added to their personal learning about research and their capacities as researchers, students, and leaders—testing out recently acquired skills in writing and research, discovering new levels of confidence (and critique) in their own abilities, and applying new knowledge to endeavors outside this particular research project.

Molly. As an anthropology major, I had knowledge of participatory research methods on a broad scale. The knowledge I had was primarily developed through classroom theory rather than hands-on field research. Therefore working on this project was my first real experience with applied anthropological methods. As the project progressed, I began to develop knowledge of anthropological writing, which I later applied to my own individual research endeavors. While our YPAR project was going on, I was also conducting individual research on the influence of college access programs on peer group structures and social lives of limited-income high school students.³ Through conducting our project, I had already gained the skills necessary to complete this research (i.e., how/where to establish rapport with subjects, how to structure field notes, what to look for during observation, and the degree to which a researcher could be an active participant and/or a passive observer).

From a rhetorical standpoint, my background in English played a significant role when it came to mentoring the scholars through the actual writing process. I had worked for several semesters as a consultant in the Elon University Writing Center, where I was trained to analyze and provide feedback on writing in multiple disciplines. What made mentoring with the Elon Academy somewhat challenging was that I had very little experience working with high school students who were functioning at varying levels in terms of their writing skills. As the writing portion of the project began in June 2011, I found myself having to work with each scholar at an individual level. Through this process of

assisting the scholars with their writing, I think we all began to become more aware of our own writing process.

Andrew. Like each of the undergraduate researchers, I served as a mentor to younger researchers but was also being mentored by established professionals, including Dr. Scott and Dr. Pyne. I was able to work hands-on with a community-based research project while simultaneously serving as a mentor to scholars who come from backgrounds very similar to my own. While I was not initially aware of how special a situation I was in, it soon became clear to me just how unique it was to serve in both capacities: I was a mentor and a mentee, a learner and a teacher, a fighter for social justice and trainer for future ones.

On one hand I was able to learn much about anthropological research and the methods employed in such a field. From obtaining IRB approval to conducting interviews, to transcribing interviews, to analyzing statistical data, I developed a greater understanding and appreciation for what it is that anthropologists do. While developing my knowledge and perspective about research and anthropology, I was also able, as a mentor, to help develop certain critical thinking, reading, and writing skills in the scholars I worked with. My particular academic background aided this instruction for I had built a solid foundation of academic skills that had been successful for me—skills that I could pass on to others coming from backgrounds very similar to my own.

Muhammad. Fresh off my first year of college, I was in an interesting position as an undergraduate research assistant during the summer. My maturity level as a writer and academic was not at the same level as my peer research assistants. I was already a year younger than most of my class at Elon, so working with Molly and Andrew who were a class ahead of me was intimidating. They seemed to be well versed in their ability to research efficiently and get the most out of the hours we logged in the research office. I was challenged to work up to the level of these high-achieving upper classmen. This level of competition gave me motivation to strive to reach their work ethic level. As a result, the experience I gained was vital to where I am today as a student. I have been able to apply this research mentoring experience and insight with the intense group work involved in my upper level entrepreneurship and economics classes at Elon.

Before this project I had never been on a research project tackling an issue like underrepresented minority (URM) students. I have always been passionate about the subject because of its pertinence to my life, so I did not think it would be a daunting task. I have gone to school in a low-income neighborhood and experienced the unfortunate realities of deficiencies in our educational system. It did not take long for me to learn that research at that level was a difficult and complicated task filled with tedious practices. I just wanted to write and have fun reflecting on experiences as a URM, but I did not take into account the hours that go into conducting interviews, transcribing interviews, and analyzing statistics.

Being a mentor to the scholar-researchers gave me essential insight into how to conduct myself as I worked with Dr. Scott and Dr. Pyne. When the scholar-researchers would occasionally provide a lower level of work, it showed me a lot about the negative impact of that work on the project. For example, a scholar would submit work that had a lot of potential but would not follow through with the research required to have a substantive contribution. Comparing that impact to the work I did for Dr. Pyne and Dr. Scott made me realize that I had to put in hours to make sure I was pulling weight in the group.

The American Association of Colleges and Universities has identified several high-impact practices that result in highly effective long-term learning outcomes for undergraduates. These include writing-intensive courses, learning communities, first-year seminars, capstone courses, service learning, and undergraduate research, among other things (Kuh 2008). Such practices, as Molly, Andrew, and Muhammad describe, have the potential to involve undergraduates in “deep learning,” a richer and more transferrable educational experience unlike the traditional memorize-and-recite performances that have often been the backbone of education at every level (Kuh 2008: 24). Rather than understanding learning as the transmission of static information from all-knowing expert to passive, blank slate novices—what Freire (1970: 2002) critiques as the banking model of education—undergraduate research and other high-impact practices draw on a more sophisticated conceptualization of learning. Students become active participants in the learning process, co-creating knowledge, posing and solving problems, enacting critical inquiry, and developing capacities better suit-

ed to future success in a highly changeable world (National Research Council 2000; Rogoff 2003). Undergraduate research has been specifically linked to improved engagement, cognition, and retention or persistence for students at every kind of institution and across many disparate disciplines (Kuh 2008).⁴ The benefits span academic, social/personal, and even civic realms, making learning more immediately meaningful, facilitating relationships between faculty and students, providing natural conduits for increased formal and informal feedback, and creating inquiry-oriented communities.

According to several recent studies, adding a mentorship component to already rigorous undergraduate research experiences can substantially increase learning gains for students on both sides of the mentoring equation. Lopatto (2010) found that serving as a research mentor to other undergraduates enhanced students' understanding of the nature of research in general, increased their sense of responsibility and enjoyment in their individual projects, and improved interpersonal and communication skills. Mentoring other undergraduates in a research community provided leadership opportunities and specialized skill development not as widely available to undergraduate students in traditional course-based research models. Similarly, in a study on peer mentoring in course-based research, Dunbar and colleagues (2011) argued that mentoring added opportunities for leadership and other skill development as well as enhanced collaborative learning.

The act of mentoring is necessarily reciprocal, with peer mentors learning more when their mentees challenge them with new misunderstandings or innovative and unexpected ideas. Faculty mentors of undergraduate research have recognized this in their own mentoring relationships, and they understand mentoring as a complex and uniquely educational negotiation, blending expertise and interpersonal relations and teaching self-confidence, openness, and the ability to cope with unexpected developments both personal and academic (Vandermaas-Peeler et al. 2011).

UNDERGRADUATE YPAR MENTORING AS CRITICAL REFLECTION

YPAR and other similar participatory paradigms require researchers to engage in a significant amount of personal reflexivity through critical reflection or reflection that includes an awareness of "complex power relations, histories of struggle, and the consequence of oppression,"

through the research process itself (Cammarota and Fine 2008: 2). At this point reflexivity has long been integrated into much anthropological work since postmodern critiques of researcher objectivity were raised. As Fine and colleagues argue, assumed neutrality and “bracketing of the researchers’ world” leaves research participants “carrying the burden of representations” (Fine et al. 2000: 109). The balance of researcher personal experience and background with ethnographic text is a challenge, but attaining it is critical. Explicit attention to the political outlines of experience creates a kind of generative resonance (or dissonance) between the researcher’s private life experiences and the narratives emerging from the data, creating spaces for questions and uncertainties, highlighting patterns and silences. Through this critical process, as Cammarota and Fine maintain, researchers—whether experienced or inexperienced—come to recognize that injustice is *produced* rather than *natural*.

In the case of the YPAR project, the act of mentoring invited undergraduate researchers to deepen their awareness of their own social location and built on these positionalities to further the goals of research (Rosaldo 1993). In other words, undergraduate researchers drew on their own experiences to facilitate understanding and make connections between the scholars’ experiences and their own. Rather than getting caught up in a personal, egocentric analysis of experience, undergraduate researchers used their experiences in *relation* to the experiences of the high school students as a basis on which to develop theoretical and practical understandings of educational inequities.

Muhammad. Working with the Elon Academy scholars was an experience all too similar to my past. Just two summers ago, I too was a high-achieving underrepresented high school student in a college preparatory summer program. I had the same worries about the undiscovered frontiers of college and the same fears of the intimidating task of transitioning to a new environment with people completely different from myself. Working with the scholars as a mentor gave me further insight into this unique time in my life that they were experiencing as I mentored them. Watching them approach their work and reading their writing was an enlightening experience. Encouraging them to delve deeper into the analysis of their experiences was a big challenge for me as I really wanted to help them become better writers. At other times, I was left in awe of the insights they had at such a young age.

Comparing my experiences to theirs gave me an enlightening lens to understanding my past and how I have evolved into the individual I am today. Some of the scholar-researchers would contribute personal experiences, like being forced by their schools to take vocational classes as opposed to core curriculum classes that prepare them for college. They saw this practice as degrading and discouraging because it promoted the idea of being prepared for a career right after high school instead of pursuing higher education. When I took the vocational classes in my high school, I never looked at them as discouraging, but in hindsight I understand that point of view. I remember during a brainstorming session talking to one of the scholars about peers at school. The scholar was very unsympathetic to his failing peers in school because he felt that he worked harder than they did toward his goal of getting into college. I remember feeling the same sentiments then as opposed to now, when I understand that some misfortune is out of students' hands. Being aware of this reality makes me understand how urgent success is in order to be a role model to my old peers from high school. Being able to talk to the scholar-researchers and hear their insights was a boon to my further understanding of the workings of the educational system for underrepresented minorities.

Andrew. During the course of the research project, I came to understand the existence of very real barriers present toward the attainment of higher education. The mere existence of these barriers is not the most fundamental aspect to point out here, but rather the way in which they manifest themselves among different segments of the population—that is, unequally. I came to understand that my own path through the education system leading up to college as a lower-income, African American, first generation college student had been subject to these barriers I had begun to identify through mentoring students currently experiencing them. This understanding and awareness was largely facilitated by my supportive role in our YPAR research project. While I served as a mentee to Dr. Scott and Dr. Pyne during the research process, it was my role as a mentor to the scholars that genuinely caused me to put my current educational position and experiences into perspective. Learning about the structural inequalities present in the educational system and the large *gaps* in information pertaining to higher education in my own community was at times a tough reality to deal with.

Understanding that the goal of the research team project was to write and publish a book highlighting these very issues motivated me to do as much as possible with my involvement to assist the scholars both to complete their project and to help work to mitigate the presence and reality of these barriers for other current and future students.

Molly. Over the course of the project, as I formed bonds with the scholars and helped mentor them, I began to recognize my own personal duality. As a middle-class, first generation college student, I am part of an underrepresented section of the campus population. However, as a white female, I am also part of the university's demographic majority. By recognizing my similarities to and differences from both my undergraduate peers and the Elon Academy scholars, I was able to begin critically analyzing and negotiating my own social location as a college student. Even though I was in the mentor role opposite the scholars, I found I was learning more about how the intersections of an individual's identity affect the number of opportunities available to that individual in higher education (and the person's subsequent success therein) by virtue of my own personal experiences.

As the scholars made observations about their own social location and intersectionality, we began to challenge them to ask the difficult secondary and tertiary questions: Why are minority students underrepresented on college campuses? What does this mean for you? How do we address this discrepancy? As we got into the habit of asking these questions of the scholars, I began to ask myself similar questions in my own research and integrate those reflections into my writing. I began to notice the scholars recognizing their own advantages and disadvantages at play in their pursuit of college access. For example, one scholar, a white male, began to recognize that comparatively speaking, he was at a relative advantage when it came to succeeding in college as opposed to his minority or female counterparts. However, coming from a limited-income household, this scholar also began to realize that while getting into college might not present as much of a challenge, finding funds to pay for it would be significantly harder.

Reflexive researchers often engage in what Bettie (2003: 23) has called a "radical reflexivity," one that "acknowledges that there is always a place from which we speak." As the undergraduate researchers engaged

in mentoring relationships with the scholar-researchers, the place from which they spoke became clearer to them. In discovering this place, they were able to uncover new ways of understanding social position for themselves and for the high school students they were mentoring. Such reflexivity demands constant negotiation and conscious evaluation of the research produced in relationship with research participants. Denzin (2000: 902), for example, has argued that a feminist ethical model for research includes making one's moral position public, recognizing "who stands to benefit from a particular version of the truth." The mentoring relationships with high school students caused Molly, Andrew, and Muhammad to rethink their membership in their own communities (both in college and at home) and to understand the complexity of what we were discovering together.

Reflexivity has become more prevalent in discussions of objectivity and subjectivity in the research enterprise in the social sciences. On a purely technical level, therefore, the undergraduate researchers gained first-hand experience of knowledge production rooted in a social science practice that recognizes the researcher as more than an aloof, objective observer. In addition, their self-reflection led them to more complex understandings of themselves—understandings that support their future perspectives as researchers who will seek to create less distorted analyses of social life (Crenshaw 1989). Ideally, this thoughtful critique may become the basis for a collective re-visioning of the world as what Ginwright, borrowing from James Baldwin, calls "a more human dwelling place" (Ginwright 2008:14). This project's undergraduate researchers, themselves first generation students or students of color, were able to use their own voices to support the emerging critical stories that the high school scholar-researchers worked to tell. While the undergraduates and scholar-researchers may not have finished with a coherent, holistic vision for a better world, their insights into the relationships between their own lives and the lives of others may serve as the starting point for such a vision.

UNDERGRADUATE YPAR MENTORING AS DEVELOPING AN ETHIC OF CARE IN RESEARCH

Adult mentors can be essential partners in social justice projects that focus on youth issues, but sometimes youth need other support—like our undergraduate mentors. These younger mentors can do things that

“adults” cannot. The undergraduate researchers developed close bonds with many of the high school researchers, their emotional and personal support laying the groundwork for scholar success and ongoing devotion to the often difficult work. But more than simply being friends or editors, the undergraduates developed what Noddings (1984) defines as true caring relations—an inherently unequal relationship constructed for the benefit of the mentee and requiring the “caring one” to enact support even when the “cared for” party fails to achieve or respond with equal attention. The undergraduate mentoring relationship was a hybrid relationship—one that carried expertise and authority while still requiring compassion and concern for scholars’ personal struggles.

Being a mentor required different things at different times—demonstrations of respect, shared life advice, supportive or harsh critique, a nod or smile, a shoulder to cry on, or a steely response to late work or laziness. Undergraduate researchers grew not only to support the research as a cognitive act but to support the teenagers as YPAR researchers, allying themselves to the individuals as well as the larger cause, refusing to allow the scholars to sell themselves short or to fall prey to their newfound sense of structural inequalities. Positioning near-peer mentoring within the context of YPAR thus transforms the nature of the academic mentoring relationship to something both cognitive and emotional, abstract and personal.

Molly. Before this project, I had never expected that by the end of it I would have become an ally for underrepresented students seeking college access; nevertheless, that is exactly what happened. Having formed an almost sibling-like closeness with each of the scholars, I became willing to do everything I could to help them overcome the obstacles they were presented with on their path to college access and success.

It was particularly interesting and perhaps most rewarding to realize that this project gave both the scholar researchers and us as mentors an entirely unique experience that created a very strong bond, which I have maintained over the last year. Now, as I am on the brink of my college graduation in what is arguably one of the most competitive job markets in history, I often see my peers caught up in the rush of searching for jobs, internships, and graduate school acceptances. I am reminded of how easy it is to get caught up in the self-centered, anything-to-get-ahead mentality. It is at those times that I think not just of the scholar-

researchers but of the Elon Academy scholars as a whole, almost all of whom will face similar and often greater challenges than I or any of my peers could ever fathom. If I had it my way, every undergraduate student would have an opportunity like this project to show that there is more to life than building the five-star resume.

Now, as the scholar-researchers who at the time were sophomores are preparing to leave for college this year, they have come to me on multiple occasions to help them with application essays, because they like the fact that I am familiar with their writing styles and personal experiences. Most of them describe the ways in which the Elon Academy and this project in particular are responsible for a positive and fundamental change in both their personal and academic lives. Additionally, a few of the scholar-researchers and I have developed such close friendships that they feel comfortable approaching me with certain personal issues, allowing me to be an ally for them on a broad scale.

Muhammad. In addition to working with the scholar researchers in the office, I was a live-in mentor for all the scholars in Elon Academy. Living with the scholars gave me the ability to dedicate time to finding ways to connect to the scholars. I was able to find different levels on which to communicate with them. My experience with the scholars that summer expanded beyond the research office to the dormitories, classrooms, and gymnasiums where they spent the other hours of their day. Whether it was as a volleyball player, African American, or immigrant, I found ways to connect to the scholars. I was able to communicate with them through their struggles because they were comfortable with me. They were not afraid to voice their opinions to me, which gave me more valuable insight into their situations.

For example, Mary Alice is an avid volleyball player who dedicated an hour every day during the summer program to working on her swing. As a former volleyball player in high school, I offered to help her with her mechanics every day. The relationship that we developed provided a foundation of trust when we were working on her contributions to the book. I already had experience giving Mary Alice constructive criticism on her swing, so when it came to working together toward improvement of her writing, we had a rapport from the beginning.

Another advantage I had with the scholars as a result of being a live-in mentor was my experience with getting the undocumented immi-

grant scholars to open up. Jack was a recently documented immigrant scholar who lived in the dorm room right across from me during the summer program. Jack was naturally someone who kept to himself, which affected some of his insights. Living in such close proximity to him, in addition to seeing him in the research environment, allowed me to check up on his progress constantly. I would relay stories of my family's past of struggling to deal with documentation. It made him more comfortable with giving us information that was valuable to the team's progress.

I spent many days during the summer talking to some of the African American scholar-researchers about their expectations of college. One exchange that I remember was with Catherine, an African American student, about the pressure that comes with being the only black student in the classroom. We talked about how the classroom was a microcosm of the real world as a professional. I urged Catherine and many of the other African American scholars to take this reality in stride and not feel obligated to be the torchbearers of the race. I believe that this interaction helped Catherine make deeper analyses in her writing.

As someone to whom the scholars could relate, I felt it was important for me to provide as much knowledge as possible. I saw aspects of myself in practically every scholar. My summer in YPAR gave me the important perspective of how essential identity was to these students. Giving the scholar-researchers reasons to be proud of their identity was certainly one of the indirect effects of this research. We helped them dig deep into who they were in the big picture of things in America.

Andrew. As I approached my role as a summer research assistant with the book project scholars, I initially believed it would be one that simply entailed editing student work, providing feedback, and assisting with the writing process in a more general capacity. Given that I had worked in a similar fashion with my college-age peers—assisting friends and classmates with their writing through editing—I honestly believed my role would be a pretty straightforward one. I quickly saw that my role would not be limited to basic editing. I had to learn how best to work with the research team scholars in a way that would yield positive relationships between myself and them as well as in ways that would facilitate growth and development in their research and writing skills.

I found that I was tasked with guiding scholars not just to develop the

skills needed to complete the book project successfully but to develop the skills necessary for their futures in college. Primarily, I found myself adapting the way I communicated with the scholars and critiqued their work. This was certainly a tough aspect to my experience. Many of the scholars' reading and writing skills were not an accurate reflection of the grade they were in—we found it to be the case that many of our scholars were reading and writing below their grade level. Therefore, instead of being able to review a peer's writing in which the basic writing mechanics and rules were in large part present, I found myself having to address the most basic of writing mechanics as well as more sophisticated aspects of critical reading, writing, and argumentation.

It was of great importance to me to make sure the scholars were not making corrections simply because I suggested them but understood *why* that was the case. Due to this, I believed it integral to supplement written feedback with one-on-one meetings. These meetings served to affirm that the scholars were not just working to finish their respective sections of the book but also to develop and further their writing skills.

I noticed a fundamental shift over the summer in the scholars' approach to writing and what writing meant to them. As one might expect from most high school students, our scholars seemed to have an initial approach of regarding writing as burdensome. However, as I was working with scholars by covering the basic writing mechanics they were struggling with, explaining the art of communication and argumentation, and enabling them to see the use of writing as a form of systematic expression of one's ideas, for example, it became clear that the mere *idea* of writing and what writing meant was slowly changing. Writing for them, through my mentoring and the book project, was no longer solely a painful experience—it was no longer simply a form of “busy work” isolated to the province of overcrowded classrooms and underfunded schools, where the notions of using writing as a tool to speak out against oppression and inequality or as a method to enact real changes either were nonexistent or never fully took root. The approach to and understanding of writing had changed. Instead of burdening the scholars with a painful exercise, I was charged with assisting the scholars to develop the art of communication and argumentation so that the critical issues they were facing could be properly communicated to individuals in positions to make meaningful changes.

Interactions with scholars during this time speak to the extent of

this conceptual change. The common disposition (or hesitation) regarding writing was present with our students and was only overcome by encouraging the scholars to *begin* writing their respective sections. For just about all of our scholars, once writing actually started, the change also began. Through one-on-one meetings with scholars, I began to observe that by and large they had a solid grasp on *what* they experienced and the impact of that experience on them with respect to education and college access (lack of access to guidance counselors, for example). The awareness was there, but scholars needed the most help in the area of articulating and voicing their experiences and their reflections on those experiences.

My background in philosophy and logic allowed me to assist the scholars in crafting, defending, and sufficiently supporting their arguments. Seeing the progression the scholars made from understanding the gaps between what they had written and what they wanted to say, as well as closing or addressing the gaps a critic might exploit in their arguments, was very rewarding.

Undergoing experiences and constructing ideas about what we experience can prove an arduous if not debilitating barrier to development and progress unless we have the ability to express those experiences and reflections critically. In our case it was clear that the scholars fundamentally understood the complex issues they were facing. In fact, as the summer progressed, the complexity of their experiences became clearer and clearer to the scholars. What was rewarding for me was that I was not telling the scholars anything; I was not giving them reflections, nor was I imposing on their experiences of the educational system. Rather, what I *was* doing was assisting the scholars in developing the tools and the skills to present those experiences sufficiently clearly to craft an argument about the importance of social justice, change, and getting their voices heard. I found it rewarding because the experience allowed me to help develop in others what I find most interesting about writing and argumentation.

Our initial project design included undergraduate researchers as academic mentors, responsible primarily for supporting the scholar-researches in the cognitive demands of the project. Andrew's shifting vision of his task and the needs of the position he had been hired into captures this well. They approached their mentees with faith that the

younger students could thrive in an advanced, intensive research experience, could master politically and linguistically complex texts, and could produce sophisticated ideas. Such high expectations are necessary for work in a YPAR environment, where all parties are envisioned as equal participants in the research process.

However, one-on-one mentoring calls us to recognize reality as it is while maintaining a clear and hopeful vision of possibilities. The undergraduate researchers also had to confront a difficulty that is well described in educational research literature. In many schools, low-income, minority, first generation students often lack the opportunities to flex such college-ready cognitive muscles and instead exist behind the skills curve when compared with “mainstream” students who attend higher-opportunity institutions. Andrew, Muhammad, and Molly quickly discovered a mentoring dilemma—how to meet scholars where they were skill-wise (in reading, writing, and critical thinking) without lowering expectations for what they ultimately had the capacity to accomplish. The project sought to privilege the scholar-researchers’ own voices and experiences, but the final research manuscript needed to speak clearly and powerfully to an audience who might not respect or understand the communication styles students used most comfortably. As Delpit (2006) points out, such skills, especially writing facility, are gatekeepers to the culture of power, and any educative process that overlooks skill building in the service of developing a more natural student thought or communication has condemned students to a life within the status quo, rather than providing a means by which to challenge it. She writes:

Students must be *taught* the codes needed to participate in the mainstream of American life, not by being forced to attend to hollow, inane, decontextualized subskills, but rather within the context of meaningful communicative endeavors; . . . they must be allowed the resource of the teacher’s expert knowledge, while being helped to acknowledge their own “expertness” as well; and . . . even while students are assisted in learning the culture of power, they must also be helped to learn about the arbitrariness of those codes and about the power relationships they represent. (Delpit 2006: 45)

For the undergraduate researchers, this teaching necessarily became central to their relationship with the scholars. It was critical for the younger

participants to develop stronger academic writing skills, in particular, if they were to ever share their research-based insights in public circles or participate in the larger academic conversation around the topic of college access. At the same time they had to maintain the scholar-researchers' roles as experts in their lives and make explicit the reasons for instructing the scholars in the codes of higher education and the world of researchers in general. If real-world action is the desired end result of YPAR, then providing access to the culture of power is a key step.

Perhaps most important, however, this rigorous cognitive work was embedded in the relationships built through and around mentoring—emotional, interpersonal connections between the undergraduate researchers and the high school scholar-researchers. Both groups lived at the intersection of historically marginalized identities and college dreams. Both could speak as marginalized youth, as insiders, and could bring powerful lenses to our shared understanding of college barriers while suggesting new directions for addressing those barriers. At the same time, recognizing structural inequality and oppression challenges our received notions of why things are the way they are and can create a sense of cognitive dissonance that goes beyond uncomfortable to feeling downright disempowering (Nygren 2005).

The role of a mentor necessarily included the responsibility for helping students move beyond the feelings of hopelessness that such dissonance can bring and toward effective action that resists the status quo. As Muhammad and Molly's reflections show, the mentoring relationship involved addressing some difficult and personal issues about racism on campus and in the community, academic stresses, feeling left out or different from other students on campus, fearing that an individual will to succeed might not be enough, and other issues. For the high school scholars, those moments of connection with older college-going peers who have confronted and overcome many similar issues were essential to replacing tendencies toward despair and frustration with those of resistance and action. This shifts the YPAR mentoring role far beyond its initial boundaries but perhaps best captures the nature of the relationships developed over the course of the work. These caring relationships, a result of YPAR sensibilities, were central in helping high school students access the culture of power and validating scholar-researchers' experiences of oppression and marginalization as low-income, first generation students and students of color.

Conclusion

Cammarota and Fine (2008) open their seminal book on YPAR with a set of questions that YPAR researchers must continually ask about their projects, including: “Under what conditions can critical research be a tool of youth development and social justice work?” YPAR projects like ours are never just about the academics. As Molly, Andrew, and Muhammad argue, both the scholar-researchers and the undergraduate researchers experienced a profound shift in understanding academic research. The knowledge they produced was individually and collectively embedded in their daily experiences of the project and the relationships developed within that framework. Such emancipatory knowledge only comes when we move through the challenging work of recognizing and analyzing oppression as the first steps for a collective imagining of a just world. The spaces for doing that have been restricted in multiple ways, not insignificantly by research on youth and the “youth problem.” This is certainly why we need YPAR (Ginwright 2008). And we believe that including undergraduate researchers as mentors in a YPAR project can actually *create* some of the conditions necessary to bridge between critical research, youth development, and social justice work.

Over the course of this collaborative project we found that space for being more intentional about the role of undergraduate researchers moved all team members toward reflection, resistance, and—ultimately—action. Participation by undergraduate researchers guards against the reproduction of traditional power balances, deepens opportunities for serious critical reflection, and allows for more supportive and ethical relationships. The experience of undergraduate researchers as mentors in such a project has yet to be addressed in the rapidly growing literature on YPAR (but see Goto et al. 2010 for a relevant discussion of peer mentoring), and we hope this exploration will help inform those interested in sponsoring undergraduate research in participatory research paradigms. We suggest that such a model, even more intentionally designed, could do more than we were able to do and could better support the critical pedagogical potential of YPAR for youth, undergraduate researchers, and academic sponsors alike.

Mentoring relationships are necessarily active—modeling, engaging, and ultimately letting students do the hard work of YPAR research,

cognitively and emotionally. More than simply learning to be researchers, Molly, Andrew, and Muhammad had the opportunity to develop their own critical skills, to guide others in grappling with the realities of underrepresented lives, and to build more complex caring relationships rooted in a sense of shared justice. This experience reminds us all that mentoring can directly contribute to the work of social equity. For undergraduate researchers, it allows them to envision research as an ideological stance toward the world, connecting intellectual endeavor with the potential to make a difference for themselves, for local communities, and for the wider world.

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Notes

1. We use the term “adult” here in a somewhat problematic effort to distinguish between the age and experience of the faculty/staff researchers and the undergraduate researchers, but we recognize that college students are also adults both legally and intellectually and bring equally rich and multifaceted experiences to the team. This is a semantic boundary that such research naturally transgresses and calls into question.

2. Deborah Long, Darris Means, and Katie Wicke-LaPlante, all Elon Academy staff members, also contributed significantly in many aspects of this research project. They assisted in conceptualizing the project, collecting data, and supporting the undergraduate and high school scholar-researchers throughout the project.

3. Molly. Through my thesis research, I found that, unlike those peer groups formed in schools and the community, which are generally dictated by race and gender, the peer groups within college access programs are generally dictated—but not constrained—by age and school grade, leading to the conclusion that college access programs like Elon Academy are effectively tearing down the innate segregation that seems to have remained so prevalent in the US public school system.

4. While this kind of deep learning can be transformative for students at any social location, recent research shows it to be especially impactful for historically underserved students (Pascarella and Terenzini 2005). However, these students are also the least likely to be involved in any of the high-impact educational practices at the college level (Kuh 2008) and most likely to be distanced from the very academic community that inspires retention and long-term success. Because such high-impact practices support not only academic skill but also interconnectedness among the academic community and an increased sense of belonging and potential for success, they promise to be uniquely powerful for students of color and from first generation and limited-income backgrounds. According to Penrose (2002), first generation student persistence in college hinges more on students’ self-assessments of academic skill in a college environment than on their actual preparation or performance. Learning outcomes that support a college-going identity, like these high-impact practices, are therefore critical for underrepresented students.

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