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### Relationships Make Great Colleges?

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# Relationships Make Great Colleges?

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Paul A. Djupe

March 12, 2018

By Paul A. Djupe

If you have been in the same room with Denison's President, [Adam Weinberg](#), you have no doubt heard about the centrality of relationships in making college(s) great. His HuffPo piece [Thriving in College](#) reads as if it were Denison's Constitution, expressing what is and what should be – it's worth a read. He argues that a mentoring relationship with a faculty member is the crux; he hopes you can connect with a relevant staff member, in part because it signals involvement beyond the classroom; and we should not at all dismiss formative relationships with other students, of course, which he situates in the context of working on common problems in dorms and elsewhere.

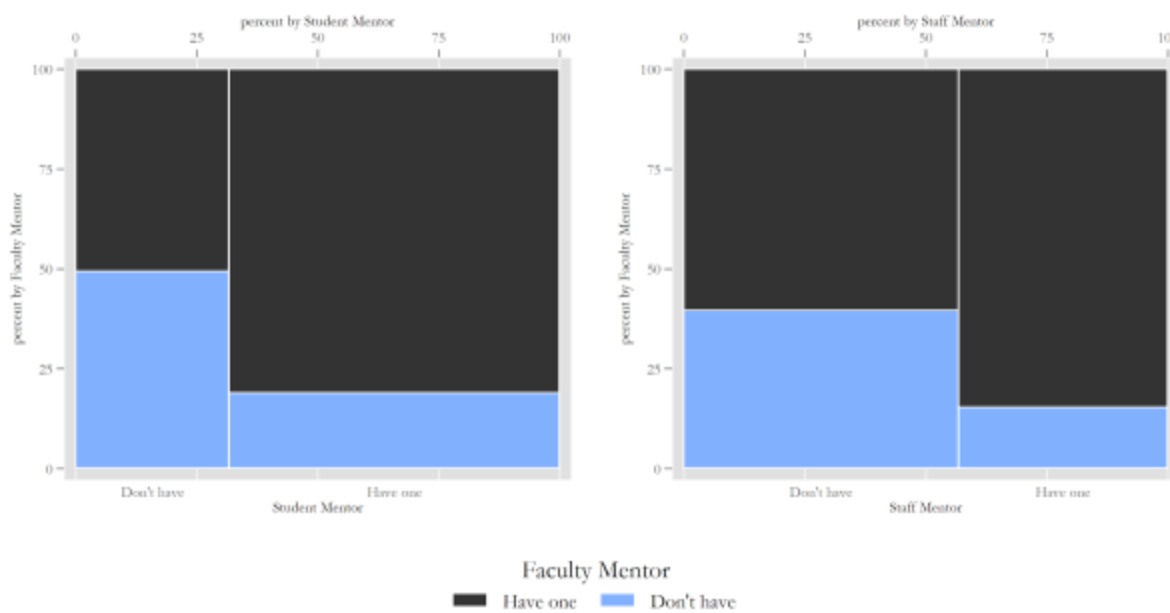
In this formulation, mentoring relationships act “as catalysts for students, encouraging them to ask good questions, develop goals, and learn to achieve....produc[ing] intellectual and ethical growth.” To me, the word “mentoring” is redundant, these strike me as “relationships.” Good friends help me figure out what I want and what I should be thinking about, they help me work through problems about how to treat others, and they give me new things to think about and new ways to think about them. I think of relationships as the mutual exchange of questions and advice. Or, put differently, I think having mentoring relationships is the natural consequence of having healthy relationship habits. If you have mutually supportive, stimulating friendships, you have good mentoring relationships as well.

## Mentor Up

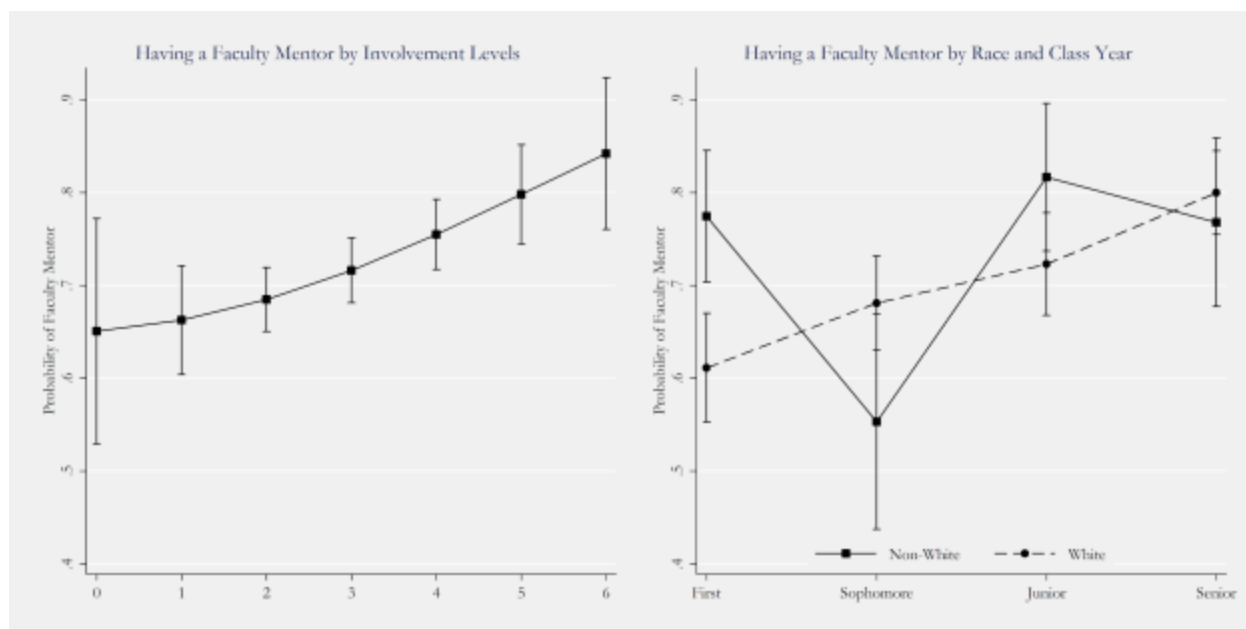
Do Denison students have mentors? You betcha. We asked 523 students in late February (22.3% response rate) a number of questions, including whether a professor, staff person, or student “was a mentor to me.” We asked about mentoring in a variety of other ways too and, while there is some slight variation in responses, they are all capturing effectively the same thing.[1] Overall, 72 percent claimed a professor at Denison was a mentor, 43 percent reported a staff mentor, and 69 percent noted a student mentor. 78 percent had either a staff or faculty mentor.

If mentoring is a function of healthy relationship habits, then these mentoring relationships should overlap and reinforce each other. Shown below, if you name a student mentor, you are much more likely to name a faculty mentor (81% do) compared to only 51% of those who do not have a fellow student mentor. The same basic lesson applies to staff mentors as well – about 85% of those with a staff mentor name a faculty mentor compared to 60% of those who do not name a staff mentor. Seeking advice in one corner of Denison means you are likely to look everywhere.

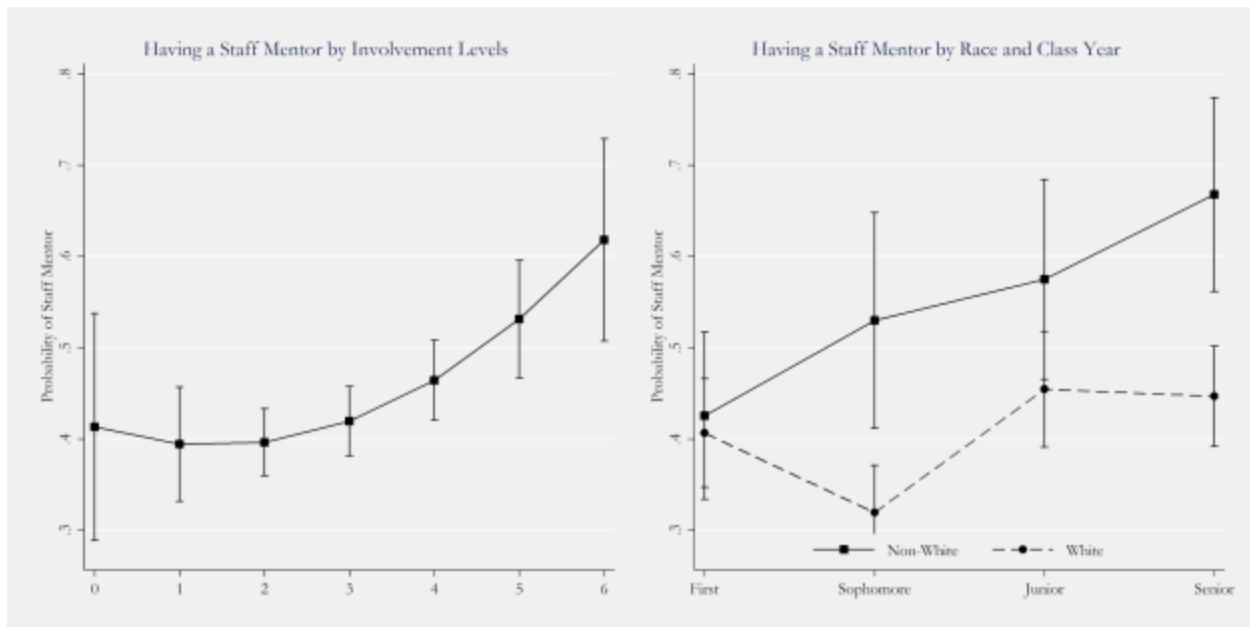
## Mentoring Relationships with Students and Staff are Reinforcing



I wanted to see how mentorship levels vary across class years, for white and non-white students, and by campus involvement. Those results are shown below. Mentorship goes up with involvement, but for most students (who are in 1-3 groups), it really doesn't make much difference. The other panel shows how mentorship with a faculty member climbs across class year. It does that in a steady fashion for white students, climbing from 60 to 80 percent by senior year. For non-white students, mentorship is sky high in the first year, then drops off a cliff in the sophomore year before climbing back to the same level as first year. Now the number of students in these classes is relatively small (e.g., 24 non-white sophomores in the sample), but we do get a hint that something is different and missing in the famously anomic sophomore year.

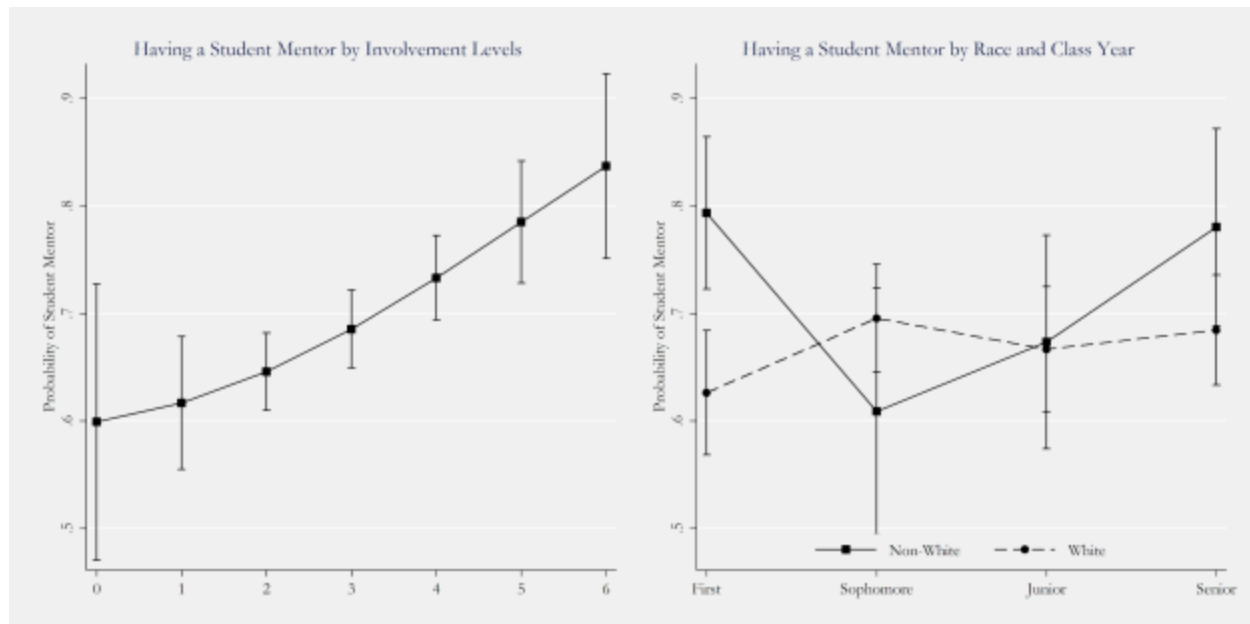


The connections students make with staff are somewhat less common, but at 43 percent the rate is not at all low. I'm honestly surprised that involvement levels in general are so weakly tied to connecting with a staff member – it only climbs at the highest levels. And the mentorship rates vary quite substantially for white and non-white students. Here, the rate climbs in a secular (i.e., steady) fashion for non-white students from 41 to 65 percent. Mentorship levels for white students are like early March, hovering in the low 40s, though they dip a bit in the sophomore year.



Student to student mentoring relationships (69 percent claim to have one) look a bit different than the other two. First, they respond strongly to involvement levels, which no one is surprised by. The type of involvement is important, too. For instance, students involved in greek life are more likely to indicate a student mentor (by 16 percent). This hints that greek life is a bit of an enclave especially when those students are a bit less likely to report a staff or faculty mentor.

It's interesting that having a student mentor really doesn't change across class years, at least for self-identified white students – it hovers in the upper 60s. For non-white students, it looks like the faculty mentor pattern – it is very high in the first year, drops off by 20 percent, and then steadily climbs back up by senior year. That disruption looks worrisome, though we have yet to see if it is linked to any problems.



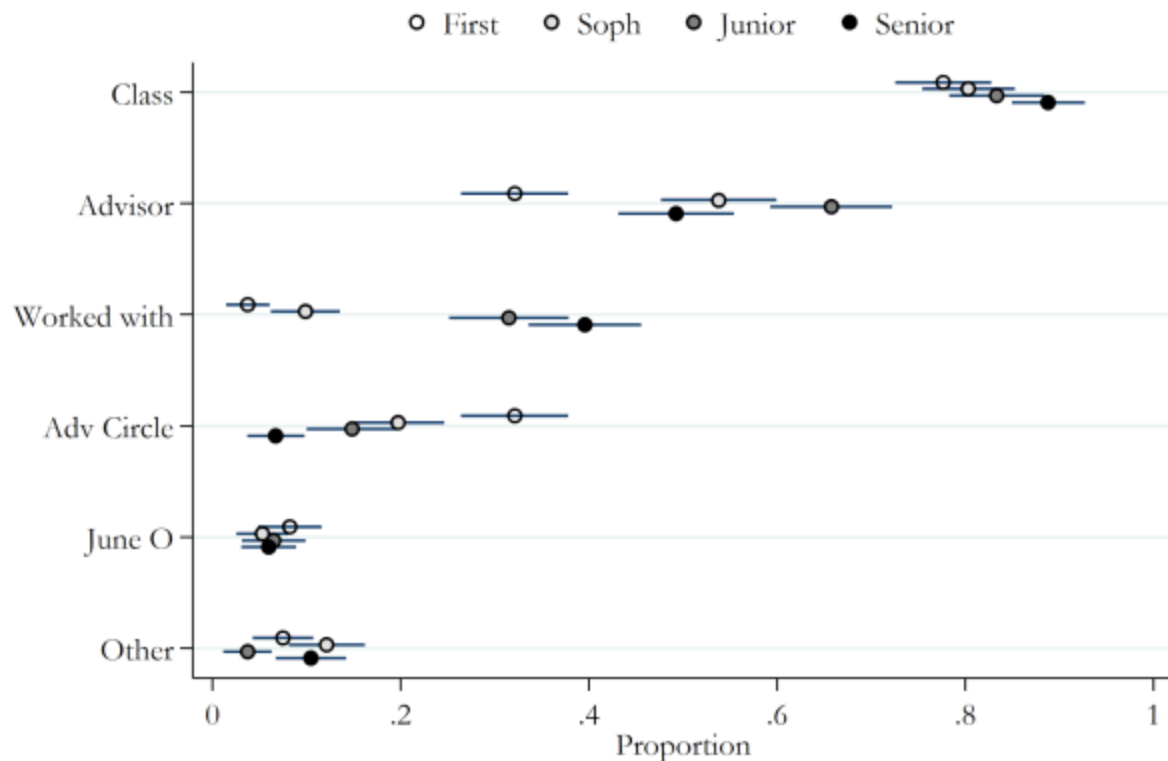
## Sourcing (Faculty) Mentors

Adam has the intuition that mentorship can be encouraged, but is probably not something dispensed from the university commissary. My own sense after being around the block a few times is that these relationships develop when you have a chance to chat. I've had a chance to chat in DC eating at District Taco with DenSem students, over a table folding surveys to be mailed, and sitting around the poli sci office with whoever drops in. But, the most common source of mutually assured exposure is the classroom. It's there that we get a chance to talk about ideas and get some sense of mutual interests. Those are the exchanges that lead to some mutual work, advice giving, and some expression of concern – they can turn into some level of mentoring. That is, mentoring is natural byproduct of common engagements and healthy relationship habits.

The results of our recent survey confirm as much – just under 80 percent of first years indicate having taken a class with a mentoring professor, a figure which climbs to 90 percent by senior year. Mentors are not necessarily assigned, though the first year matching process doesn't do a bad job (just over a third of first years name their advisor as a mentor), but add some selection processes and time and the figure climbs to over half. First years don't do much work with faculty, but by junior and senior year, considerable mentoring happens in the context of common work with a professor.

There aren't many mentoring relationships that overlap with June O, but it's notable that the new group advising model shows considerable promise here as many first years name their Advising Circle prof as a mentor. That the figure is lower for older students is simply a function of this being the first year when most all students were enrolled in an AC. This is a pretty significant pushback to the idea that mentors can't be assigned.

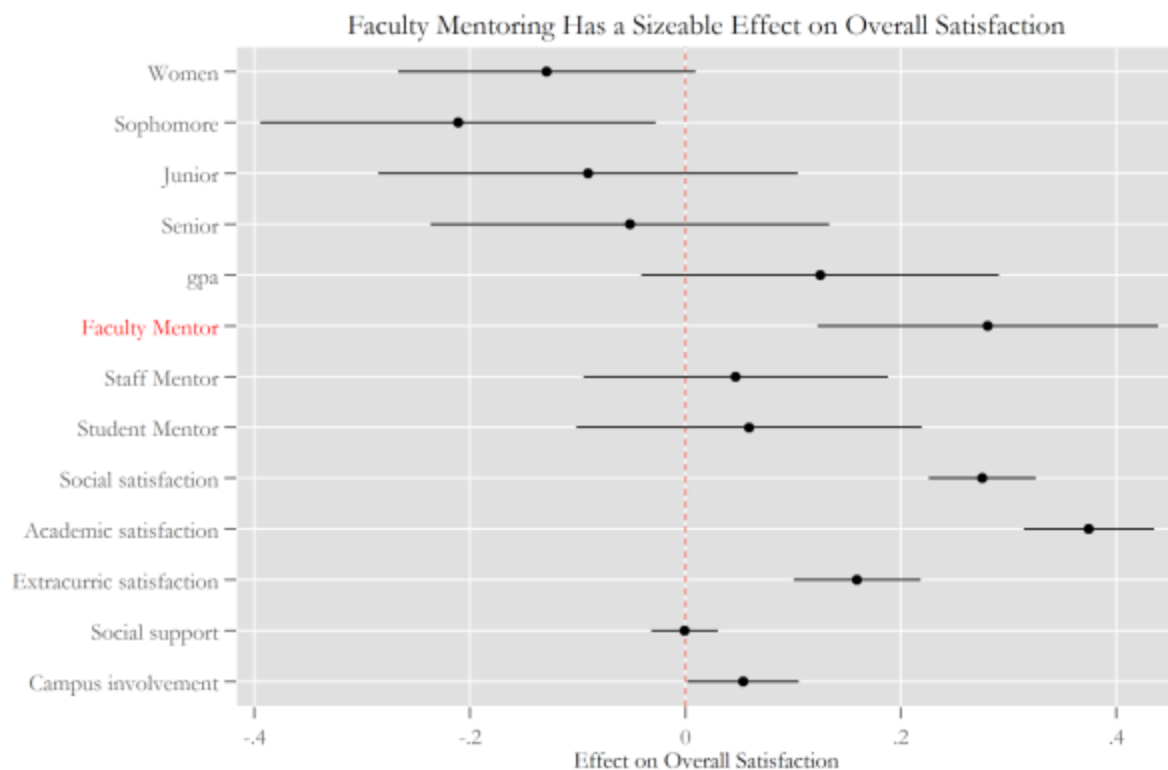
## Sourcing Faculty Mentors, by Class Year



### Implications

From a social scientist's perspective, the trick of Adam's assertion of the importance of mentorship is that mentors are not randomly assigned. That is, students may have to be in the right place and with the right frame of mind to help give a mentoring relationship a chance. Those simple notions suggest that mentoring may have little to do with promoting success in college and life and may instead just reflect it. Having a mentor may simply be a byproduct of what students who are doomed to be successful do – they may pick up a mentor along the way to greatness. Moreover, reporting mentoring relationships could just be a function of having more social support, more friends. Having more friends is bound to increase the probability of talking about important problems and gaining advice.

Now, we're not about to randomly assign people to mentors because we think everyone would benefit from such a relationship; it would be unethical to deny access. Moreover, "assignment" suggests too much institutional control anyway – a lot of these relationships develop organically rather than programmatically as we just saw. So, instead, we'll travel down the lesser causal path and try to control statistically for student greatness and social support to see if mentorship makes a difference in "overall satisfaction."



Note: Dots on the right side of the red zero line indicate that the variable has a positive impact on satisfaction (obviously opposite on the left side). If the black confidence interval line overlaps with the zero line, we estimate that it has no effect (e.g., social support).

The answer is yes. Even after we take into account campus involvement, student social support, GPA, and satisfaction with academics, social life, and extracurriculars, being able to identify a faculty mentor boosts satisfaction with the Denison experience (notably, having a student or staff mentor does not). It's not really possible to be certain that mentorship has a causal relationship here without a randomized controlled trial, but this is good suggestive evidence that mentorship plays an important auxiliary role in maximizing your college experience.

And just to confirm, it is not just the students with stratospheric GPAs who go talk to faculty. Students all over the GPA spectrum find a faculty person.[2] No one should be surprised by this. We're in this profession to help, promote, and advise; our doors are almost always open; we reach out and hope you will too. I suppose this means that Adam is right; now he has the Denison data to document that claim.

*Paul Djupe is a local cyclist who happens to have taught political science at Denison since the Harry Potter series was first published. You can learn more about his work at [pauldjupe.com](http://pauldjupe.com).*

1. We asked a number of questions to capture a potential mentoring relationship: “Someone cared about me as a person.” “Someone encouraged me to pursue my goals and dreams.” “Someone had conversations with me that helped clarify my goals.” “Someone actively supported me pursuing my goals with their time or other resources.” “Someone was a mentor to me.” And then one to see a bit what role agency played, “I asked someone to support my activities with their time or other resources.” The results don’t seem to turn much on which angle (question) we use. I also tried an index ( $\alpha=.8$ ) and the results look effectively the same.

2. There is a slight positive relationship between GPA and reporting a faculty mentor, which surely works both ways. Having faculty to reach out to helps GPA and students with good academic habits (like reaching out to faculty) have higher GPAs. Still, it is important to recognize how widespread having a faculty mentor is.

