



Lab as Family: Creating Kinship Networks on Campus for Community-Based Work

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Figure 1. Mentors can create a feeling of kinship within a university laboratory setting. Used with Permission from the lead author.

Students exist *within* and *in between* larger structures that often shape the path of their educational experiences and success. Appreciating their ecological context helps us to understand that the success of our students lies in the responsibility of the student as well as the mentor (faculty, staff, and administrator) of the campus they attend. Institutions of higher education have historically been structures that perpetuate structural inequalities for students of color. At the university, these students have no history of the space they occupy: there are no pictures that reflect their images, no scents they recognize, and no sounds that reflect their known environments.

No kinship, no educational justice!

Students of color in particular seek **kinship**, which is a complex web of support systems, feelings, and emotions that humans need in

order to be healthy and successful. Kinship means creating an academic environment with students where the students feel whole and complete just the way they are—they do not need to change or pretend to participate. This is a space where ethnic, cultural, and linguistic practices are accepted, welcomed, and encouraged. Additionally, by locating kinship in this space, we partner with students to bridge their life and the academic world. Simultaneously, students of color in a kinship environment have as much to offer as their mentors, and developing a horizontal, reciprocal mentoring relationship is how kinships subsist.

Many of us seek to create authentic connections between ourselves and our students as well as provide a platform through which students can connect with themselves. The question is how to

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do this in what is often a hierarchical university structure with limited resources. Here are some of our own experiences creating a kinship network within a university lab setting.

How Does a Social Science Lab or Space for Mentoring Students Work?

There is a critical mass of mentees that one mentor can have. In our experience, 10 students at a time is the maximum mentorship load for a year-long experience for the best interactions

The goal of a mentoring relationship is to have students have a well-rounded experience in community based research, inter and intra student relationships, higher education, and career options.

between and among faculty, staff, and students. Both undergraduate and graduate students can be part of one larger team. It is important for each individual student to have time with the mentor in the lab. What is important here is the number of hours spent, not the content of the activities; more hours equals more kinship. Additionally, a community-based research lab provides a space for students to engage in the community and use their skills and assets in research settings. This shows students that they have cultural wealth that they may not have ever considered as important and relevant to their academic practices and training.

How to Create a Kinship Within Your Lab

—**Have weekly readings** intended to advance the critical consciousness of the students so that students can awaken and advance their political consciousness as critical race scholars. Meetings are also meant to be a place where students can learn from each other as well as from their mentor. This allows faculty, staff and students to understand that we are all vulnerable and we are working for the same cause: the educational success of each student.

—**Create a safe space** where students learn about the value of research that is socially conscious. They will learn about how to see individual human behavior from an asset-based perspective rather than a cultural-deficit one. This is key for their understanding of themselves and their research.

Students and the success that they experience cannot be solely explained by their individual behavior.

Discuss at some length the cultural biases we all may hold and how to break down our thoughts and behaviors around these issues. These conversations are often difficult. In this space, we all agree that conversations need not be bound by academic rules. We share family events, health concerns, and overall life activities. It is important to discuss hardship experiences about surviving on campus and in our daily lives. It is key that faculty and staff share their challenges so that students can see first hand that we all struggle. This is key for the development of kinship. This space is a time for all members to offer advice and techniques we can use to cope and survive within usually hostile educational environments.

—**Negotiate and re-examine your practices continuously.** We call each other out if we feel someone has been inappropriate or hurt someone's feelings. We understand that there are

limitations imposed by the structural constraints of the academy and learn how to navigate these spaces adequately enough to complete educational and career goals. We also get it if a student cannot or will not continue their experience in our lab.

—**Provide food.** We always have food in the lab to set a family tone. Students become family to each other. They have each other's back, become good friends, and often go to events together outside of the lab. They give each other rides, they come to each other's rescue if someone is sick, and they cover for each other when necessary. They love and care for each other like family. This enables students to trust. This trust lets students explore issues they would have never considered. This is also a space where students become grounded and explore and accept that institutional limitations do not need to close off or change the choices they make in their education and career.

Conclusions

Although we have worked locally and narrowly with small groups of students, we strive to make a larger longitudinal impact in the lives of students of color. We have found that love and acceptance between mentees-mentees and mentees-faculty is necessary for positive human interactions. Ultimately, as social beings we seek a sense of belonging. Kinship is possible when students and faculty get this, and when they do, educational justice is possible.

For more information about Guzman's work on kinship, please see: [Guzman, B. \(2017\). Kinship, Justice, and Students of Color. *The Community Psychologist*, 50 \(2\). Retrieved from <http://www.scra27.org/publications/tcp/ethnic-racial-affairs/>](#)