



# INTERORGANIZATIONAL FORMAL MENTORING: BREAKING THE CONCRETE CEILING SOMETIMES REQUIRES SUPPORT FROM THE OUTSIDE

**AUDREY J. MURRELL, STACY BLAKE-BEARD, DAVID  
M. PORTER JR., AND ADDIE PERKINS-WILLIAMSON**

*Our research explores the idea that formal mentoring relationships that cut across traditional organizational boundaries may facilitate positive interactions among an increasingly diverse workforce. We present interview, Web-survey, and focus-group data across an eight-month period from a pilot test of an interorganizational formal mentoring (IOFM) program sponsored by the Executive Leadership Council (ELC). Results indicate that IOFM provides valuable access to mentoring relationships that include trust and psychosocial support, access to legitimate organizational power, and the sharing of social capital across traditional organizational boundaries. The benefits and challenges of this approach to mentoring and diversity are examined. © 2008 Wiley Periodicals, Inc.*

**W**hile modern organizations are more diverse today than three decades ago (Bell, 2007; Cox & Blake, 1991; Thomas & Ely, 1996), leaders continue to grapple with how to support and enable relationships among people who are engaged in a common enterprise but “who do not share a common history or culture” (Caproni, 2005, p. 269). While lower ranks within the organization may be used as examples of effective human resource policies and programs for enhancing diversity, a lack of diversity exists within senior leadership in most organizations that has been attributed, in part, to systemic barriers facing underrepresented demo-

graphic groups, including women and people of color (Eagly & Carli, 2007). A key human resource strategy that has been suggested as a catalyst for addressing barriers to advancement and developing more diverse leadership is formal mentoring (Hardy, 1998; Tyler, 2007). In this article, the concept of interorganizational formal mentoring (IOFM) is introduced as a valuable tool for the leadership development of people of color within organizations as they attempt to break through into top levels within their organizations. Before focusing explicitly on the experiences of African Americans, it is instructive to explore the diversity context that influences the empirical work presented here.

Correspondence to: Audrey J. Murrell, University of Pittsburgh, Katz Graduate School of Business, 312 Mervis Hall, Pittsburgh, PA 15260, Phone: 412-648-1651, Fax: 412-648-1693, E-mail: amurrell@katz.pitt.edu.

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## Setting the Diversity Context

While diversity in workforce participation is increasing, a glass ceiling still effectively keeps the top levels absent of the same diversity that exists throughout the middle and lower levels of organizations (Cotter, Hermsen, Ovadia, & Vanneman, 2001; Federal Glass Ceiling Commission, 1995a). The glass ceiling has been defined as an “unseen, yet unbreachable barrier that keeps minorities and women from rising to the upper rungs of the corporate ladder, regardless of

their qualifications or achievements” (Federal Glass Ceiling Commission, 1995b, p. 4). The glass ceiling has been recast as the concrete ceiling for African Americans (Hayes, 2006; Thomas & Gabarro, 1999), the adobe ceiling for Hispanics (Blancero & Del-Campo, 2005; Foley, Kidder, & Powell, 2002), and the bamboo ceiling for Asians (Curry, 2006; Hyun, 2005) to reflect the unique barriers facing people of color.

Work by Thomas (Thomas & Alderfer, 1989; Thomas & Gabarro, 1999) illustrates the power of mentoring in helping people of color (in their work, specifically African Americans) “break through” to senior levels

within the organization. Thus, understanding the intersection of diversity and mentoring may outline a process for changing the dynamics of power and break down the barriers that keep people of color from attaining leadership positions within organizations. In addition, Thomas’s research (1989, 1993) makes clear that the nature and outcomes of interracial dynamics embedded within the organization’s culture can provide revealing information about the state of racial affairs within the firm. In fact, some argue that people of color may act as a miner’s canary—an indicator of conditions that are challenging not only for numerical minorities but also for majority groups in that same organization (Guinier & Torres, 2002). The presence of dissatisfaction, frus-

tration, and high turnover among people of color is perhaps a precursor to future problems that will be experienced by majority group members if the issues facing these more vulnerable groups are not resolved. Thus, the impact of mentoring on diversity in organizations is important to understand because it may provide a mechanism for altering interracial dynamics in the workplace and increasing the overall health and strength of the organization.

## Diversity and Mentoring Relationships

Mentoring has gained attention as a powerful tool to enable the careers of those advancing through the ranks in organizations (Blake-Beard, Murrell, & Thomas, 2007; Dreher & Ash, 1990; Murrell, Crosby, & Ely, 1999; Thomas & Gabarro, 1999). A mentor is generally defined as a more senior individual who uses his or her influence and experience to help with the advancement of a mentee (Kram, 1983). Those with access to mentoring have been consistently shown to benefit from their involvement in these relationships; they report higher salaries, increased promotion rates, greater career satisfaction, higher organizational commitment, and less intention to leave the organization as well as lower levels of turnover (Blake-Beard, 1999; Crosby, 1999; Dreher & Cox, 1996; O’Neill, 2002; Ragins, 1999; Wanberg, Welsh, & Hezlett, 2003).

However, the picture becomes more complicated when exploring people of color’s ability to develop mentoring relationships with mentors who share the same racial group (or racial identity group) membership. Gaining access to mentors of the same race may be difficult for people of color because of their low numbers within higher levels in the organization (Catalyst, 1996; Sims, 2002). Thomas (1990, 1993) found that when mentoring relationships were present, white males predominated as mentors for white females, black males, and black females. The presence of white males in leadership positions is such that they are the primary group poised and positioned to act as

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mentors. Dreher and Cox posit that “a significant part of the influence differential between White men and mentors of other genders or racial groups derives from differences in legitimate power that is embedded in organizational position” (Dreher & Cox, 1996, p. 298). In order for mentees of color to gain access to mentors of color, they have to go outside of their own department/unit (Thomas, 1990) and these were frequently informal relationships that provided primarily psychosocial support.

Thus, gaining access to individuals who provide career-focused mentoring functions means that people of color are thrust into interracial dynamics embedded within the organization to a greater degree than whites (Sims, 2002; Thomas, 1990). Access to mentors of the same race is not as available to people of color within the organization without crossing additional boundaries such as level, location, or function, or seeking these relationships outside of their own organization. With little formal support or legitimacy, there is an additional burden, or what Blake-Beard, Murrell, and Thomas (2007) call a “mentoring tax,” on these developmental relationships that is a function of dimensions of diversity such as race.

Access to people who share the same race may be important for building trust, but access to people in leadership positions is equally important given the power dynamics of a mentoring relationship. As Thomas (1989, p. 284) writes, “The power imbalance is reinforced, as blacks tread lightly, carefully, and Whites go comfortably about their business. The powerful can choose what to ignore.” These findings highlight power dynamics and axes of privilege that benefit whites, often at the expense of people of color within organizations (Corsun & Costen, 2001). As Ragins notes, the powerful seek to preserve their power “and may do so by supporting policies, practices, and prescriptions that exclude other groups” (Ragins, 1995, p. 97). Thus, formal mentoring relationships must not simply be about matching individuals across diverse boundaries (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender); they must also be about creating access to power and the development of

trust among those who traditionally have been excluded from the knowledge and resources that will support their success and the success of the organization.

While diverse mentoring relationships within a single organization may have many advantages that are critical for individual and organizational outcomes, the reality is that these relationships are complex, more likely to produce conflict, and may not meet all of the needs of people of color within organizations, particularly those seeking to “break through” to senior-level leadership positions (Thomas & Gabarro, 1999). This statement is based on the wide variety of empirical and theoretical work that shows race, as one aspect of diversity, to be embedded within the organizational context (Alderfer & Thomas, 1988), a consistent driver of work attitudes and outcomes (Murrell & Hayes-James, 2001), and a moderator of the return on investment employees received from training and other developmental activities (Hayes-James, 2000). Thus, attention should be devoted to how the experience of mentoring relationships shapes our ability to develop a diverse cadre of managers who create meaningful change and cultivate diversity both across and within organizations.

We argue that interorganizational formal mentoring can be one powerful tool for enhancing diversity, strengthening the pipeline of diverse leadership, and providing people of color access to both career and psychosocial support that may not be afforded by traditional formal mentoring efforts within a single organization. The case advanced here for IOFM is quite consistent with Ragins’s (1997) notion of “diversified mentoring relationships.” Using the lens of power dynamics within organizations, Ragins suggests that there is an inextricable link between mentoring and diversity. She writes that “micro-theories for each marginalized group ignore the

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implications of multiple group membership, and take a limited piecemeal perspective toward explaining diversity in mentoring relationships" (p. 483). Ragins's notion of the diversified mentoring relationship raises the critical issue of power dynamics and the role they play in shaping mentoring relationships within traditional formal organization-based programs. In this study, we examine IOFM as one strategy for organizations seeking to increase diversity within leadership ranks in their organizations.

### *Interorganizational Formal Mentoring*

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*...establishing formal mentoring programs or opportunities that give individuals legitimate access to power and social capital is a key benefit of interorganizational formal mentoring.*

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The primary goal of this article is to validate the use of interorganizational formal mentoring and the contribution it may make for professional development among people of color and for the enhancement of diversity and leadership development within organizations. We define IOFM as *formal mentoring activities, programs, or experiences that cut across traditional organizational boundaries and target the unique developmental needs of a specific stakeholder or identity group.*

The notion of IOFM and its ties to diversity are quite consistent with recent conceptual work of Higgins and Kram (2001) and their construct of "mentoring

constellations." Regardless of whether one considers mentoring relationships that are primary or secondary, single or multiple, hierarchical or peer, the importance of IOFM as part of the mentoring constellation is that it may provide a dual benefit; individuals can have mentoring relationships that provide access to individuals in positions of power *and* who share an affinity based on key social identity groups. This latter point is supported by Friedman's work on affinity or social network groups and race. He shows that the strength of ties among African Americans that extend *outside* of their current organization has a positive impact on careers

and work attitudes *inside* of their current organization (Friedman, 1996; Friedman, Kane, & Cornfield, 1998).

Further, IOFM provide the ability for people of color to cultivate valuable "social capital" that may not be developed within a traditional organization-specific formal program. As Raider and Burt (1996) write, social capital is "generally important, but more important for people at the social frontier—people at the interface of different social worlds" (p. 189). In fact, Burt and his colleagues would argue that IOFM gives people of color the ability to span "structural holes," an ability that already has been shown to drive positive career outcomes for majority individuals within organizations (Burt, 1992). Thus, establishing formal mentoring programs or opportunities that give individuals legitimate access to power and social capital is a key benefit of interorganizational formal mentoring.

While some would argue that mentoring relationships that cut across organizations are more effective if these relationships are informal rather than formal (e.g., Raabe & Beehr, 2003), there can and should be a rethinking of this assumption. A key aspect of the conceptualization of IOFM is the *legitimacy* that is provided by formal mentoring relationships that extend outside the boundaries of the traditional organization. Burt's work on social networks is relevant to this supposition (Burt, 1992). For example, he argues that women are unable to duplicate the networks of men because they lack legitimacy within the organization. In order to be successful, women need to effectively "borrow" the social network of a male sponsor who is influential in the organization. This borrowing of social power makes other organizational members recognize someone (e.g., a woman) that they are dealing with is legitimate because he/she is being treated as a proxy source of organizational power. Burt's research found that women who are connected to the social network of their male manager were promoted more quickly than women who attempted to develop their own networks (Burt, 1998). In fact, "borrowing" or leveraging the social capital of an influen-

tial white male sponsor was also an effective strategy for African Americans who broke through to senior levels within organizations, according to work by Thomas and Gabarro (1999).

Furthermore, IOFM is a developmental process akin to other dimensions of mentoring relationships that have been studied previously. For example, Scandura and Schriesheim (1994) define supervisory career mentoring (SCM) as “a transformational career activity involving a mutual commitment by mentor and mentee to the latter’s long-term development, as a personal, extra-organizational investment in the mentee by the mentor, accomplished by the sharing of values, knowledge, experience and so forth” (p. 1589). However, the traditional SCM relationship does not take into account the need for managers of color to connect on issues of values and experiences that are context-bound and related to issues of race, ethnicity, gender, or other dimensions of diversity. Nor does the traditional view of SCM provide a response to Burt’s claim that individuals who traditionally are left out of the power circles within organizations need to “borrow” social capital to facilitate their own career success. While a number of these programs exist to develop and support various target groups (e.g., women, African Americans, Latinos, engineers, MBAs, etc.), we focus on one particular program as a model for the potential of IOFM to increase the pipeline of future managers and leaders of color in organizations.

This study utilizes a longitudinal, multi-method study of a pilot formal mentoring program sponsored by the Executive Leadership Council (ELC) to show how interorganizational formal mentoring may provide valuable access to mentoring relationships that include trust and psychosocial support, access to legitimate organizational power, critical connections to social identity-relevant role models, and the sharing of social capital across traditional organizational boundaries. Results are synthesized from a review of interview, survey, and focus-group data collected over an eight-month period that explores the experience mentees within the ELC program have with career and psy-

chosocial mentoring functions through this IOFM program. To add to the understanding of the importance of formal mentoring for the development of African American leadership, the potential impact of IOFM is examined by asking several descriptive research questions:

1. Is there an exchange of career and psychosocial mentoring functions within IOFM relationships?
2. What is the relevant frequency of career versus psychosocial mentoring functions within IOFM mentoring relationships?
3. What are the different types of advice and knowledge shared across IOFM relationships?

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*A core focus of the ELC programs and mission is for every ELC member to help others establish career goals and to develop the necessary skills to reach top levels within corporations as a deliberate strategy for increasing the diversity of organizations.*

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**Methods**

*Research Setting*

The Executive Leadership Council is an independent, nonpartisan, nonprofit corporation that was founded in 1986 by a group of 19 African-American corporate executives. The ELC has more than 340 members, one-third of them are women. Individuals who qualify for membership should be within three levels to the CEO and the focus is on U.S.-based companies and multinational organizations. A core focus of the ELC programs and mission is for every ELC member to help others establish career goals and to develop the necessary skills to reach top levels within corporations as a deliberate strategy for increasing the diversity of organizations. As part of this focus, the role of mentoring has been inextricably linked to accomplishing these diversity goals.

*The ELC Interorganizational Formal Mentoring Program*

One central aspect of ELC’s mentoring activities is the inclusion of an interorganiza-

tional formal mentoring program. For our study, this effort included three half-day training sessions on three dimensions of mentoring relationships: fundamentals of effective mentoring, peer mentoring, and becoming an effective mentor. Each session presented current research and practice in the relevant area of formal mentoring, as well as exercises that helped participants apply this knowledge. All sessions were facilitated by research-oriented, university-level faculty and were an integral part of the overall curriculum that focused on leadership development among African American managers.

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*A key goal of the matching process was to provide each mentee with a mentor who had expertise or experience within the function, industry, or level of his/her desired professional goal or aspiration.*

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A total of 30 participants were recruited from both member and nonmember companies and included managers in private, public, and non-profit organizations; however, most participants (95%) worked in the private sector.

In addition to the curriculum content, each participant was matched with a senior-level African American manager from a different organization. All mentors recruited were ELC members, and the matching process focused on key information provided by the mentees during the program application process. Criteria used for the matching process included three categories: career factors (industry, function), personal factors (gender, marital status, age), and geographic region.

A key goal of the matching process was to provide each mentee with a mentor who had expertise or experience within the function, industry, or level of his/her desired professional goal or aspiration.

### **Data Collection**

The methodological approach utilized a multimethod, longitudinal design. Data were collected via phone interviews, a Web-based survey, and in-person focus groups across an eight-month period. All data collection involved participants within the ELC formal

mentoring program. As part of the structure of the program, mentees were asked to attend all sessions, while the mentors were present only during initial matching, which occurred during session one. The first follow-up took place three months after the initial contact between the mentor-mentee pairs. A faculty coach was assigned to each pair and conducted an hourlong telephone interview with each mentor and mentee. The focus of this initial contact was to determine the status of the relationship and frequency of contact since our initial workshop and to conduct an initial assessment of the types of activities and interaction taking place within the relationship. Interview questions were taken from previous measures of mentoring contact and functions developed by Ragins and McFarlin (1990) and Thomas (1999).

The second follow-up involved telephone contact with each mentee within each of the pairs. Mentees were asked to complete a Web-based survey to examine the nature of their mentoring experience since the first follow-up. Several questions from the initial check-in were repeated to allow an assessment of the change in relationships over time.

The third follow-up involved face-to-face, small focus-group (four or five people) interviews with a majority of the mentees. A set of questions was developed that addressed their overall evaluation of the mentoring experience, as well as their feedback on the structure, design, and execution of the formal mentoring program. Some similarity in questions from the first two interviews was included to allow for comparisons to be made over time.

### **Measures**

Study measures focused on the mentoring experience from the perspective of the program participant or the mentee.<sup>1</sup> Questions included how frequently they interacted with their mentoring partner and how satisfied they were with the mentoring experience. Several items also examined the specific type of advice or information that was being shared between the mentoring pairs.

These questions were used during both the interviews (first follow-up) and the Web survey (second follow-up) and utilized items from the mentoring scale developed by Ragins and McFarlin (1990). These items used a 1 to 5 scale (disagree to agree); specific items are provided in Table I. Focus-group items (third follow-up) consisted of a series of open-ended questions on the overall experience of the IOFM program and were developed by the researchers. A few items from the earlier data-collection points (e.g., overall effectiveness of the mentoring experi-

ence) were repeated during the focus groups for comparison purposes.

### Results

The study data consists of both qualitative and quantitative information provided by the participants across the three distinct phases of data collection. While a number of different research questions can be examined with these data, the presentation of results herein will focus on some of the key factors within each of the mentor-mentee pairs and

**TABLE I** Architecture for Intangibles

Question: In your contact with your mentoring partner, please tell me how often you have engaged in the following activities:	First Follow-Up (% who said sometimes/often)	Second Follow-Up (% who said sometimes/often)
<p><b>Career Factors:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shared knowledge about organizations, their culture, and politics and how to be effective?</li> <li>• Talked about strategies to solve work-related problems, conflicts, or concerns?</li> <li>• Discussed ways to enhance their visibility within the organization or the professional networks?</li> <li>• Collaborated on a common project or work-related activities?</li> <li>• Shared technical assistance, expertise, or financial resources as part of collaboration on a project?</li> <li>• Discussed specific information about performance review or formal feedback given to you?</li> </ul>	<p style="text-align: center;">81%</p> <p style="text-align: center;">84%</p> <p style="text-align: center;">75%</p> <p style="text-align: center;">16%</p> <p style="text-align: center;">27%</p> <p style="text-align: center;">54%</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">94%</p> <p style="text-align: center;">100%</p> <p style="text-align: center;">88%</p> <p style="text-align: center;">24%</p> <p style="text-align: center;">41%</p> <p style="text-align: center;">76%</p>
<p><b>Personal Factors:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Talked about your own personal experiences related to career or life success and satisfaction?</li> <li>• Shared personal stories about family or non-work-related interests or problems?</li> <li>• Shared personal interests, leisure activities, or hobbies outside of the work context?</li> </ul>	<p style="text-align: center;">86%</p> <p style="text-align: center;">76%</p> <p style="text-align: center;">59%</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">94%</p> <p style="text-align: center;">76%</p> <p style="text-align: center;">83%</p>
<p><b>Identity-Based Factors:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shared knowledge about the importance of race and how to be effective as a person of color?</li> <li>• Provided networking opportunities with other people within ELC?</li> <li>• Provided networking opportunities with other people outside of ELC?</li> <li>• Provided networking opportunities with other people inside your own organization?</li> <li>• Contacted one of the faculty or staff from the ELC program for advice and/or assistance?</li> </ul>	<p style="text-align: center;">67%</p> <p style="text-align: center;">17%</p> <p style="text-align: center;">19%</p> <p style="text-align: center;">11%</p> <p style="text-align: center;">5%</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">83%</p> <p style="text-align: center;">19%</p> <p style="text-align: center;">18%</p> <p style="text-align: center;">19%</p> <p style="text-align: center;">6%</p>

how these relationships develop and change over time. First, the data from each follow-up is reviewed. The study concludes with some overall findings and a discussion of implications for both research and practice.

### *First Follow-Up*

A total of 37 interviews from the 41 participants were completed during the first follow-up (90%). During this initial phase of the mentoring relationship, most participants reported having “occasional or frequent” (78%) interaction. This interaction typically occurred via telephone (43%) or some combination of telephone and e-mail (49%). The majority of our mentoring pairs tended to focus their initial interactions on career-related activities, particularly developmental action plans (56%). In addition, the overall level of satisfaction within this initial phase was quite high. A majority of participants (81%) reported that their relationship was either “effective” or “very effective.”

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*The majority of our mentoring pairs tended to focus their initial interactions on career-related activities, particularly developmental action plans (56%).*

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Both mentors and mentees responded to a series of questions on the types of activities and/or information they shared during their contact. These data are summarized in Table I. This initial phase of the mentoring

experience involved a fair amount of attention to sharing career-focused experience. Activities that involved sharing advice on career success, knowledge about organizational dynamics and politics, and how to solve workplace problems or conflicts were among the most frequently reported activities during this initial phase (see Table I). Some of the pairs also reported talking about personal issues such as family or non-work-related interests and problems, but these activities occurred less frequently among the pairs during this early stage of relationship cultivation.

A number of open-ended questions were included to further explore the overall

impressions of the dynamics of the mentoring relationship during this initial phase. Examination of these qualitative data revealed three general themes. The first theme noted was the importance of the matching or the fit between mentors and mentees. As one mentor commented:

A lot of whether or not a pair is going to make it is dependent on how they engage one another, how they click. I think the program did a nice job setting people up. I wonder what might happen if even more attention was placed on the match. My protégé and I have a lot of interesting things in common with one another—so it is fairly easy for us to have conversations with one another. But I’d be curious to see how this plays out across our whole cohort.

The second theme reflected the challenges surrounding relationship cultivation, such as the need to allocate time and effort for mentoring to be effective during this early stage. For example, one of the mentors provided the following insight:

Really time for me to initiate and reach out to my mentee. When my mentee has reached out to me, I have been very responsive. So I’ve had to become more conscious about putting our time on my calendar. In fact, if I am being accurate, it isn’t time. It is around scheduling and how is it that I schedule in time with my mentee in the same way that I do other important things. We intended to talk and then the time got away from us. What my mentee and I had to do was put a stake in the ground around this relationship.

This theme was most frequently echoed by comments about the commitment needed in order to effectively build the relationship such as “Making the time to talk (Holidays were tough). Failure to document past conversations means that we often lose where we are.” Another participant indicated, “Establishing focus and task to work

on with roadmap. Knowing when we have achieved goals and when to change or terminate relationship.”

Frequently, the issue of balancing the mentoring relationship with other work demands was identified, as seen in one mentee’s comment:

Just the natural challenge of two busy people trying to schedule time. This is a standing challenge. We try to use alternative ways to communicate and to brief when we are working together. We’ve also been trying to meet face to face once a month. In addition to the face-to-face meetings, we use frequent e-mail and phone calls to touch bases with one another quickly.

Similarly, one of the mentees discussed challenges facing him in developing the mentoring relationship. He reflected:

Initially it was schedule of the mentor. I did the follow-through after the initial workshop. I never got a response—logistical problems in connecting. After making some contact, we have not had consistency in contact. We did get things accomplished when we were able to connect mostly via telephone. A key obstacle has been conflict in schedules, mentor’s accessibility, and protégé getting a new position. We have made some commitments to stay on a bi-weekly schedule.

Related to the challenges during the relationship cultivation phase, several specific comments reflected the need to have face-to-face interaction between the mentor and mentee. This category involved comments that most often reflected how important that face-to-face interaction was seen for building open communication and trust during this early phase of the mentoring relationship. For example, one of the participants commented:

Would love to have more face to face.  
We talk frequently via telephone and e-

mail. Face to face is important in building a relationship. We have developed a friendship. It would be enhanced by having more personal and social contact.

The use of electronic methods of communication was seen as being useful, but limited. For example, one mentee noted that it was “difficult to stay connected. Being able to spend time face to face is better; e-mail and telephone are not as good.” The limits of electronic communication, especially during the early phase of the relationship, were reflected by another comment:

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*The use of  
electronic methods  
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Comfort level is both an obstacle and a challenge. Time is another issue. Distance is also a barrier. I am a totally touchy-feely person. I like looking at someone, feeling that person because this is where I get my comfort with them. I do better when I can socialize. When we do phone calls, it is just about what are we supposed to be talking about. Sometimes I just want to chitchat. If we could do some of our meetings face to face, that would help.

Several comments focused on personal challenges in cultivating mentoring relationships, though they were mentioned less frequently. For example, some participants reflected on their own personal growth and development as they tried to meet the demands of cultivating a new relationship. This sentiment was most frequent among mentees, as one person commented:

Well, I really started navigating on my own and I really didn’t touch base with my mentor for the first 6–8 weeks. Then we did talk and I caught him up on all that I was doing. My mentor said, “Hey, why didn’t you call me earlier? I could have offered some advice and guidance.” I guess. I am a little

cynical and skeptical—just because people say they mean you well, that is not always the case. And I also didn't want to bother him. But his response was that "Hey, I can really help." I think I discounted how engaged he would be.

Another mentee shared the following:

During the training that we had, one of the topics that was discussed was introverts vs. extroverts. I am an introvert. So when I first meet people, I can be reserved unless I get good vibes. I need to open up more—this will help me get more from relationships. I also need to

reduce the amount of intimidation that I feel. I know we've been told that this is a mentoring relationship and we should get the most from it. But you don't want to harass the other person. So I don't want to overstep the boundaries.

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*There was a great deal of similarity in the types of activities and information sharing between the pairs in the early phase compared to the middle phase.*

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### **Second Follow-Up**

A total of 18 of the possible 21 mentees (86%) completed the Web survey during our second follow-up. This follow-up occurred at the halfway point during the formal mentoring program. A majority of participants still reported interacting occa-

sionally or frequently (81%). However, the percentage of those responding that they had "frequent" interaction with their mentors declined compared to our observations during the initial phase. Participants were still quite positive in terms of the overall effectiveness of the mentoring experience. Most of the mentees felt that their mentoring relationship was either effective or very effective (65%) during the subsequent cultivation phase.

There was a great deal of similarity in the types of activities and information sharing between the pairs in the early phase compared to the middle phase. During both peri-

ods, a great deal of time was spent in sharing career-related advice. As during the initial contact with the mentoring pairs, issues such as knowledge about organizational politics, solving work-related problems or conflicts, and sharing career advice were frequently reported. However, during this later period in the relationship, the mentees reported more activities involving specific support on performance feedback, technical assistance or collaboration on work projects, and support to enhance their visibility within professional networks. These types of activities reflect that greater trust and disclosure of personal issues (e.g., performance review, specific work projects) were taking place in the relationship (see Table I).

While some discussion surrounding issues of race and how to be effective as a person of color in the organization was reported during our initial follow-up, the frequency of this activity increased during the second point of contact. This increase is perhaps further evidence of a shift or expansion of focus among the mentoring pairs into more difficult, personal, or challenging areas that they have in common as part of the same demographic group (in this case, as African Americans). Sharing race-related information was the one dimension of these identity-related activities that showed an increase between our first and second contacts (see Table I).

In an examination of the open-ended responses, information was gained about several of the key factors that mentees felt were most beneficial about their mentoring experience. Most of the respondents discussed key characteristics of the mentor. These qualities included technical or functional knowledge. For example, one of the mentees commented, "Mentor's background and current line of business has helped in my personal development and has enabled me to work through issues at work." However, more frequently, the qualities that mentees reflected as being important for the mentoring relationship were interpersonal and psychosocial in nature. For example, "Honest feedback, good relationship, lots of areas to relate; good listening and honest feedback."

Another participant reported that an effective mentor has “[b]rutal honesty that challenges our thinking and rationale so as to contemplate all possibilities—not just one.”

In addition, the theme of a “fit” or match between the mentor and the mentee was reflected in the comments received during this second phase. However, rather than a match in terms of functional area or expertise that was present during Wave 1, these later comments focused more on the interpersonal fit or the match between the mentor and the mentee. For example, when asked about the strengths of the relationship with her mentor, one participant commented, “Interest, caring, and concern. We have a good feel for each other. My mentor is definitely someone whose perspectives I value a lot.” On this occasion, this fit was articulated as a complementary relationship with a mentor who is similar to the mentee on key dimensions, such as age and personal disposition.

As in the first follow-up, issues such as scheduling time for contact, having a regularly scheduled time for connecting (e.g., regular conference calls), and taking advantage of work-related travel that puts them in close proximity to the partner were prominent. For example, one participant shared that the major challenges facing him in building his relationship with his mentor is “Making the time to keep connected; due to physical locations/distance, all communications have been via phone or e-mail.” Another participant told us, “Scheduling and sticking to the assigned meeting times can be a challenge but the great thing is we always try to make time.” One other participant highlighted similar challenges with their mentor, identifying time restraints, personal transitions, and keeping the relationship fresh when there is not a crisis.

Clearly, issues of contact and overall effectiveness were among the frequently mentioned themes in both the first and second follow-up periods. To further examine the differences in mentoring relationships between the first and second follow-up, correlations between the frequency of contact reported and the overall perceived effectiveness of the mentoring relationships were ex-

amined. Frequency of contact and perceived effectiveness are more highly correlated in the later cultivation phase ( $r = .733$ ) than in the early cultivation phase ( $r = .236$ ). This higher association may reflect learning between the mentoring pairs on the importance of taking time to connect and cultivate the relationships. While frequency of initial contact was not significantly correlated to perceived effectiveness during the later mentoring phase ( $r = -.250$ ), the perceived effectiveness reported in the early phase was significantly correlated with frequency of contact later on ( $r = .564$ ). This finding suggests that some initial perceived success may be a strong motivator for the establishment and maintenance of the mentoring relationship. In fact, this initial success may be more important than the absolute amount of contact during the initial phase of the relationship.

### Third Follow-Up

A total of 18 of the possible 21 mentees (86%) attended the final session, which took place as part of a closing face-to-face workshop. For this final session, small focus groups (four or five people in each) of all mentees who participated in the formal mentoring program were conducted. A number of the questions that were asked from the first and second follow-ups were included to help compare the change that had taken place over the year-long program. This final follow-up session focused on suggestions from the mentees on how to improve the mentoring experience with the senior mentor and how it differed from other formal mentoring relationships they experienced.

Based on responses across the focus-group discussion, several themes emerged. First, on the issue of advantages, mentees’ responses could be grouped into one core theme that had several important dimensions: *validation*. In general, mentees talked about the key benefit of the IOFM program

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as providing validation by a more experienced mentor who helped them to both examine and in many cases confirm their perspectives, or aspirations, with an unbiased view that was, as one participant told us, “biased by the corporate culture.” This access to senior African American executives to whom they would not have been connected otherwise was a critical resource for confirmation and validation among these future corporate leaders. The notion of having a relationship external to the firm provided a safety net for sharing of problems and concerns on both

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the professional and personal dimensions. One participant commented, “It can be a safe haven—because they have no skin in the game.”

The advantage of validation was also reflected in issues of trust, honesty, and shared experience. Mentees frequently commented that being able to access advice on work-related problems or conflicts with someone outside of their organizations whom they could trust to provide a nonthreatening and safe discussion was an important benefit. One individual commented that the IOFM relationship provided a “safe place to have an unbiased discussion about corporate culture” for African Americans. One partici-

participant commented that it was a strength of his IOFM relationship to have access to a mentor who “is only interested in your success and benefit”—that is, a mentor who has no hidden agenda in terms of the internal politics of the organization.

Frequent comments about the advantages of the IOFM experience included “unbiased perspective” or “checking and validating from a different viewpoint.” A number of mentees also commented that an advantage of their IOFM relationship was that it gave them access to honest feedback about themselves and how to improve as they developed as leaders. Comments such as an “objective opinion” and an “unbiased ear” and “no

backlash from discussions” are examples of how respondents felt that IOFM provided important support absent from formal mentoring relationships internal to their organizations. In addition, access to experienced leaders who shared common experiences as African Americans was another advantage to IOFM. This dimension frequently was expressed by the comment “common experience,” or as one participant put it, an “unusual mirror.” Many participants also suggested that expanding one’s social network, particularly among experienced and influential African American executives within the ELC, was an important benefit.

Some of the same dimensions mentioned as strengths of IOFM were also cited as some its limitations. While having access to African American mentors outside of their organization has a number of advantages, one limitation that a number of mentees mentioned was their mentors’ lack of familiarity with their organizations as an obstacle for certain types of career advice. Issues such as “lack of knowledge of key players” and “no understanding of the corporate culture” were frequently mentioned by the focus-group participants. Also, “not understanding the structure” and differences across particular aspects of the industry between the mentor and mentee were mentioned. Thus, while having access to a different perspective outside of the organization was an important advantage of IOFM among our participants, the issue of having to do a lot of “translating” for the mentor was a disadvantage of this external mentoring relationship.

### **Summary**

The overall perception of the mentoring experience among mentees (and mentors) was quite positive and remained positive across the yearlong program. This research indicates that both career and psychosocial functions were provided in these relationships, and participants were appreciative of the opportunity to get both career and psychosocial support from senior African-American executives. In addition, there was a change

in the type of information that was shared between the pairs as they cultivated their developmental relationship. While the pairs reported most frequently talking about their own personal experiences related to career or life success and satisfaction early on, later discussions seem to shift toward more specific career and personal development concerns (e.g., culture, dealing with conflict, race issues). Lastly, our research findings did show that some types of advice received substantial attention in the mentoring relationship, while other types of advice were not addressed. The strength of IOFM relationships was clearly in gaining access to influential mentors outside the mentees' organizations who can provide safe, honest, and confidential feedback that may not be available from internal formal mentoring relationships.

## Discussion

The literature is clear that mentoring relationships have great benefits for individuals and for organizations. Those who have mentors are found to enjoy more job security, higher salaries, higher-level positions in organizations, enhanced political skills, more work satisfaction, and lower job turnover than those who do not have mentors (Catalyst, 1996; Dreher & Ash, 1990; Fagenson, 1989; Johnson & Scandura, 1994; Lankau & Scandura, 2002). Recent work has started to capture some of the negative mentoring experiences by both the mentor and the mentee (e.g., Eby & McManus, 2004; O'Neill & Sankowsky, 2001).

However, there is still debate over whether formal versus informal mentoring relationships provide greater support for individual career outcomes and overall organizational effectiveness. There are a number of benefits to be gained from offering interorganizational formal mentoring programs; there are also several challenges that should be considered. These benefits and challenges can affect participants and sponsoring organizations at any one of three levels: individual, group, or organization. In the following section, benefits and challenges, as well as suggestions for proactively addressing po-

tential barriers to effective interorganizational formal mentoring relationships, will be discussed.

## Benefits of IOFM Program

The benefits of the ELC approach are threefold. First, sponsorship by the mentee's organization provided legitimacy to their participation in this IOFM program. Second, the partnering of senior African American executives with high-potential managers provided the opportunity for mentees to access influential leaders with whom strong career and psychosocial support could occur. Given that mentors and mentees were African American, the opportunity to cultivate a relationship involving mutual trust and strong identity bonds was provided by this IOFM program. The third benefit of the ELC program was access to social capital provided by the program. This access is facilitated both through the matching of mentees to influential senior African American executives and the inclusion of peer mentoring as a component of the program. In much the same way that Burt (1992) described, the mentee could "borrow" the social capital of these influential African American leaders. Clearly, this IOFM approach provides an expansion to the participants' social networks that is consistent with work by Ibarra (1993, 1995) in that it extends the relational ties to individuals with little redundancy within the organization.

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## Challenges of IOFM Program

While there are numerous benefits to the use of an IOFM program such as that executed by the ELC, this organization faced many challenges during this effort. One of the challenges related to IOFM programs is connected to the provision of mentoring functions. Kram's (1985a) career and psychoso-

cial functions were developed from the exploration of informal mentoring relationships, in which mentoring partners were generally located in the same organization. Because IOFM relationships span organizations, access to some of Kram's functions, particularly those that are career-related, may not be as readily achieved. A mentor within the same organization as his or her mentee serves many duties, acting as protector, providing opportunities for exposure and visibility to key management leaders, and coaching around political landmines.

Mentors in IOFM, who are not embedded in their mentees' organizations, will not be able to offer those career functions to the same extent as an internal mentor.

Another challenge associated with IOFM programs is related to how mentoring partners locate one another such that they are able to build strong psychosocial connections. This study highlights the importance of IOFM relationships for African American executives as sources of critical psychosocial support, such as counseling and confirmation and acceptance. But these psychosocial functions do not just happen spontaneously. Kram (1985a) indicates that in informal mentoring relationships, career functions emerge first, and, with time

and trust, psychosocial functions follow. In IOFM relationships, time is often the scarcest resource; it is challenging for mentoring partners to build in opportunities for spending time with one another. In fact, in this study of the ELC program, the most common challenge cited by participants was not enough face-to-face interaction with their mentoring partners.

Thus, while similar demographic characteristics are important for the initial matching within IOFM, cultivation of the relationship is essential and requires that mentors and mentees take time to orient themselves to one another, to locate their partners in

terms of who they are and what they stand for. It is critical for mentoring partners to take time to personally get to know one another; extant research on formal mentoring programs reinforces this notion (Raabe & Beehr, 2003). Programs can assist with this process by providing structure and tools to connect employees. For example, in the ELC program, the first conversation between the mentor and mentee is structured using an exercise that encourages each to consider his or her past mentoring experiences, the strengths and challenges of those relationships, and how past experiences may impact this relationship. Exploring their "history of mentoring" provides one example of a mechanism to support IOFM partners in building comfort and familiarity with one another to increase the likelihood of gaining access to psychosocial functions.

This research contributes to the literature in several important ways. First, this effort offers a glimpse into the relationships of African-American mentees partnered with African-American mentors. An opportunity to study this particular configuration is not common, as most mentoring studies do not have a sufficient number of African-Americans (or any other group of people of color) in the mentor role. As the workforce continues to become more diverse, it will be important to have some understanding of how mentoring relationships shift or change as mentors become more diverse.

This study also offers an opportunity to examine the effects of formalizing the mentoring process. There are a great number of anecdotal descriptions of formal mentoring initiatives (Friel, 2007; Tyler, 2007; Weinstein, 2006). As more organizations adopt formal mentoring, the need for substantive examination of these initiatives will be more critical than ever. Findings from this research can be used to ensure that program participants reap the benefits of well-planned initiatives and program planners avoid the challenges associated with developing and implementing formal mentoring.

Finally, this study provides a sense of how mentoring evolves as it is expanded beyond organizational boundaries. Higgins

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and Kram (2001) ground their research on mentoring constellations with two concepts that are relevant to this effort. They note the changing career landscape and suggest that mentoring relationships will also need to change. Future research should specifically address the need to look beyond traditional boundaries to build mentoring relationships. In addition, ongoing work is needed to explicitly identify opportunities for enhanced career development of minorities that may happen as a result of developing multiple relationships that extend beyond their places of work. The research presented here is an initial attempt to respond to Higgins and Kram's call for a reconceptualization of mentoring at work.

### Implications for Research

This study raises a number of questions that merit additional research. What this study suggests is that access (overall availability and characteristics of mentor) to mentoring may be driven by the types of relationships and social networks that people of color can cultivate. For example, Ibarra's (1993) study of the informal networks found that minority managers had networks with significantly lower levels of homophily than those of their white counterparts. In addition, career advancement for minority managers was related to the configuration of their networks; Ibarra (1995) found that the networks of low-potential minorities tended to be dominated by whites (cross-race relationships), while the networks of high-potential minorities were composed of a balance of same-race and cross-race relationships. Her research speaks to the importance of the pattern and composition of relationships that are developed both within and across racial boundaries.

People of color often develop two complementary networks: one set of relationships with whites who may provide access to resources and opportunities, and another set of relationships with people of color who provide psychosocial and emotional support. Whites, on the other hand, do not have to think about who is in their network in the

same way or include people who are racially different from them within this network. An interesting implication of these different patterns is the suggestion that for people of color, same-race versus interracial mentoring serves very different purposes, or what Kram (1985a) would label as "mentoring functions." Thus, the pattern of access to developmental relationships is clearly tied to the nature, type, and strength of these relationships that also vary as a function of dimensions of diversity, such as race.

An interesting question to explore further is suggested by work within the area of social networks. Raider and Burt (1996) argue that it is "generally important, but more important for people at the social frontier—people at the interface of different social worlds" (p. 189). This proposition suggests that people of color may rely on the benefits of social capital to a greater extent than their white counterparts. However, little current research helps to examine the types of social networks that are the most productive as a function of the diversity dynamics taking place in organizations. Burt and his colleagues would argue that differences in social networks account for performance differences among individuals who are equivalent in terms of experience, education, and ability (Burt, 1992; Raider & Burt, 1996). Their research suggests that strong social capital helps some individuals to experience a better return on their human capital than others. Consistent with Burt, mentoring relationships may be viewed as a competitive advantage for individuals as well as a primary source of social capital for the individual and for the firm.

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### Implications for Practice

We make several recommendations for organizations that are considering participating or initiating an interorganizational for-

mal mentoring program. Decision makers must attend to the following aspects of IOFM implementation: recruitment and selection of participants, matching and training of participants, evaluation, positioning of the program, and funding. Some of these dimensions of IOFM, as well as several of the common mistakes that organizations involved in formal mentoring programs make (and suggestions to counter them), will be discussed.

Organizations that implement IOFM programs should spend valuable time up front in carefully selecting and matching mentors and mentees (Hegstad, 1999). Participation in formal mentoring initiatives requires serious commitment and willingness to invest time and energy into building the relationship. Sponsoring organizations may have an application process in place for mentees who are interested in participating. Applications (or some process requiring potential mentees to consider and share why they stand to benefit from the IOFM program) offer program administrators critical information about the mentees' readiness to engage in mentoring. As a result of expending the effort to secure placement, mentees may be more committed to effectively working with their mentors. It may be

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more challenging to recruit mentors for the program—many more people tend to sign up for access to mentoring than those signing up to act as mentors. So one common mistake program planners make is to accept every single “mentor” they are able to get to sign up for the program. In fact, just as mentees are evaluated for their readiness to be mentored, mentors should also be evaluated for their developmental strengths and willingness to mentor.

It is also important to thoughtfully match mentees and mentors and to provide training for both mentoring partners. While formal mentoring programs hold a great deal of promise, inadequate attention often is

paid to how mentoring partners are brought together—the match. In far too many cases, mentor-mentee pairs are formed in unreliable ways: at random, by geography, for convenience, or because there is a “hunch” that particular people will make a good pair. In fact, how mentoring partners are selected and placed together is critical (Blake-Beard, O'Neill, & McGowan, 2007).

Another common mistake that formal mentoring program implementers make is to plan a kickoff session without regular and rigorous follow-up in the form of check-in sessions and strategically placed reminders and prompts. Again, a huge issue in formal mentoring initiatives is finding time for the relationships. To the extent that IOFM programs include opportunities for participants to spend time together, the effectiveness of these initiatives may be positively affected. For example, Lyons and Oppler (2004) found that the more often mentors and mentees participating in a formal mentoring program met, the more satisfied the mentees were with the relationships. Program administrators need to build in time for participants to receive training as an orientation to prepare them for work as mentoring partners, continuous support throughout the program, and systematic evaluation at the conclusion of the program.

## Conclusions

Organizations are undergoing significant changes related to the interaction across a variety of dimensions related to diversity. One idea explored here is that formal mentoring relationships that cut across traditional organizational boundaries may be a mechanism to facilitate positive interactions among the increasingly diverse members of today's organizations. This study of the Executive Leadership Council's program offers one model of how interorganizational formal mentoring can provide valuable access to mentoring relationships that include trust and psychosocial support, access to legitimate organizational power, and the sharing of social capital across traditional organizational boundaries.

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**AUDREY J. MURRELL**, PhD, is an associate professor of business administration, psychology, public and international affairs at the University of Pittsburgh Katz/CBA School of Business and director of the David Berg Center for Ethics and Leadership. She received her BS from Howard University, magna cum laude, and received an MS and a PhD from the University of Delaware. Professor Murrell conducts research on mentoring, careers in organizations, workforce/supplier diversity, and social issues in management. Dr. Murrell is the author (along with Crosby and Ely) of *Mentoring Dilemmas: Developmental Relationships within Multicultural Organizations* and the forthcoming book (along with Forte-Trummel and Bing) *Blue Mentoring: Innovative Mentoring for Organizational Learning at IBM*.

**STACY BLAKE-BEARD**, PhD, is an associate professor of management at the Simmons School of Management, where she teaches organization behavior. She is also affiliated faculty in the Center for Gender in Organizations at Simmons. Before joining Simmons, she was on the faculty at the Harvard University Graduate School of Education and worked in sales and marketing at Procter & Gamble as well as the human resources department at Xerox. She currently sits on the advisory board of a number of important organizations, including MentorNet, Peace Games, Jobs for the Future, and the Harvard Project on Tenure. Dr. Blake-Beard has published research on gender, diversity, and mentoring in several publications including the *Journal of Career Development*, the *Academy of Management Executive*, *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, the *Journal of Management Development*, the *Journal of Business Ethics*, and *The Diversity Factor*.

**DAVID M. PORTER, JR.** PhD, is executive director of the Walter Kaitz Foundation, the diversity advocacy organization for the cable industry. He also serves as faculty director of the UCLA Anderson African American Leadership Institute. Previously, he served on the faculty of the Howard University School of Business and the UCLA Anderson Graduate School of Management. Dr. Porter earned his PhD in organizational behavior at Harvard University. Prior to pursuing his PhD, he received a BS and an MS in industrial engineering and an AM in sociology from Stanford University. He is a member of the Academy of Management, the American Sociological Association, and the Society for Human Resource Management.

Dr. **ADDIE PERKINS-WILLIAMSON**, a recognized authority on organizational effectiveness, has been consulting, writing, and teaching in her field for more than 20 years. She has provided her expertise in the academic, corporate, and consulting arenas. Dr. Perkins-Williamson has served as an adjunct professor at Teachers College, Columbia University, and the graduate business schools of New York University and Baruch College and served as an internal organizational development expert at IBM, Chase Manhattan Bank, Pfizer, PepsiCo, and American Express. Dr. Perkins-Williamson established her own consulting firm in 1994 and serves as president and CEO. Her most recent clients include General Electric, Deloitte Consulting, MTV Networks, and Johnson and Johnson. Dr. Perkins-Williamson holds a BS from Morgan State University and an MA and PhD from the University of Michigan.

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## NOTE

1. Mentor perceptions were also collected but only in the first follow-up session and are not the focus of data analyses and review here.

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