



Journal of International Students
Volume 10, Issue 10 (2025), pp. 115-136
ISSN: 2162-3104 (Print), 2166-3750 (Online)
jistudents.org
<https://doi.org/10.32674/dvhrm67>



Mentoring that Matters: African Graduate Students' Perceptions of Faculty Mentorship During Transition

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ABSTRACT: *This study explores the perceptions of African graduate students in the United States regarding faculty mentorship, utilizing the framework of Appreciative Inquiry (AI). This research aims to understand how AI, which focuses on strengths, resilience, and positive experiences, can enhance the mentorship experience of African students during their transition into U.S. academic, cultural, and social systems. Through qualitative analysis of in-depth interviews with 13 graduate students, the study reveals five interrelated themes: recognition of student strengths, cultural inclusivity, constructive feedback, emotional support, and development of self-efficacy. While AI revealed mentoring practices that empowered students, the findings also highlight institutional inconsistencies and systemic barriers that limited equitable mentorship experiences. The study concludes with implications for policy and practice, recommending that universities institutionalize culturally responsive, strength-based mentorship programs embedded within broader equity frameworks.*

Keywords: Appreciative Inquiry, African Graduate Students, Faculty Mentorship, Higher Education, International Students, Resilience, and Transition

Received: March 11, 2025 | **Revised:** June 23, 2025 | **Accepted:** Sep 1, 2025
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How to Cite (APA): Ngbabare, S. M. J. (2025). Mentoring that matters: African graduate students' perceptions of faculty mentorship during transition. *Journal of International Students*, 15(10), 115-136. <https://doi.org/10.32674/dvhrm67>

INTRODUCTION

The growing number of international students in the United States continues to refine the educational landscape. There were over one million international students enrolled in U.S. universities and colleges during the 2022–2023 academic year, comprising 5.5% of the total student population (Institute of International Education [IIE], 2024). While students from China and India still represent the largest groups, sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) has shown the highest growth, especially from countries such as Nigeria and Ghana. Not surprisingly, most African students pursue graduate-level studies (Okahana & Zhou, 2023).

Although this demographic shift reflects a growing demand for global education, it also highlights the specific challenges African graduate students face as they transition into new academic, cultural, and social environments (Mesouani, 2025; Yaro & Smith, 2024). The concept of transition in higher education has evolved from being viewed as a brief adjustment phase to being recognized as a complex and multifaceted process. Gale and Parker (2014) categorize transition into three broad conceptualizations: transition as induction, transition as development, and transition as becoming. While induction focuses on initial orientation and development, the becoming lens centers on the ongoing, relational, and identity-shaping experiences of students as they navigate educational systems (Gale and Parker, 2014).

This ‘becoming’ perspective is particularly relevant for African graduate students who are navigating not only academic rigor but also unfamiliar cultural and institutional norms, often in predominantly white institutions. These students frequently encounter acculturative stress, emotional invisibility, and cultural marginalization (Laufer & Gorup, 2019; Ecochard & Fotheringham, 2017), along with pressure to balance academic expectations with personal and cultural integrity (Mwangi, Changamire & Mosselson, 2019).

In this context, faculty mentorship emerges as a critical component of the student experience. In addition to serving as an academic resource, mentorship can act as a relational bridge that facilitates a sense of belonging, builds social capital, and helps students navigate the structural and cultural landscape of U.S. higher education (Schwartz et al., 2018; Stanton-Salazar, 2011). As students move through the stages of transition, adapting, resisting, or reimagining their academic identities, mentorship that matters can shape how students experience success, growth, and agency.

Scholars widely recognize the importance of effective mentorship for international graduate students (Curtis et al., 2016; Lechuga, 2011). Recent studies have also advocated culturally responsive models that affirm students’ identities and values (Kelley et al., 2023). However, such models often remain reactive; they focus on overcoming deficits or removing barriers rather than proactive, which involves cocreating spaces that center students’ strengths and ambitions.

This study introduces Appreciative Inquiry (AI) as a novel mentorship framework that fills this gap. Unlike traditional approaches that diagnose challenges, AI invites mentors and mentees to cocreate a positive vision of

growth. Its four phases are discovery (identifying what works), dreams (imagining what could be), design (planning systems and support), and destiny (sustaining transformation). It supports generative, strengths-based conversations (Whitney & Cooperrider, 2011). When applied to faculty mentorship, AI facilitates not only guidance and support but also mutual learning, relational empowerment, and affirmation of identity.

The strengths-based qualities of African graduate students, such as resilience, adaptability, and resourcefulness (Evans et al., 2024; Mason, 2019), challenge deficit narratives often applied to international students. However, these strengths are rarely leveraged in traditional mentorship models, which may overlook the unique cultural and academic journeys of African students (Turner & Waterman, 2020; Park-Saltzman et al., 2012). An AI-informed mentorship approach can address this gap by recognizing students not as problems to be solved but as full participants in shaping their academic and professional trajectories.

Research purpose and questions

This study examines the perceptions of African graduate students in the U.S. regarding faculty mentorship through the lens of AI. It is guided by the following research questions:

1. How do African graduate students perceive faculty mentorship during their transition into U.S. academia?
2. How does Appreciative Inquiry (AI) foster faculty mentorship for African graduate students?

By examining mentorship through an AI framework, this study provides new insights into how dialogic, future-oriented mentoring can facilitate empowering transitions for African graduate students. It challenges conventional mentorship models and demonstrates how positive, culturally grounded approaches can affirm identity, support academic success, and inspire long-term professional flourishing among international graduate students.

LITERATURE REVIEW

International students, as defined by the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS, 2024), are individuals who enter the United States on an F-1 visa to pursue full-time studies at accredited institutions. Among this group, sub-Saharan African graduate students constitute one of the fastest growing and most underrepresented populations. As they transition into U.S. higher education, they encounter multifaceted challenges, linguistic, cultural, academic, psychological, and social, that significantly impact their academic persistence and well-being. While the adjustment literature acknowledges these obstacles, it often generalizes international students as a homogenous group, thereby overlooking diverse differences based on region, race, or educational background.

This literature review synthesizes key themes relevant to the study of mentoring and transition experiences of African graduate students and is organized into five sections: (1) Language and communication challenges; (2) cultural adaptation and identity; (3) discrimination and sense of belonging; (4)

psychological well-being and support networks; and (5) mentorship and academic persistence. An Appreciative Inquiry (AI) lens is used to highlight students' agency, strengths, and institutional responsibility to foster inclusive mentoring practices.

Language and Communication Challenges

Language remains a persistent challenge for international students, including those from English-speaking countries. While Campbell (2015) identified academic writing as a key barrier to success for doctoral students, Zhou et al. (2018) highlighted classroom interaction and unspoken cultural norms, such as critical participation and informal communication, as major stressors. Kuol (2011), in a qualitative study of African graduate students, reported that despite high levels of English fluency, students struggled with idiomatic expressions and accents, which impacted their participation. Martirosyan et al. (2015) surveyed 129 international students and reported a strong correlation between self-reported English proficiency and GPA, indicating that language barriers have both academic and emotional consequences.

Cultural Adaptation and Identity

International students often must navigate cultural dissonance upon entering U.S. academic institutions. Zhang (2016) reported that students from collectivist cultures, such as many Asian and sub-Saharan African nations, struggled with the self-promotion and individualism emphasized in American education. George Mwangi et al. (2018) used intersectionality theory to examine the experiences of African graduate students, discovering that adjustment challenges were often embedded in campus structures that failed to recognize or value diverse worldviews. Their findings highlighted the tensions between African values of humility and American norms of assertiveness, often resulting in misunderstanding and marginalization.

Discrimination and Sense of Belonging

Several studies have documented how Sub-Saharan African students encounter racialization and exclusion. Lee and Rice (2007), in their mixed-methods study of 24 international students, reported that African participants experienced overt and covert discrimination, including being stereotyped as socially and culturally awkward, barbaric, or ignored by professors and peers. Bofo-Arthur (2014) focused on Ghanaian graduate students and reported that despite strong academic motivation, students often feel invisible in classroom settings. Yaro and Mize Smith (2024) conducted interviews with 20 Sub-Saharan African students at two PWIs. They reported that institutional prestige did not shield them from racial microaggressions, which negatively affected their university identification and sense of belonging. George Mwangi et al. (2018) added that these experiences are often compounded by structural racism embedded in campus culture and advising relationships with faculty members.

Psychological Well-being and Support Networks

International students face psychological stressors stemming from academic pressures, homesickness, and limited social support. Zhou et al. (2017), in a study of 15 Chinese graduate students, identified acculturative stressors such as isolation, unfamiliar academic norms, and limited mental health support. While leisure was found to be a coping mechanism, it sometimes reinforced isolation when students lacked inclusive spaces. Briscoe et al. (2022) conducted a longitudinal study on international color students and reported that students relied heavily on conational peers for emotional and academic support due to barriers in building friendships with domestic students. Similarly, Bi's (2025) recent study examined five international graduate students and concluded that culturally responsive pedagogies enhanced students' engagement, sense of belonging, and academic resilience. The literature underscores that strong social ties and a welcoming classroom atmosphere can mitigate mental health challenges.

Mentorship and Academic Persistence

Mentorship is widely recognized as essential to international students' academic success. The Council for Graduate Schools (2024) defines effective mentorship as holistic, addressing academic, cultural, and emotional needs. Holley and Caldwell (2012) reported that doctoral students value mentors who are approachable, culturally aware, and available, with some preferring mentors who share their racial or gender identity and others prioritizing discipline expertise. Curtis et al. (2016) similarly reported that strong faculty relationships improved confidence and retention among underrepresented students. However, George Mwangi et al. (2018) noted that the needs of African students are often overlooked due to institutional assumptions and cultural gaps. Glass et al. (2015) call for mentorship models that prioritize the lived experiences of international students, recognizing their strengths and aspirations rather than focusing on deficits.

Gaps and Appreciative Inquiry Lenses

Although literature has expanded in recent years, key gaps remain. Few studies focus specifically on Sub-Saharan African graduate students, whose experiences reflect unique intersections of race, culture, and regional history. As a result, there is limited context-specific understanding, despite evidence from Bofo-Arthur (2014), George Mwangi et al. (2018), and Yaro & Mize Smith (2024) that this group faces distinct challenges. Additionally, many existing studies, including those by Campbell (2015), Lee & Rice (2007), and Zhou et al. (2018), primarily frame international students in terms of deficits. There remains little focus on African students' strengths, resilience, and agency within U.S. institutions.

While Holley and Caldwell (2012) and Curtis et al. (2016) accentuate student-centered mentoring, many institutional practices still frame mentorship primarily in terms of academic output. Few studies explore mentorship as a relational, culturally informed, and transformative practice, particularly for African students (Mwangi et al., 2018; Glass et al., 2015). This study adopts an AI approach to address these gaps. Focusing on what works in faculty–student

mentoring relationships shifts attention from barriers to assets and from surviving to thriving. AI enables the exploration of culturally affirming mentorship practices that recognize and support the strengths of African graduate students, providing a more inclusive and hopeful framework for faculty engagement.

This review highlights the pressing need for culturally sensitive mentorship that supports African students' academic, social, and emotional transitions into U.S. higher education. Using AI, the study aims to identify and enhance effective mentoring practices, providing a pathway toward more inclusive and empowering faculty engagement that enables African graduate students to thrive.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study utilizes Appreciative Inquiry (AI) as a theoretical framework to investigate African graduate students' perceptions of faculty mentorship during their transition to U.S. institutions. Rooted in social constructionism, AI offers a strengths-based, relational approach that seeks to uncover what gives life to individuals and institutions when they function at their best (Stavros et al., 2015; Cooperrider & Whitney, 2011). Rather than focusing solely on deficits or problems, AI encourages a reimagining of possibilities through a collaborative and hopeful lens. The AI process is structured into six key stages, commonly referred to as the 6-D model: define, discover, dream, design, delivery, and destiny (Coetzee & Heyns, 2016; Cooperrider & Whitney, 2011). These phases are particularly relevant for exploring mentorship, as they invite reflection on what has worked, what is desired, and what could be cocreated between students and mentors.

Each phase of AI informed the study's design and data interpretation: 1). The Define stage helped refine the research purpose and questions to focus on transition and mentoring experiences. 2). In the discovery phase, participants reflected on meaningful mentoring experiences, both formal and informal, that supported their academic and emotional well-being. 3). The Dream and Design stages were engaged during analysis, as the data revealed students' aspirations for ideal mentoring relationships and their visions for more inclusive academic environments. 5). Finally, Deliver and Destiny informed the implications of the findings by pointing toward strategies for institutional transformation and culturally responsive mentorship practices. Figure 1 below shows the 6-D model of the AE.

AI was preferred over other strength-based models, such as positive psychology and resilience theory, due of its dialogic, co-constructive, and future-oriented nature. While positive psychology emphasizes internal traits, resilience theory focuses on overcoming adversity, and AI focuses on collective imagination, shared agency, and the potential for systemic change. This makes AI more appropriate for a study examining cross-cultural faculty–student mentoring within complex institutional settings that require both structural sensitivity and cultural responsiveness.

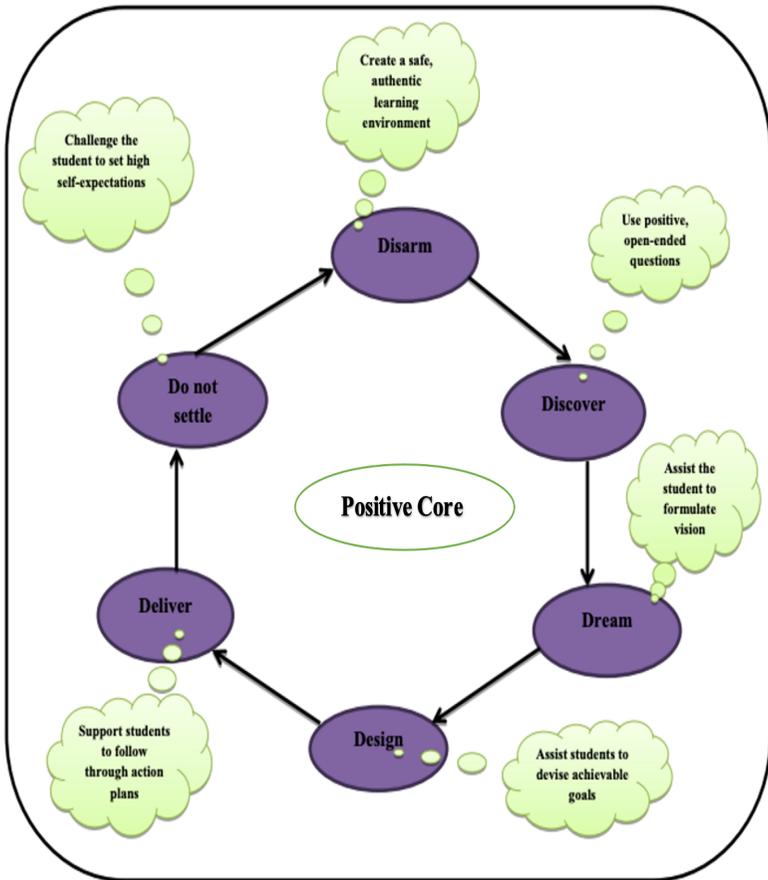


Figure 1: 6-D phase approach to educational practices (Coetzee & Heyns, 2016)

Previous research has demonstrated the efficacy of AI in educational settings, particularly in fostering student engagement and success (Butler et al., 2016; Bloom et al., 2013). AI has been shown to increase student engagement, motivation, and academic performance by focusing on positive experiences and strengths (He & Hutson, 2018; Mamiseishvili, 2011). For international students, including those from Africa, AI offers a valuable lens for reimagining mentorship as a strength-based and identity-affirming relationship. Glass et al. (2015) and Jackson et al. (2019) show how AI-informed practices help students transition more smoothly, enhance their academic and social integration, and promote long-term success. This study builds on those insights, using AI to uncover how African graduate students define empowering mentorship while affirming their cultural and academic identities (Moglen, 2017; Campbell, 2015).

However, the use of AI in this study also warrants reflection on its limitations, particularly when applied in complex and inequitable contexts, such as cross-cultural faculty–student mentoring. Critics argue that AI’s focus on the positive can obscure or silence brutal truths, including experiences of racism, marginalization, or institutional failure (Clouder & King, 2015; Shuayb et al., 2009). AI may unintentionally steer data collection and interpretation in predetermined directions, limiting the exploration of conflict, power, and systemic injustice. Clouder and King (2015) noted that the insistence on affirmativity can yield partial or overly sanitized narratives, especially when power asymmetries are not explicitly addressed. Similarly, Shuayb et al. (2009) caution that AI may not be suitable for research into social issues where participants’ experiences are defined mainly by inequity or trauma.

In this study, the researcher remained mindful of these critiques and engaged in practices that counterbalance the limitations of AI. For example, participants were encouraged to reflect on both affirming and challenging aspects of mentorship, and the study incorporated peer debriefing and member checking to validate interpretations. By anchoring the inquiry into participants lived experiences and allowing critical insights to emerge organically, the study sought to maintain analytical depth while drawing on AI’s generative power.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study, rooted in social constructivism, investigates African graduate students' perceptions of faculty mentorship during their transition into U.S. graduate programs. Social constructivism suggests that individuals interpret the world through their personal experiences, which are shaped by cultural, geographic, and social contexts (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2002). As noted by Patton (2002), these contextual factors profoundly influence individuals’ realities, necessitating an understanding of these specific frameworks.

To explore how participants make meaning of their mentoring experiences, a phenomenological research design was employed (Husserl, 1958; 1938; Heidegger, 1889; 1976). Phenomenology aligns well with a constructivist worldview, as both prioritize lived experience and the construction of meaning. Phenomenology focuses on uncovering the essence of participants’ experiences through their own words. In contrast, constructivism recognizes that those experiences are shaped through dialog and interpretation within specific cultural and institutional contexts. Together, they provide a coherent philosophical foundation for understanding the depth and diversity of African graduate students’ perceptions of faculty mentorship.

By centering on students’ lived experiences, this design enables the researcher to explore how mentorship is perceived, interpreted, and valued by African graduate students during their transitional period into U.S. academia. The emphasis on meaning-making through narrative and dialog also complements the AI approach embedded in this study.

Participant Recruitment and Data Collection

Following Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, this study recruited thirteen international African graduate students from research universities across the United States. In phenomenological research, the goal is to achieve depth rather than breadth, thereby allowing rich and detailed accounts of lived experiences. A sample size of 5-25 participants is typically considered adequate to reach saturation and uncover the essential structures of a phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). The thirteen participants in this study provided sufficient diversity and depth to capture the unique experiences of African graduate students transitioning into U.S. higher education. All participants were born in sub-Saharan African countries, had completed at least two semesters of graduate study in the U.S., and had no prior international education experience. These criteria ensure that participants can reflect meaningfully on their transition experiences and interactions with faculty mentors.

A combination of purposive and snowball sampling was employed. Purposive sampling enabled the deliberate selection of individuals who met the study's inclusion criteria (Creswell, 2018; Finlay, 2009): international status, sub-Saharan African origin, first-generation graduate student status (in most cases), and at least one year of graduate study completed. Participants were recruited via emails and flyers distributed through international student service offices, academic departments, and African student associations on U.S. campuses. Snowball sampling was also utilized: initial participants referred to peers who shared similar experiences and were willing to participate (Glesne, 2011).

The participant pool included eight doctoral and five master's students, ranging in age from 25 to 46 years. Eight participants were male, and five were female. Seven participants were married with children, while the others were either single or single parents. Ten participants identified as first-generation college students, and only three reported having prior formal mentorship experience. While all the participants had received instruction in English, many also spoke additional languages, including Swahili and French. They represented diverse cross-sections of East, West, Central, and South Africa, which contributed to a broad understanding of cultural, academic, and social transition experiences.

The interviews were conducted virtually via Zoom with thirteen participants between January 2024 and December 2024. Each participant received an email detailing the study's purpose, role, and consent form, which was signed before the interviews commenced. The interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and followed a semi structured interview protocol that allowed flexibility in probing emerging themes (Creswell, 2018; Patton, 2015). The questions invited participants to reflect on experiences of support, affirmation, and challenge. Examples include *"Can you describe a time when a faculty mentor supported you during your graduate journey?"* and *"What strengths or experiences did your mentor acknowledge or build upon?"* The full interview guide is provided in Appendix A.

As a participant observer, the researcher recorded observational field notes, including tone, body language, and emotional cues, during the interviews. These notes were supplemented by reflective memos to assist in interpretation and

coding. Triangulation was employed through triangulation, combining data from interview transcripts, observational notes, and researcher reflections. This approach enhanced the study's trustworthiness without overstating its methodological breadth.

Member checking was conducted with a subset of participants who reviewed synthesized themes and interpretations for accuracy and resonance with their lived experiences. The participants provided clarifications, corrections, and confirmation to ensure authentic representation of their narratives. Peer debriefing involved consultations with two qualitative researchers familiar with international student issues and African graduate student experiences. These colleagues offered critical insights into data interpretation, thematic coding, and bias reduction (Glesne, 2011).

DATA ANALYSIS

The purpose of the data analysis in this study was to understand how African graduate students make sense of their transition into U.S. higher education and the role that faculty mentorship plays in that process. Guided by a phenomenological approach outlined by Moustakas (1994), the analysis focused on uncovering common meanings and experiences as described by the participants themselves. Each interview transcript was read multiple times to gain a thorough understanding of individual perspectives before points of convergence across narratives were identified. Using open coding, significant statements were labeled with descriptive codes that captured the essence of the participants' reflections. These codes were then grouped into broader categories through axial coding, allowing for the emergence of key themes that reflected shared realities and challenges (Glesne, 2013).

To support this process, MAXQDA software was used to manage and analyze the data systematically. After all the interview transcripts were uploaded to the platform, the researcher segmented the text line by line and applied initial codes to meaningful phrases. Memos were added throughout to document emerging ideas and interpretations. MAXQDA's code matrix made it easier to track recurring codes, examine overlaps, and organize related codes into coherent themes. This process allowed the researcher to move easily between individual stories and collective patterns.

For example, one participant explained, "Even though I learned in English back home, I struggled to keep up with my professors because they used so many idioms I had never heard before." This was coded as "*Idiomatic barriers*" and contributed to the broader theme *Language and Communication Challenges*. This illustrates how fluency in English did not necessarily prepare students for the nuances of academic and cultural expression in U.S. classrooms.

Ethical considerations were integrated into every stage of the research. To ensure the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants, all identifying information was removed from the final report (Patton, 2015; Creswell, 2013). All the participants were asked to voluntarily provide informed consent and were fully aware of the study's purpose and their right to stop participating at any time.

These thorough validation strategies and ethical practices ensured that the findings genuinely reflected the perceptions of African graduate students regarding faculty mentorship during their transition into U.S. graduate programs.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Perceptions of Faculty Mentorship

This section presents findings on how African graduate students perceive faculty mentorship during their transition into U.S. academia. This period is often shaped by academic, cultural, and social challenges (Glass et al., 2015; Koo, Baker, & Yoon, 2021). Faculty mentorship can help address these challenges by offering academic guidance, emotional support, and, when effective, a sense of affirmation and inclusion (Lunsford et al., 2017; Lechuga, 2011). Interview findings reveal four key themes: (1) navigating cultural and academic adjustment, (2) academic and personal support, (3) sense of belonging and inclusivity, and (4) faculty bias in academic interaction. These themes highlight both supportive and problematic aspects of mentorship, emphasizing the need for institutions to confront systemic inequities embedded within faculty–student mentoring structures in higher education.

Navigating Cultural and Academic Adjustment

Many African graduate students enter U.S. institutions with strong academic aspirations; however, their early experiences are often shaped by linguistic, pedagogical, and cultural dissonance (Li et al., 2010; Zhang, 2016). The students highlighted that initial struggles with language, communication styles, and unfamiliar teaching expectations often left them feeling disoriented.

Language barriers and classroom participation

Although the participants were proficient in English, they reported difficulties understanding colloquialisms, rapid speech, and accents that differed from their own. These barriers impact class participation and peer engagement. Mashimba shared:

“Switching from learning through Swahili to learning in English for all subjects was a big, big struggle. Even today, I sometimes struggle to find the right words to explain myself in English.”

Similarly, Amani commented on the disconnection he felt with Black American students:

“One thing that I truly found difficult at first was the Black Americans... I felt they speak so fast... they just cut words and don’t finish sentences. It becomes embarrassing to even have a conversation, so you just avoid it altogether.

These experiences mirror those of Martirosyan et al. (2015), who reported that language and communication issues often create exclusionary classroom dynamics for international students.

Unfamiliar Teaching and Learning Expectations

Many participants struggled with transitioning from teacher-centered pedagogy in their home countries to U.S. expectations for discussion-based, student-driven learning. Babadinga described his experience as follows:

“The classroom was potentially a hub for cultural shock for me... it was very shocking to see the much smaller, seminar classes of about seven--eight people... engaging in in-depth discussion for hours was not easy; I wasn't used to it.”

Temu also noted challenges in adapting to academic writing and citation conventions:

“Academic writing was challenging... I had to learn different styles of citations, which was cumbersome.”

These accounts reveal a discrepancy between students' prior learning experiences and new academic expectations, underscoring a structural gap that institutions must address through targeted mentoring and educational support services (Li et al., 2010).

Academic and Personal Support

While many students experience mentorship, which helps ease their academic transition, the quality and depth of support vary greatly across participants (Lunsford et al., 2017; Curtin, Malley, & Stewart, 2016).

Faculty as a Catalyst for Academic Success

Several participants shared how meaningful faculty mentorship positively impacted their academic growth. Seboo stated:

“My academic advisor was very supportive and would counsel me whenever I felt lost.”

Tina recalled how affirming feedback from her mentor dismantled feelings of inadequacy:

“Professor Harrison said that we are here to learn... she doesn't expect us to know everything. She's asking us to have a growth mindset. That just broke down all the impostor stuff that was hitting me.”

These examples suggest that affirming mentorship can challenge internalized doubt but also raise questions about why so many students experience impostor syndrome in the first place. Mentorship must be understood as one piece within a broader structure that can either support or alienate students (Lechuga (2011)).

Faculty Engagement Beyond Academics

Personal gestures from faculty, such as checking in on students' well-being or helping during life transitions, were greatly appreciated. Seboo recalled:

“One of my faculty members... surprised me with a package of clothing... That’s something I didn’t expect... they go beyond just the business that brought me here and I find that so unique.”

Chioma shared:

“My professor even held a baby shower for me... this kind of support was surprising and helpful.”

These moments illustrate how mentoring can extend beyond academics to foster student well-being. However, they also reveal a systemic gap in that such support often depends on individual goodwill rather than institutional mandates.

Sense of Belong and Inclusivity

The participants frequently described feelings of marginalization within their departments and institutions. In this context, faculty mentorship has become a tool for navigating institutional invisibility (Baker, & Yoon, 2021; Glass et al., 2015).

Faculty Mentorship Reducing Isolation

Mentors who recognized and affirmed the participants’ identities made the students feel acknowledged. Amani said,

“Sometimes, professors assume you’re African American until they hear your accent. Then, they start doubting until they see your performance... then they’re like, oh, you’re capable.”

Simba noted the lack of formal structures for African students:

“There’s no community that... is structured somewhere when people come in... you have to determine yourself. However, having a professor guiding you makes a difference.”

These findings underscore a critical need for institutions to create more inclusive environments where such support is structured and expected and not left to chance (Glass et al. (2015)).

Faculty Bias in Academic Interactions

Not all the participants reported positive mentoring experiences. Several recounted being overlooked, misunderstood, or held to different standards. Babadinga shared:

“I would make a point, and the professor would not even comment... then another student would make the same point, and the professor would go on and on.”

These experiences echo existing research on implicit bias in faculty–student interactions (Li et al., 2017). They also call for systemic change in how faculty are trained to support international and racially minoritized students.

Appreciative Faculty Mentorship

This section examines how Appreciative Inquiry (AI), as a strengths-based framework, shaped faculty mentorship for African graduate students. While AI helps shift the focus toward students’ resilience and cultural assets (He & Hutson, 2018), its impact is largely dependent on individual faculty efforts. The findings highlight that although AI-inspired mentoring fostered confidence and purpose, it also revealed persistent structural gaps. This underscores the need for mentorship approaches that are not only affirming but also institutionally supported to address the systemic challenges African international students face in U.S. higher education (Glass et al., 2015; Singh, 2021).

Recognizing Student Strengths

A central component of AI is affirming students’ existing skills and knowledge. The participants reported that when faculty acknowledged their academic background and prior experience, it helped counteract the negative effects of racial and linguistic stereotypes. For example, Chioma shared how her advisor encouraged her to pursue African-centered research:

“My advisor told me to pursue what I am passionate about.”

Similarly, Mashimba noted:

“Coming here, I found the system a bit friendlier... In Kenya, I was used to doing things by rote... Here, there’s a lot of emphasis on truly getting the content.”

While affirming students’ strengths proved valuable, the inconsistency across faculty highlights that AI-informed mentorship remains far from institutionalized practice (He & Hutson, 2018; Zhang, 2016). Without sustained institutional efforts to train and support faculty in culturally responsive approaches, such mentorship is likely to remain uneven. Moreover, the frequent need to affirm competence can unintentionally signal assumed deficits, revealing deeper issues of bias and systemic marginalization.

Cultural Inclusivity Fostering

Many students described moments when faculty validated their cultural identities and communication styles. Seboo expressed pride in his accent and appreciated professors who accepted it without correction. Kumba recalled:

“She told me... ‘You don’t need to change the way you speak. Just be yourself and express yourself the way you feel.’”

Meaningful Faculty–Student Relationships

Students expressed appreciation for faculty who offered support beyond academics, which contributed to their well-being and sense of belonging. Seboo shared:

“My director checks on me, like every two days just to see how I’m getting on with my family.”

Chioma recalled how her mentor organized a baby shower, an act of care that made her feel valued. However, such gestures, while meaningful, highlight the absence of institutional structures for consistent support. When care depends on individual goodwill (Holley & Caldwell, 2012), many students are more likely to fall through cracks.

Constructive Feedback

The participants emphasized the value of balanced, strength-based feedback that motivated them to persist and improve. Babadinga noted:

“She gives feedback in a way that pushes you to improve... She points out specific strengths and areas for growth. It’s not just about making you feel good, but truly caring.”

Several students also described mentors who pushed them to contribute and share their views and experiences in class, despite initial hesitations. Temu noted:

“I noticed the way teachers provoke students to be innovative... they respect the ideas and views of students, which was inspiring.”

This style of feedback supported student development in accordance with the findings of Curtin et al. (2016), but again, its presence was uneven. Several students experienced environments where feedback was either absent, overly critical, or misaligned with their cultural or linguistic context. While AI encourages affirming and constructive engagement, the broader academic culture often prioritizes critique and competition, leaving students vulnerable to discouragement.

Building Resilience and Self-efficacy

The participants also credited mentoring relationships with helping them build resilience and self-efficacy in the face of academic and cultural challenges. Temu shared how recalling his past adaptation to English-language instruction in Tanzania gave him confidence to do so again in the U.S.

“They need to understand that back in Africa, we also have knowledge... we are not coming to America empty-headed.”

Other participants reported that their ability to adapt and succeed was boosted by mentors, who pushed them to reflect and capitalize on past experiences as strengths: Amani, for example, reflected:

“After all the life I’ve gone through, I knew the only way forward for me was education.”

While resilience is often celebrated, Lunsford et al. (2017) and Glass et al. (2015) overemphasize it as risks individualizing structural problems. It places the burden of adjustment on students rather than prompting institutions to create more equitable conditions. Encouraging resilience without addressing the underlying causes of stress, such as linguistic bias, a lack of community, and unfamiliar pedagogical norms, limits the transformative potential of mentorship.

While Appreciative Inquiry presents valuable strategies for affirming and supporting African graduate students, the findings indicate that its application remains uneven and largely relies on individual faculty initiatives. Persistent structural inequities in faculty preparation, institutional norms, and resource allocation continue to influence the quality of mentorship. To create truly inclusive academic environments, institutions must move beyond endorsing AI as a personal approach and embed its principles into policies, evaluation frameworks, and professional development programs.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Implications

The findings of this study underscore the critical, although uneven, role of faculty mentorship in shaping the academic and personal experiences of African graduate students transitioning into U.S. academia. While the Appreciative Inquiry (AI) framework helps reveal the value of strength-based mentoring approaches, the data also highlights structural inconsistencies, institutional neglect, and the need for deeper cultural responsiveness. Therefore, policy and practice implications must extend beyond individual mentorship efforts and focus on structural reform and inclusive institutional policies:

Institutional Investment in Inclusive, Strength-Based Mentorship

Although AI can support resilience and affirm students’ strengths (He & Hutson, 2018), the mentoring practices reported in this study were highly dependent on individual faculty initiatives. Universities should institutionalize formal mentorship programs that draw on AI principles while being embedded in a broader equity-oriented framework. Such programs must include structured training on recognizing prior academic capital, providing growth-oriented feedback, and navigating cross-cultural communication. However, caution is necessary to avoid idealizing AI without realizing its limitations, particularly its

potential to obscure inequities when applied uncritically (Bushe, 2007; Grant & Humphries, 2006). Faculty training must explicitly engage with systemic power dynamics, bias, and the complexities of mentoring across racial and cultural differences (Cunliffe, 2020).

Culturally Responsive Teaching and Faculty Development

Mentorship rooted in cultural affirmation is especially vital for African graduate students navigating racialized academic contexts. Faculty who integrate students' linguistic, educational, and cultural knowledge into teaching and advising foster inclusion and belonging (Glass et al., 2015; Evans et al., 2024). However, such affirming experiences were inconsistently reported in this study, pointing to a need for institutional mandates, not just recommendations, for faculty to undergo cultural responsiveness training. Drawing from critiques of AI (Watkins et al., 2011), mentorship models should resist overly optimistic framings that ignore the lived realities of racism, marginalization, and systemic exclusion.

Reframing Resilience through Efficacy

Many participants demonstrated resilience and a strong sense of self-efficacy. However, these traits are often framed as individual coping mechanisms rather than outcomes of institutional support. Affirmative feedback was appreciated, but it cannot substitute for structural change. Institutions must avoid celebrating student resilience without addressing the inequities that make such resilience necessary (Fitzgerald et al., 2010). Mentorship must include space for vulnerability, critique, and the acknowledgment of systemic barriers.

Community Building and Peer Support

While faculty support is essential, peer networks and student-led affinity groups provide crucial emotional and academic support for participants. However, many of these communities were informal and underresourced. Universities should fund and institutionalize peer mentorship and culturally grounded student organizations, recognizing them as critical complements rather than replacements for faculty mentorship (Zhang, 2016; Koo et al., 2021).

Policy recommendations for sustainable support

Orientation programs should be restructured to go beyond administrative onboarding and include long-term academic coaching, culturally responsive mentoring, and institutional accountability mechanisms. These programs must be tailored to meet the unique needs of international students and be maintained throughout their academic journeys (Ching et al., 2017; Kuo, 2011). Furthermore, institutional policies must prioritize mentorship equity, ensuring that all students, regardless of background, have access to quality mentorship that is affirming, culturally competent, and structurally supported.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the experiences of African graduate students as they navigated faculty mentorship during their transition into U.S. academia. While AI offers a valuable lens to highlight what works in mentorship, the findings reveal that strength-based approaches often operate within and are constrained by unequal institutional structures. The participants shared moments of transformative mentorship, but these were frequently isolated rather than institutionalized.

This study offers a more nuanced perspective on mentorship by positioning individual student experiences within the broader context of structural power and exclusion. It reinforces existing scholarship on the pivotal role of faculty–student relationships in graduate education (Glass et al., 2015; Lunsford et al., 2017) while also engaging critically with Appreciative Inquiry by acknowledging its limitations when applied without paying attention to systemic inequities (Bushe, 2007; Grant & Humphries, 2006; Fitzgerald et al., 2010). For mentorship to be truly affirming, it must not only recognize students’ strengths but also confront and address institutional barriers and embedded biases.

Support for African graduate students requires institutions to move beyond well-meaning affirmations toward a more comprehensive and accountable approach to mentorship. Strength-based practices should be part of a broader commitment to equity, which includes faculty development, inclusive pedagogy, peer networks, and policy changes. When anchored in institutional commitment rather than individual effort alone, mentorship can evolve into a catalyst for meaningful and lasting transformation across the academic landscape.

Acknowledgment

In the preparation of this manuscript, I did not utilize artificial intelligence (AI) tools for content creation with the following capacity:

None

- Some sections, with minimal or no editing
- Some sections, with extensive editing
- Entire work, with minimal or no editing
- Entire work, with extensive editing

This study did not incorporate content generated by artificial intelligence (AI) tools. There are no sections where AI tools are employed. This article was written in accordance with ethical standards and guidelines for academic integrity. The final content has been thoroughly reviewed and edited to ensure accuracy, relevance, and adherence to academic standards.

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