

# **Conceptualizing a Mentorship Program for University Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder**

by

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B.A. (Hons), University of Calgary, 2009

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## Abstract

Mentoring students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in post-secondary education settings can provide beneficial and efficient support for enhancing their educational and social experiences. This study provides an in-depth understanding of a university mentorship program using a grounded theory approach to determine how the Autism Mentorship Initiative (AMI), a mentorship program designed for students with ASD, was experienced by its participants. Participants were undergraduate and graduate university students attending Simon Fraser University (SFU). Data was collected from semi-structured interviews with both mentees (SFU students with ASD) and mentors (SFU students without ASD); as well as other AMI documents, in order to identify common themes that emerged throughout the mentoring process. By using a grounded theory method, the following five broad themes were identified and interrelated under the core theme of *A Mentee-centered Approach*. These broad themes include: (1) *The Natural Progression of the Relationship*, (2) *The Versatile Mentor*, (3) *The Meeting Process*, (4) *Identifying and Implementing Goals*, and (5) *Learning Together*. Subthemes also emerged within the broader themes that further explained how each theme emerged from the “ground” up. This study provides insight into the experiences of the participants in AMI in order to provide an exploration of a mentorship program that has potential to inform support services and practices for students with ASD in higher education. The dual-perspective approach (of considering the experiences of both mentees and mentors) gives a rich description of what comprises mentorship for students with ASD.

**Keywords:** autism spectrum disorder; mentorship, mentor; mentee; self-advocacy; academic skills; social skills

## **Dedication**

This work is dedicated to the nine mentees and ten mentors who met with me throughout the school year and volunteered their precious time to share their experiences with me. Thank you AMI participants.

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I would like to acknowledge the support and guidance of my senior supervisor, Dr. Elina Birmingham. While I researched and explored the mentoring experiences of the AMI participants, she was supporting me as *my mentor*, being encouraging, supportive, and quintessential in her role. Her hard work and dedication to research, keen eye for detail, and strong commitment to her students has been an invaluable inspiration to me as a researcher.

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# **Chapter 1.**

## **Introduction**

Prior to attending graduate school I received training in Applied Behavioural Analysis and worked in a therapeutic capacity with individuals diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Many of these individuals were low-functioning in both cognitive and social arenas. Once in graduate school, I became aware of and interested in adult students with ASD who have the cognitive ability for university entrance, yet, are in major need of support in order to successfully navigate university life. In discussion with a learning specialist at the university's Centre for Students with Disabilities (CSD), I learned that the CSD was unable to appropriately serve students with ASD with the services and supports they had in place for other students with disabilities (such as extra exam time or learning accommodations within the classrooms). Students with ASD were seen to need a different type of support that addressed both their unique learning needs and the challenges they shared, such as social and executive function deficits. A review of the literature on university students with ASD confirmed for me that social skills deficits are a hallmark symptom of ASD and executive function deficits do, indeed, impede academic functioning and learning.

To support students with ASD, the CSD and colleagues from the Department of Psychology (Dr. Iarocci) and Faculty of Education (Dr. Birmingham) instituted a program called the Autism Mentorship Initiative (AMI) in which students with autism are paired with a mentor, with whom they met on a weekly basis in order to address personalized goals as university students. When I learned about AMI it had been running for one full year. Although specialists at the CSD seemed happy with the program, they had no real understanding of what was taking place between mentors and mentees or how the program was being experienced by participants. This raised a number of questions for me. I wanted to know how a mentorship at university for students with ASD actually

worked. Additionally, I wanted to know how the participants themselves felt about the mentoring program and if they perceived it to be helpful. These questions, along with the paucity of research on students with ASD in higher education, led me to study the AMI at SFU. More specifically, I chose to do an in-depth analysis of the experiences of AMI students and their mentors. My hope was that such work could help inform post-secondary institutions on how to better support students with ASD in higher education.

## **1.1. Statement of the Problem**

Enrolment rates for students with ASD in post secondary education are increasing, but support services for these students are not keeping up. In reviewing the research literature on students in higher education, I found a paucity of studies addressing how university was experienced by students with ASD. Furthermore, there was only one very recent study done on a mentorship program for students with ASD. Most importantly, there were no studies that explored, in depth, the experiences of university students with ASD who were participants in a mentorship program. In order to provide a thorough investigation and exploration of the mentoring process in AMI, a grounded theory approach was used to systematically organize the data from interviews and documents to reveal themes that were salient to both mentees and mentors in AMI.

## **1.2. Research Aim**

In this study, I explored how the AMI at SFU was experienced by mentees and mentors over two academic terms in university. Giving a voice to both mentees and mentors in this study is a preeminent method for determining how to best support university students with ASD. My research question, therefore, was: How was the AMI experienced by its participants?

### **1.3. Definition of Post-secondary Terms**

For the present study, the research I reviewed on the topics of students with ASD in higher education, peer mentoring, and mentoring students with ASD in higher education was conducted in Canada, the United States (U.S.) and the United Kingdom (U.K.). The terms “college” and “university” are used interchangeably amongst these studies making it sometimes difficult to determine the type of academic setting or institution to which the authors refer. Therefore, in the present study, I will address both college and university contexts, with an emphasis on the university context, as it more closely pertains to the context of AMI. Terms that are used throughout this study such as *college*, *university*, *post-secondary*, and *higher education* are meant to entail that practices can be employed within any of these contexts.

## **Chapter 2. Review of Literature**

### **2.1. The role of literature in grounded theory research**

Grounded theory provides a set of useful research strategies for exploration of a phenomenon. A grounded theorist begins with a general research question instead of a preconceived hypothesis (Charmaz, 1990) and explores the experiences of participants in order to gain an in-depth understanding of a phenomenon or process. A grounded theory design is a qualitative procedure through which the researcher generates theory that explains a phenomenon or process at a broad conceptual level (Creswell, 2012). It is of great utility to the researcher when existing theories do not address the problem at hand and a description of a process is needed. For the beginning qualitative researcher, grounded theory offers a step-by-step systematic procedure for analyzing qualitative data and coding the information gathered from participants into themes (Creswell, 2012). Based on one set of data, the researcher is informed of the direction in which to take the next steps in the research, such as how to structure the second round of interview questions and what questions to ask participants in follow-up interviews. Thus, the theory is “grounded” in the data, as it emerges through subsequent data analysis from coding the data into broad themes.

#### **2.1.1. Theoretical integration**

If theory emerges from data analysis, rather than guides data analysis, what then is the role of a literature review in grounded theory research? In their first publication, Glaser and Strauss (1967) advised against doing a literature review in the early stages of the research process, which contradicts most other methodologies. A literature review is generally seen as a foundation upon which to build one’s own research and a place to consider existing theories in relation to one’s own research. Glaser and Strauss (1967) maintained that a substantive literature review done in the early stages of the grounded theory approach would stifle the development of emerging theories with preconceived ideas. In fact, these authors recommended that one actually *ignore* the extant literature until the very end of the analyses. However, in more recent years, the position of Strauss

changed significantly as he collaborated with Juliet Corbin, who promoted a more prescribed approach to grounded theory than the original conceptualization. Strauss saw the merit in adding systematic procedures to grounded theory and became an advocate for the early review of relevant literature (Dunne, 2011). However, doing a more substantive literature review is recommended towards the end of the analyses.

### **2.1.2. The present study**

My decision to use grounded theory came from the need to explore a phenomenon not yet thoroughly researched. Grounded theory methodology allows for such exploration. As a qualitative researcher, I felt it was best to use grounded theory as it recommends engaging in some literature before the data collection begins, which allowed me to gain an understanding of the gaps in research for university students with ASD. It allowed me to explore literature while also staying close to the data at all times in my analysis to ensure that it is *the data* that are driving the research, and not any preconceived notions. The literature review initially allowed me to find the gaps in the research and remained ongoing during further data collection and analyses. The literature review did not so much guide the data collection as it was guided *by* the emerging data. In doing so, the relevance of my research was confirmed and a theory could be derived based upon the experiences of participants in AMI.

## **2.2. Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)**

ASD is a neurodevelopmental disorder that affects afflicted individuals with varying degrees of severity (APA, 2013). A diagnosis of ASD is based upon observed behaviours (Adreon & Durocher, 2007), as defined in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, fifth edition (DSM-5; APA, 2013) and is usually made by a psychologist (Adreon & Durocher, 2007). ASD is characterized by deficits in social communication and interaction with restricted, repetitive patterns of behaviour, interests, or activities that cause significant impairments to the individual's daily functioning (APA, 2013). These symptoms are present in early childhood and are not better explained by other factors, such as intellectual disability or a global developmental delay (APA, 2013). ASD, as understood as a "spectrum", means that each person with ASD can be affected in different



ways and, therefore, may communicate, interact, behave, and/or learn in different ways as well (CDC, 2014). The signs and symptoms of ASD usually last throughout a person's lifetime (CDC, 2014).

The Center for Disease Control (CDC) in the U.S. estimates that 1:68 individuals are on the spectrum and that this number is increasing (CDC, 2014). Although Canada does not have a national surveillance system, current provincial estimates from the National Epidemiologic Database for the Study of Autism in Canada (NEDSAC; 2012) hover around 1:94. Almost half (46%) of children with ASD have average to above average intellectual ability, with an IQ of 85 and higher (CDC, 2014). These children are considered to be cognitively "higher functioning" than others with ASD, described as having *high-functioning autism* (HFA; Sanders, 2009; Carpenter & Soorya, 2009). As such, HFA refers to individuals with ASD who meet DSM-5 criteria, yet do not have an intellectual disability. The increasingly high proportion of children diagnosed with HFA indicates a rise in the number of young adults to have HFA. These adults are likely to apply for post-secondary education, as they are capable of meeting the academic requirements of colleges and universities. However, despite their cognitive abilities being in the normal range, these students still face challenges in social communication and behaviour associated with the ASD phenotype, which creates barriers and impedes their learning in higher education.

## **2.3. ASD in higher education: Legislation and prevalence**

### **2.3.1. Legislation**

Over thirty years ago, in the US, there was no legal requirement of the state to provide educational services to children with disabilities (VanBergeijk, 2008). This changed when the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA), was first enacted in 1975 (as EACHA, Education for All Handicapped Children Act), authorized in 1990 (as IDEA, Individuals with Disabilities Education Act), and most recently revised in 2004 (to IDEIA). Students with ASD are often eligible to receive special education services under this act and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. IDEIA and Section 504 both specify that school districts, including universities, provide all eligible

students with a public education that meets their individual needs, such that it provides the appropriate education for persons with disabilities (VanBergeijk, 2008).

In Canada, educational policies for students with disabilities differ from province to province. In British Columbia (BC), where the current study takes place, the BC Ministry of Education states that “All students should have equitable access to learning, opportunities for achievement, and the pursuit of excellence in all aspects of their educational programs” (BC Ministry of Ed, 2013, p. V) including those with special needs. The Special Education Policy Framework for British Columbia was established in 1995 and promotes an inclusive education system where students with special needs, including post-secondary students, are entitled to equitable access in all aspects of their educational programs. As part of the School Act, under Section 85, the Special Education Policy states that “While some students will wish to enter a university or a community college, others may want an apprenticeship program...Districts are encouraged to develop strategies for supporting the career and life transitions of all students, including those who have special needs” (BC Ministry of Ed, 2013; Appendix 37). An important factor to note within this mandate is that services and programs should not be delivered or organized along categorical lines but to match the identified special needs of the student with the appropriate services to address them (BC Ministry of Ed, 2013). Given that universities are mandated to provide equitable access to education for all students who meet entrance requirements, it is imperative that we understand how they can best do that for students with ASD within post-secondary education. The examination of the AMI program conducted in the present study represents one attempt to better understand how to provide the appropriate services for university students with ASD.

### **2.3.2. Prevalence**

The 1990's saw a wave of young children being diagnosed with ASD and the numbers continue to grow (Chown & Beavan, 2011). The British Columbia Teachers' Federation (BCTF, 2012) stated that, from 2001 to 2012, ASD had the greatest increase in enrolment (+4,393) based upon statistics taken from elementary to secondary school (BCTF, 2012). Both Learning Disabilities (+3,370) and Physical Disabilities (+2,518) fell behind ASD (BCTF, 2012), indicating that students with ASD are contributing to large

increases in students with special needs in BC schools. As this population ages, many are entering post-secondary institutions creating a significant rise in the number of students with ASD in colleges and universities around North America (Chown & Beavan, 2012).

Recently, increased attention has been given to students with ASD in higher education by researchers and educators alike. Specifically, White, Ollendick, and Bray (2011) investigated the prevalence of ASD in students at a single university in the Southeastern United States and found that between 0.7 (1 in 130) and 1.9 (1 in 53) percent of students met criteria for HFA (Appel, 2011). Many university students with ASD do not seek academic or disability support, perhaps because they have found supports in the past to not be of much use or they do not think they need or are eligible for these services (Brown, Wolf, & Kroesser, 2014). Nevertheless, retention and graduation rates for these students tend to be low (Appel, 2011). Indeed, post-secondary graduation rates of students with ASD are alarming. In a study titled the National Longitudinal Transition Study 2 (NLTS-2) it was found that less than 20 percent of college students with ASD who attended a four-year college were on track to graduate (NLTS-2, 2011). This is of great concern because it means that students with ASD miss out on opportunities to gain independence, employment, intellectual stimulation, and to develop important life skills and friendships with peers (Heck-Sorter, 2012).

## **2.4. Challenges and Needs of Students with ASD in Higher Education**

Many students with ASD are likely to experience significant and unique challenges in adjusting to post-secondary settings (Adreon & Durocher, 2007; Smith, 2007; Vanbergeijk, 2008; Brown et al., 2014). As these students transition from high school into post-secondary, they are expected to be independent and able to work and study on their own with much less supervision than they have had in the past (Chown & Beavan, 2012). The majority of the literature on students with ASD in higher education focuses upon three broad areas of concern: (1) Social Functioning; (2) Academic Functioning; and (3) Self-advocacy. Within these broad areas, are issues with social communication; repetitive and restricted activities, interests, or behaviours; executive functions, and stress and anxiety. The implications of these areas are discussed below.

### **2.4.1. Social functioning**

Social communication is known as a cardinal deficit of ASD, affecting all severity levels. It has been suggested that the most challenging area for students with ASD in higher education is adjusting to the social demands of post-secondary settings (Adreon & Durocher, 2007). The college and university years are times when young adults set goals to meet new friends and potential mates (Brown et al., 2014). The average college or university student has the drive to actively seek out and interact with peers, and the ability to read social situations, which are both essential for a successful social life (Brown et al., 2014). In ASD, social deficits inherent to the disorder are exacerbated by the intense social demands of college or university.

In university, it is important for students to demonstrate social competence across a range of situations. In navigating the campus and attending classes, students interact with a wide variety of people, including peers, faculty, and administrators. While much of the socializing at university occurs outside of the classroom, a considerable amount of learning in universities also takes place in social groups within classrooms (e.g., group work and group discussions). Additionally, there are limited one-on-one supports for students with disabilities, and difficulties with social navigation are further compounded by large class sizes and limited teacher-student contact (Janiga & Costenbader, 2002; Lerner, 2003). Thus, students must be socially flexible to accommodate the variety of social interactions that they will face at university. Specific areas of social functioning where students with ASD struggle are outlined in the following sections.

#### ***Forming friendships***

The social communication deficits seen in adults with ASD make it difficult for these individuals to form friendships. Friendships are important to one's wellbeing as they predict loneliness, depression, and self-esteem (Mazurek, 2014). Mazurek (2014) conducted a large study involving 108 adults with ASD ranging in age from 18 to 62 years old. Results from self-report measures of friendship and wellbeing showed that adults with a close friend reported significantly lower levels of loneliness, even after controlling for effects of ASD symptoms. The adults without a close friend and poorer friendship quality experienced higher rates of depression, poorer life satisfaction, and lower self-esteem

(Mazurek, 2014). The social experiences of adults with ASD point to the importance of having close relationships, such as friendships, to counteract the depressive symptoms often associated with ASD in adulthood.

Difficulties forming friendships is also an area of concern for university students with ASD. Making and maintaining friendships is no longer structured or facilitated by teachers or parents, as was often the case for these students in high school (Nirmal, 2015). In Heck-Sorter's (2012) multiple case study of seven students with ASD at a community college, many of the students reported that social interactions and making friends on campus was something that they strived for, despite the challenges they faced. Importantly, many stated that their lack of social connections had become an area of hindrance to their college persistence.

Heck-Sorter (2012) discussed how one student considered making friends his greatest barrier to persisting at college", yet, for all the students interviewed "Being able to 'fit in' and be accepted by peers is something that they crave and, on some level, strive for." (Heck-Sorter, 2012, p.115). Thus, some of the students tried joining clubs on campus to make friends in a more structured environment, in order to practise building their social skills with other students on campus. However, trying to 'fit in' took much time and practice for these students. One student reported that although she remained in the club, she felt she was "hanging on by the skin of her teeth" (Heck-Sorter, 2012, p.116), not feeling accepted by her peers. She discussed how she craved their acceptance, but still struggled as she continuously practised working on her social skills. In short, the students studied by Heck-Sorter (2012) all stated they wished they had more friendships and better peer relationships on campus.

### ***Understanding social cues and taking other' perspectives***

Individuals with ASD often have difficulty understanding social cues and the feelings and perspectives of others (Adreon & Durocher, 2007). Lack of cognitive flexibility can lead to difficulty in taking others' perspectives resulting in social interaction and communication difficulties (Bramham, Ambery, & Young, 2009). Even adults with ASD who are have a normal or above-average IQ show difficulties in perspective-taking, with significant impairments in theory of mind skills (i.e., inferring the mental states of others;

Baron-Cohen, Jolliffe, Mortimore, & Robertson, 1997). Another well-known social challenge involves difficulties with perceiving others' facial expressions (Macdonald, Rutter, & Howlin, 1989; Behrmann, Avidan, & Leonard, 2006). As a consequence, individuals with ASD may show a lack of empathy and an inability to conform to norms within social interactions that involve both verbal and non-verbal communication (Adreon & Durocher, 2007). People with ASD find it difficult to understand the emotions and feelings of others and of themselves, and risk social isolation, rejection, and loneliness because of their social and emotional deficits (Welkowitz & Baker, 2005; Adreon & Durocher, 2007). Others may not understand their idiosyncrasies due to the hidden nature of their disorder and, as a result, people with ASD may face negative consequences when attempting to interact with their neurotypical peers.

### ***Perseveration and restricted unusual interests***

Restricted, repetitive behaviours and perseveration on topics and interests are common behaviours of individuals with ASD across the spectrum (i.e. across age and severity level) that can negatively impact social functioning. People with ASD may perseverate on a topic of interest, keeping conversations very much one-sided and unappealing to others. They may have difficulty with switching topics or providing relevant background information on their topic of interest. These difficulties place them at risk for being misunderstood or appearing as rude or disinterested. The tendency to perseverate, which is the inability to shift mental set, is known as the executive process called *cognitive inflexibility*; and is related to restrictive, repetitive behaviours (Lopez, Lincoln, Ozonoff, & Lai, 2005). Cognitive inflexibility is a well-known executive function deficit that occurs in individuals with ASD (Lopez et al., 2005). Aspects of cognitive flexibility, such as shifting attention and engaging in new behaviour, can be challenging for individuals on the spectrum.

Restricted or unusual interests may also lead to a difficulty relating to others based on common interests that can lead to social isolation (Armstrong, 2011). The interests of some young adults with ASD, may be unusual, such as interests in train schedules, license plates, or obscure sports statistics. Others may have interests that are more typical to their same-aged peers such as video games and computers, However, the way in which these individuals engage in these activities may involve unusual or undesirable behaviours, such

as discussions and engagement in these activities that are overly intense. Such behaviours keep these individuals from engaging in social activities with others (Adreon & Durocher, 2007). Thus, many people with ASD have difficulty with making and keeping friends due to these behaviours (Adreon & Durocher, 2007).

### ***Social anxiety***

Social anxiety is a frequently co-occurring psychiatric problem for students in higher education with ASD. For instance, White et al. (2011) examined psychiatric risks in students with HFA at a large technology-oriented public university in the Southeastern U.S. The authors surveyed these students on their behavioural and psychiatric problems, including social phobia, depression, and ASD symptomology. Results showed that university students who scored high on ASD traits were also more socially anxious and depressed, such that greater ASD symptomology was associated with more severe social anxiety. However, despite having social anxiety, developing meaningful social relationships and connections at university were important to students with ASD (White et al., 2011).

For individuals with ASD, social anxiety makes it even more difficult to establish meaningful social relationships (Bellini, 2006). Individuals, including those with ASD, who experience high levels of social anxiety become stifled by their intense fear of having to interact with or perform in front of others. For individuals with ASD, their social skills deficits contribute significantly to the social anxiety that they experience (Bellini, 2006). Thus, social anxiety in ASD can lead to further experiences of social rejection and avoidance into adulthood. In turn, adults with ASD who report feeling socially isolated state that they feel anxious and depressed as a result of their social isolation (Müller, Schuler, & Yates, 2008).

### **2.4.2. Academic functioning**

The specific challenges faced by students with ASD can make learning more difficult than what their neurotypical peers experience. In Heck-Sorter's (2012) qualitative study, students with ASD stated that their academic strengths and weaknesses varied according to how ASD impacted the way they learned. One student stated "I am a very

slow learner” (Heck-Sorter, 2012, p. 104) and another commented that “I don’t ask questions that I should” (Heck-Sorter, 2012, p. 104). Another student said how his ASD affected various areas for him as a university student, “...it affects my ability to socialize with other people, it affects my ability to perform tasks, and it affects my ability to learn material” (Heck-Sorter, 2012, p. 104). Students stated how it was up to them, now that they were attending college or university, to take on more independence when it came to organization and time management skills. One student stated that in “high school you had basically this structure. It was all about structure and order...College is more disorganized...You can basically have a one day a week class. So high school didn’t prepare me for that.” The author reported how this student continued to struggle with staying focused and with time management (Heck-Sorter, 2012, p. 105).

### ***Executive functioning and cognitive style***

Many people on the autism spectrum have executive functioning deficits that can negatively impact their learning. These difficulties manifest in attention problems, difficulty learning concepts, and difficulty developing meaning and generalizing skill (Luna, Doll, & Hegedus, 2007; Chown & Beavan, 2011). Executive dysfunction in ASD affects planning, initiating, prioritizing, working memory, attention, organization, rigidity, self-monitoring, and time management skills—all of which are required of a university student in order to do well academically (Luna et al., 2007; Brown et al., 2014). The extra time needed for processing information, planning thoughts, and shifting ideas further compounds the challenges that students with ASD face in post-secondary education. As Brown et al. (2014) state, these challenges can “...impact academic functioning in areas such as getting the big picture of an assignment integrating information across many sources, or planning assignments over time”.

Nirmal (2015) interviewed twelve students with HFA or Asperger’s Syndrome enrolled at a college or university, from several institutions in British Columbia, Canada. She applied an Interpretive Phenomenological Approach (IPA) to examine the experiences of students with HFA in post-secondary education. Nirmal’s (2015) IPA revealed the broad theme of *Managing Academic Expectations*, in which participants reported that managing academic expectations was very challenging for them as



university or college students. Such challenges included organization of materials; managing deadlines and appointments; prioritization; and initiating and completing tasks. One participant stated, "I'm horrible at organization" (Nirmal, 2015, p.75). Others reported feeling exhausted. Another explained how she had difficulty with managing multiple steps to get herself accommodations and suggested that having a key support person to help her through this process would have made things easier. As for time management, procrastination was common among these students, which led to difficulty with following procedures, such as contacting the disability office in time to set up accommodations for exams.

Cognitively speaking, individuals with ASD have tendencies for rule-governed versus flexible thoughts, local versus global processing of information; concrete and literal thinking; and a visual thinking style. They may have an extensive vocabulary or a high IQ, but have problems with comprehension, difficulty following multi-step directions, and engaging in long discussions (Adreon & Durocher, 2007). A student with ASD could be affected by one, none, or many of these components. Thus, these students often have uneven cognitive profiles and learning styles that vary greatly from individual to individual.

### ***Coping with change: stress, anxiety, and feeling overwhelmed***

Attending post-secondary education is a stressful event for any student, and especially for students with ASD who are prone to high levels of stress due to their challenges with academic functioning. Students with ASD usually have a need for sameness and predictability in their environments. This need for routine and predictability can set apart the student with ASD from his peers (Glennon, 2001). For the student with ASD, any changes to routine can be very upsetting and may result in anxious behaviour as they become agitated by these changes (Adreon & Durocher, 2007). For example, the student may become anxious over an unexpected schedule change, such as class being cancelled. Additionally, difficulties in coping with change and unstructured time is often raised as an issue for students with ASD, affecting academic functioning. Students with ASD have reported having much difficulty dealing with constant changes in their routine, as they take different classes each day and change schedules every semester.

Gillot and Standen (2007) conducted a study examining stress levels in adults with ASD using the self-report measure, The Stress Survey Schedule (Grodén, Diller, & Bausman, 2001). Participants with autism were found to have higher stress in their ability to cope with change. The authors also found that the more anxious the individual with ASD, the less likely they were able to cope with changes in schedules and transitions. Their study confirmed that fear of change is a possible cause and great concern for developing stress for adults with ASD. Feelings such as stress and anxiety can greatly impede learning, affecting academic performance (Cowden, 2010; Dobson, 2012).

Students with ASD in post-secondary educational settings have also reported feeling overwhelmed by having to manage multiple academic demands (Nirmal, 2015). Many of these students take full course loads and struggle to keep up with assignments and exams in multiple courses, leading to stress and anxiety that can, additionally, be difficult to manage for someone with ASD (Fitzgerald, Harpur, & Lawlor, 2003). Furthermore, there is no support person to initially help with the structure and organization of these demands. Many students with ASD face a major drop-off in support in university compared to high school, leading to stress and anxiety over loss of support (Nirmal, 2015). Overall, students with ASD are at high risk to experience feeling stressed and overwhelmed to the point where they experience significant challenges.

### **2.4.3. Self-advocacy**

To self-advocate is to “communicate with others to acquire information and recruit help in meeting personal needs and goals” (Balcazar, Fawcett, & Seekins, 1991, p. 31) and can be enhanced by self-efficacy, the individual’s belief in his or her ability to engage in a specific behaviour within a certain context (Wood, Karvonen, & Test, 2004). The Autistic Self-Advocacy Network (ASAN; 2013) has illustrated that the “safety net is considerably weaker” (p. viii) in college and university for individuals on the autism spectrum compared to the support they had in high school. Therefore, self-advocacy should be a focus of both the transitioning and continuing student as they prepare for and adjust to post-secondary education. Self-advocacy skills, which are linked to successful transition to college, are often lacking in students with ASD (US Department of Education, OCR 2007). Lacking these skills makes it difficult for the student to be an active participant

in his or her own learning throughout their time in post-secondary education (Brown et al, 2014).

In order to receive more support as a university student, students with ASD must seek out disability services and discuss their specific learning needs and accommodations within the university (Adreon & Durocher, 2007). It is taken for granted that students in university advocate for themselves (Williams & Palmer, 2004), and yet this is precisely an area where students with ASD struggle. Critically, self-advocacy requires self-awareness, as the student must have some understanding of his or her own strengths and weaknesses in order to advocate for supports or services (Miller & Keys, 1996; Roberts, 2010). Students with ASD often lack the ability to self-reflect and, consequently, depend upon others to impose goals for them in college (Brown et al., 2014). Being able to identify and express personal goals is especially important because, as Brown et al. (2014) state "...internally generated and valued goals are essential when the 'going gets tough'...and lack of a life plan or even awareness can present as a student who is unmotivated to be in school. Therefore, addressing the self-advocacy skills of students with ASD should be addressed as a main concern in university. Unfortunately, there is a scarcity of research on the self-advocacy and self-awareness of students with ASD in higher education.

Test, Fowler, and Wood (2005) developed a conceptual framework for the self-advocacy of students with disabilities that involved four components designed to guide practices for teaching self-advocacy to students. The first component involves knowledge of self, as in knowledge of one's own strengths, interests, needs, and learning style. The second component is knowing one's rights as a citizen, as an individual with a disability, and as a student receiving services under the federal law. The third component emerges once the first two are in place, which is communication. The individual needs to be able to communicate effectively and appropriately. Finally, leadership is the last component, which involves advocating for others like oneself as well. Thus, for the student with a disability, the self advocate must challenge the perceptions of others who view them as incapable of making decisions for themselves and needing professionals for guidance and protection (Test et al, 2005). While students with disabilities, such as those with ASD, need extra support, this support should not involve over-dependence and should help to promote the autonomy of these students (Test et al., 2005).

In the case of ASD, self-advocacy skills may need to be reinforced early on. For instance, students in Heck-Sorter's (2012) study described how they had not learned to advocate for themselves at the high-school level, as their courses and programs were chosen according to an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) created by teachers, parents, and therapists who, as one student put it, "argued what was best for me" (Heck-Sorter, p.105). Thus, when beginning post-secondary education, the students with ASD were not in the driver's seat but, instead, depended upon external supports such as parents (Heck-Sorter, 2012). While this support was needed initially, there comes a time when these students must learn to be more independent and, much like their neurotypical peers, find more ways to self-advocate even though their parents may have a difficult time letting them do so (Heck-Sorter, 2012).

#### **2.4.4. Conclusion**

While students with high functioning ASD are certainly cognitively able enough to succeed at post-secondary education, they face significant difficulties in social functioning, academic functioning, and self-advocacy, impeding their transition and functioning in this setting. Brown et. al.(2014) used the term the *dysregulated student* to refer to the student who struggles academically and socially, has deficits with executive functions, and lacks the self-awareness needed to guide his/her learning. The dysregulated student finds it difficult to be an active participant in his/her learning at college or university and, therefore, will need support that can target these areas for better learning (Brown et al., 2014). Students with ASD are often dysregulated in university as they struggle to keep up with academic demands, social expectations, and self-advocacy (Brown et al., 2014).

### **2.5. The Need for Specific Support: The Same but Different**

Addressing the specific needs of students with ASD in higher education can help to combat the many challenges they face both socially and academically. Despite having the cognitive and academic ability to attend university, these students often face poor educational outcomes, as many fail to complete their degrees (Shattuck, Narendorf, & Cooper, 2012). Indeed, students with ASD face many of the same challenges as their

typically developing peers, yet need more tailored support to get them through their university endeavors.

Traditional service models offered by disability offices on campus may not be helpful to students with ASD. Disability services often apply accommodations and supportive strategies for students with ASD that are developed for students with other types of disabilities, which include general accommodations like extra time on exams, alternate seating or instructional materials, and note-taking services. Students with ASD differ from those with other disabilities in terms of the specific areas in need of support and the intensity of supports needed (Smith, 2007). Research shows that support services that are being made for students with ASD are the same services that were created for other disabilities. While some of these services may be helpful for students with ASD, more support and accommodations are needed to properly address the needs of students with ASD. Thus, these services should not be dependent upon the type of institution, but depend upon the individual student (Smith, 2007).

Breakey (2006) suggests that the ideal approach to working with students with ASD in higher education is to provide those supporting the students with ASD with a fair amount of knowledge about ASD; and to be “person-centered” in the approach (p.54). Breakey (2006) states that “the whole autism spectrum is represented at college, and that autistic students, wherever their diagnosis places them on the autism spectrum, all need highly-skilled, individually planned support” (p.55) and that a “one size fits all” (p.66) approach will not work for these students. While higher education programs have become more accessible, they often do not provide the individually-tailored services needed to assist these students (Zager & Alpern, 2010). Person-centered approaches for students with ASD enable them to have input to their own educational programme, giving a voice to these students within their own learning (Williams, 2007). Indeed, Williams (2007) suggests that the high rate of exclusion for students with ASD may be due to the lack of person-centered approaches within colleges and universities.

## 2.6. Mentoring in Higher Education

One example of a person-centered approach is *mentoring*. Generally speaking, mentoring is “a complex process that is interactive in nature and primarily occurs between two persons of differing levels of expertise and experience” (Ahmed, 2009, p.7). The mentor advises the *protégé*, also known as the *mentee*, through a developmental context. Mentoring relationships involve complex human interactions that are open to dialogue and dynamic learning environments (Ahmed, 2009). Mentoring is a process, in that it has a series of actions or steps taken in order to achieve a particular end. However, it is also a relationship built upon achieving goals through the collaboration of the mentee and mentor working together to decide how to best achieve success for the mentee (Ahmed, 2009). Through this process, the mentee and mentor develop a cooperative relationship as the inexperienced mentee learns from the more experienced mentor (Ahmed, 2009).

Currently, there is no one widely accepted operational definition for mentoring. The problem lies in the fact that each mentoring program within each context is so different, and so it is impractical to suggest one definition that defines the concept across contexts. By the same token, the numerous definitions in the literature reflect the diversity amongst mentoring programs. For instance, there is a key distinction between mentoring that involves a power differential (e.g., faculty members as mentors, and their students as the mentees) and mentorship that occurs among peers. In *peer mentoring*, the mentor, usually being the more experienced student, is paired with the mentee, the less experienced student, where experience is based upon number of years spent at university in good standing (Chapman, 2013). With the majority of time at university being spent in the classroom for lectures, this leaves little time and opportunity for students to socialize outside of class, connect with other students and form meaningful relationships (Chapman, 2013). Having a peer mentor provides that opportunity for connection to another student, and at the same time, to the institution (Chapman, 2013). Building these connections can support persistence and perseverance in learning and increases the likelihood that students will graduate (Nora & Crisp, 2007). Indeed, research suggests that peer mentoring has been successful in helping students adjust both academically and socially (Loots, 2009).

While peer mentoring is a person-centered approach with potentially important implications for students with ASD, the vast majority of research on mentoring in higher education has focused upon neurotypical populations (e.g. Jacobi, 1991, Rodger & Tremblay, 2003; Loots, 2009). Although this research is informative, it may not apply directly to students with ASD, who have unique challenges in university contexts. Unfortunately, there is little research done on peer mentoring of students with ASD—a population that would potentially benefit greatly from making more connections in post-secondary education.

## **2.7. Mentoring Students with ASD**

Currently, there are pilot peer-mentorship programs for students with ASD that are being attempted around the U.S., although there is no formal research conducted on these programs to inform practices for similar mentoring programs. Although still in their infancy, some examples of these programs are found at Alabama and Boston Universities. These programs hire and train peer mentors who major in social science graduate or undergraduate programs. These programs implement a “coaching” model where mentors are assigned to a mentee to work on individual social and academic goals (Hurewitz & Berger, 2008) and provide support services to mentees with ASD on an ongoing basis. These programs provide social and life skills training to students with ASD in order to provide them with the strategies they need to graduate (Hurewitz & Berger, 2008). Some components include everyday social skills such as how to schedule classes, join clubs, buy books, and replace ATM cards that don’t work.

Mentors also act as “social navigators” and help the mentee to work on his or her “outsider status” (Hurewitz & Berger, 2008, p. 116) by introducing them to their friends and other peers on campus. These programs have common features in that they provide extra support so that students have a reliable source in which to turn for help and advice, when a need cannot be well-addressed by the general accommodations provided by the local office of disabilities. However, because these mentoring programs run independently from the campus disability offices, they can cost students thousands of dollars over and above tuition. For example, the program in Alabama was \$6,200 per year in 2006 (Hurewitz &

Berger, 2008), while students with other disabilities are able to obtain support services without additional costs. Therefore, for students with ASD, who need more specific accommodations, these support services are available only for those who can afford them (Hurewitz & Berger, 2008). The consensus from the literature suggests that collaboration with a disability office on campus using a volunteer approach, free of charge, may be the best form of peer mentoring for college and university students with ASD.

Despite their growing popularity, there is a paucity of research on these peer mentorship programs (and others like them) for college and university students with ASD. Gelber, Smith, and Reichow (2014) conducted a systematic review of the literature concerning college students with ASD for various support programs found in the U.S., the U.K., and Japan. In their meta-analysis, they found only 20 articles containing 69 students in total that met their criteria. Indeed, only five of these articles discussed support services that included a form of peer mentoring. This portrays how little understanding we presently have for effective programming for these students in college and university.

A recent Canadian study (Ames, McMorris, & Alli, 2015) provides some evidence that peer-mentoring approaches are beneficial for students with ASD. The authors evaluated the Autism Mentorship Program (AMP) at York University in Ontario. The AMP was created to help students navigate the academic and social components of university life. Within the program, mentors and mentees met on a weekly or biweekly basis, where the mentors helped the mentees to work on their academic and social goals, and encouraged the development of individually-based skills for building social networks. These meetings allowed for the mentees to discuss any topics of concern in a safe environment where they could develop social relationships with their mentors and other students in the program (Ames et al., 2015). The authors examined the demographic information and Program Evaluation Surveys completed by the mentees. They sought to better understand the characteristics of students with ASD and to evaluate and measure their satisfaction within AMP (Ames et al., 2015).

Since the start of their program four years ago, Ames et al. (2015) saw enrolment increase by 200% for students with ASD, providing encouraging support for the program. The authors found that most of the students reported success in achieving their goals with



high-levels of satisfaction, having most satisfaction with the one-on-one meetings versus the group events. However, both mentees and mentors did state that they wished for more group events to occur in the future. The most notable challenges were based around social interactions and communication. Developing social skills was the goal that was most often addressed in the AMP. Given the social-communication difficulties common to individuals with ASD, and their feedback, it was obvious that social support is needed within a university program. AMP was able to provide these services to students with ASD. Mentees most frequently discussed how they enjoyed the meetings with their mentors in being able to discuss topics and issues openly and honestly together. For the mentees, these types of interactions would not have occurred without AMP, thus AMP offered the support and social interactions for students with ASD that would have been non-existent without such a mentoring program in place.

Despite this promising initial study, we are still left with very little in the way of a conceptual framework for understanding mentorship for students with ASD. Ames et al. (2015) provided program evaluation, feedback, and levels of satisfaction of AMP, with specific suggestions for how to improve the program in following years. This is useful for understanding basic levels of satisfaction with their version of a mentorship scheme. However, Nora and Crisp (2007) suggest that rather than focusing on the outcomes of specific mentoring programs, a discussion about what frames a mentoring experience would be more beneficial. The primary focus of research on mentoring should be one that addresses the components that constitute effective mentoring practices by exploring the experiences of mentors and mentees (Nora & Crisp, 2007). A better understanding of the experiences and perceptions of university students with ASD may allow educators to formulate programs for students with ASD that meet their specific needs. A grounded theory study, involving in-depth interviews of mentorship participants, may be an especially powerful approach for addressing this gap in the literature.

## **2.8. Conclusion**

The number of students with ASD that are pursuing post-secondary education is significantly increasing, yet the research on support services, more specifically peer

mentorship programs, lags far behind. This is surprising considering that peer mentoring has shown to be successful in higher education for other students, both with and without disabilities.

In order to gain a deeper understanding of how mentoring is beneficial to university students with ASD, a solid conceptualization of mentoring within this specific context needs to be in place (Nora & Crisp, 2007). Mainly, establishing a sound theoretical framework is imperative prior to testing for causal relationships or before making comparisons and drawing conclusions (Nora & Crisp, 2007). Theories of mentoring that take a *one size fits all* approach may not be effective for all university students, including those with ASD. Unfortunately, too often, mentoring programs are based upon a “‘feel good’ approach rather than based upon firm theoretical grounding” (Nora & Crisp, 2007, p.348). This confusion contributes to the inconsistency in defining an effective mentoring program. The lack of a conceptual framework on peer mentoring of university students with ASD warrants an in-depth investigation into this particular context.

## **Chapter 3. Methods**

### **3.1. Grounded Theory Methodology**

Grounded theory is a systematic qualitative methodology in the social sciences with the purpose of constructing theory “grounded” in data (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). It is a comparative and interactive method that offers a flexible set of inductive strategies for collecting and analysing qualitative data (Charmaz, 2006). It has the capacity to create rich descriptions and understanding of social life (Walker & Myrick, 2006). The process of the analysis involves comparing data while coding data, keeping the researcher interacting with the data throughout the process. It provides a framework for qualitative analyses while also allowing for flexibility within its methodology in order to provide the best method for obtaining data from the study’s participants. In grounded theory, the researcher explores general questions around a research topic or question using data collected from participants who can describe and elaborate on the topic of interest (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). The backgrounds and assumptions of grounded theorists are acknowledged and become part of the analyses while allowing for the data to create new views during the research (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Grounded theory is useful for studies of special populations, including those with ASD, in that it addresses research questions around individual processes, interpersonal relations, and the interactions between individuals and larger social processes (Charmaz 2006).

Grounded theory design, as a systematic qualitative procedure, is used when the researcher wants to develop a broad theory or description of a process to understand phenomena in context-specific settings. It allows the researcher to explore the inner experiences of the participants and to explore areas not yet thoroughly researched. This comprehensive approach to the study of phenomena utilizes an open and flexible design that is not offered in quantitative methods.

Grounded theory is considered to be both an art and a science (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). It is an art insofar as it uses flexible and creative procedures to solve analytical problems. It is a science, not in the traditional sense of experimental design and hypothesis-testing, but because interpretations are grounded in data. In all qualitative

analyses, including grounded theory, there should be a balance between the art and the science (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). This can be achieved as the researcher is sensitive to her own interpretations that come from her own experiences by keeping an ongoing record of her thoughts and perspectives—by being aware of this influence when analyzing the research and constantly comparing the data against itself, a balance between the art and science of grounded theory may be achieved.

In grounded theory, theory generation and analysis of the data are simultaneous and iterative processes. The concepts from which the theory are constructed come from the data and are not chosen prior to beginning the research (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). The analysis derived from the initial data steers the researcher towards the next set of data in an ongoing cycle throughout the research process until, hopefully, a theory can be achieved.

Grounded theory generates a theory from the “ground up” which provides a better description than borrowing a theory “off the shelf” because it fits the very situation in which the study takes place (Creswell, 2012). Through this approach, the theory is known to work in practice and is sensitive to the individuals in the study. It represents the complexities of the participants’ experiences, especially for studying special populations in education, where existing theories can have little applicability (Creswell, 2012).

Corbin and Strauss’ (2015) version of grounded theory involves a coding process that consists of three types: open, axial and selective coding. Open coding is the process of breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing, and categorizing data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Open coding is the first stage of analysis referring to the descriptive process of naming and categorizing phenomena through a close examination of the data where the data are labeled and grouped into categories according to the properties and dimensions of these properties found within the data. Axial coding is the procedure where data are put together in new ways after open coding, by making connections between categories and their subcategories. In axial coding, the researcher is still concerned with the development of a category, however this development is now moved beyond the level of simply looking at properties and dimensions with its focus on higher level categories that move further away from descriptive data and closer to conceptual analyses. Selective

coding is the process of selecting a core category while systematically relating it to other categories and further refining and developing these categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The process of defining the core category is ultimately the basis for grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Babchuk, 1996; Corbin & Strauss, 2015).

Corbin and Strauss recommend starting with a research question, unlike their predecessor Glaser who believed in the more laissez-faire approach of using a 'fit and grab' technique, where theories and concepts are judged upon their usefulness in serving particular purposes and contexts (i.e. Do they fit? Do they work? Do they have grab?; Williams & Vogt, 2011). Corbin and Strauss believe that "the research question in a grounded theory study is a statement that identifies the phenomenon to be studied" and may help guide the researcher in the beginning to set the parameters of the project and the methods to be used for data gathering and analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). This approach was attractive to me because it allows for some flexibility. As Strauss and Corbin state "while we set these procedures and techniques before you, we do not wish to imply rigid adherence to them" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Adaptations and modifications may be made to the methodology, without straying too far, to adhere to the purpose of grounded theory, which is to ultimately generate a theory from the "ground up". Research in adult education is beginning to use grounded theory as the choice of methodology to explore the wide range of problem areas and practice settings in educational institutions (Babchuk, 1996). However, it has been noted that many researchers stray too far from the methodology when attempting to utilize the flexibility of the approach. As such, grounded theory has been used as an all-encompassing term in adult education to incorporate the wide range of procedures and practices that are being used by researchers (Babchuk, 1996). Therefore, it is essential to provide clarity and thorough description of the methods used within grounded theory for any particular study, especially when dealing with special populations who may require modifications to certain procedures. Adult education is a discipline that currently lacks a well-developed theoretical foundation (Babchuk, 1996). By utilizing a methodology with a focus on theory generation, grounded theory holds much promise for studying a special population in adult education. Grounded theory's emphasis on the processes by which individuals construct meaning within their social context provides a useful methodology in helping investigate the experiences of individuals with ASD (Smith & Sharp, 2013).

## **3.2. Procedures**

### **3.2.1. Obtaining ethics approval**

Consent for conducting this study was obtained from SFU's Office of Research Ethics. After a decision was made to audio-record the interviews that were conducted throughout Term One (September to December, 2014) and Term Two (January to April, 2015), consent was later sought and obtained for the audio-recording of the AMI participants. This involved reading a statement that informed the participants of their rights and informed them of the procedures for audio-recording the interviews, including storing the recordings to ensure confidentiality (see Appendix A). Only one participant denied permission to audio-record the interview, therefore, the interview was recorded by pen and paper using abbreviations and short-hand notes in order to capture the entire conversation.

### **3.2.2. Participants' profile**

Nine mentees and ten mentors were involved in this study. All participants were university students from SFU that were recruited on a voluntary basis via selective sampling. Mentees were SFU undergraduate students with a diagnosis of high-functioning ASD. The mean age of the mentees was 28 years. The number of terms completed at SFU ranged from two (i.e. first-year student) to 12 (i.e. fourth-year student). The mentees came from a variety of different disciplines or were undeclared for a particular discipline. Seven of the mentees were male and two were female. The higher portion of males in AMI was expected due to ASD being five times more common in males than females (CDC, 2014). Mentees were of different ethnic backgrounds, and for some English was not their first language. However, all participants were proficient in speaking and understanding English as a requirement of being a student enrolled at SFU.

Mentors were senior undergraduate or graduate SFU students from the Faculty of Education or the Department of Psychology. Six mentors had experience working with children or adolescents with ASD and the remaining four mentors had previous mentoring experience with children, adolescents, or adults who did not have an ASD diagnosis. Nine

of the mentors were female and one was male. The higher portion of females to males as mentors is a reflection of the female to male ratio in areas of study for Education and Psychology. Mentors were drawn to the AMI because of their interest in working with adults with ASD and were of a particular nature, in that they were willing to be flexible, committed, and responsible to take on the role as an AMI mentor. There was one mentor who was not involved in the data analysis and did not take part in the in-depth interviews because she did not have a mentee due to attrition. However, she did volunteer to be a pilot participant for the pilot interviews, which is discussed in the section on Conducting Pilot Interviews with Mentors. Therefore, nine mentors were involved in the actual analysis (i.e., participated in the in-depth interviews that were transcribed and coded). Out of these nine mentors, one mentor (Susan) was only part of Term One as she left the program after almost two years of involvement to pursue other opportunities. A list of commencement dates for mentoring pairs is provided in Table 3.1 below.

**Table 3.1 Mentoring Pairs' Commencement Dates**

<b>Mentee</b>	<b>Mentor</b>	<b>Mentorship Commencement</b>
Tom	Lisa	Fall 2013
Paul	Lisa	Fall 2014
Steve	Susan, Mary	Susan - Fall 2013, Mary - Winter 2015
Brian	Julie	Winter 2015
David	Megan	Fall 2014
Sarah	Tracey	Fall 2014
John	Anna	Fall 2014
Amy	Michelle	Fall 2014
Chris	Jamie	Fall 2014

*\*Fall Semester is Term One: September to December*

*\*Winter Semester is Term Two: January to April*

### **3.2.3. Recruiting and consenting the participants**

Students with a diagnosis of ASD were registered at the Centre for Students with Disabilities (CSD) at SFU. The CSD offered their registered students with ASD the opportunity to join AMI by asking them if they would like to participate as a mentee in the AMI program. Upon agreeing to join AMI, the mentees completed the Consent Form for Mentees (see Appendix B) and the Goal-setting form (see Appendix C) and underwent a

brief interview with the AMI program coordinator. This process allowed for better understanding of the unique challenges that the mentees believed they would face at university, and to determine what specific goals they would like to work on for Term One and Term Two.

Mentors were recruited via advertisement sent to students in the Faculty of Education and the Psychology Department. Additionally, eligible students within these faculties who were known by the AMI clinicians were approached, asking if they would like to participate. The students that applied contacted the AMI program coordinator via email with their resume and cover letter. Potential candidates participated in a semi-structured interview with the program coordinator and at least one clinician. Students chosen for the positions were contacted by email to confirm their acceptance for the mentor position or were offered the volunteer position at the end of the interview. AMI mentors were asked if they would participate in the AMI research at the first training meeting. Upon agreement to participate, mentors signed a Consent Form for Mentors (see Appendix D) and were given a timeline of research dates (for conducting research with mentees and mentors) that would occur throughout the two terms.

Participants were told that the research portion of AMI was voluntary and that declining participation in the research would not affect their participation in the program itself, in any way. Once participants were assigned their roles as mentees or mentors, they had their first introductory meeting where they signed a Mentorship Agreement Contract (see Appendix E), that was given to each mentor by the program coordinator, in order to protect the rights of the participants and to confirm their commitment to AMI.

#### **3.2.4. Selective sampling**

Glaser (1978) refers to selective sampling as ‘the calculated decision to sample a specific locale according to a preconceived but reasonable initial set of dimensions (such as time, space, identity, or power) which are worked out in advance for a study. The participants in this study were the mentees and the mentors from the AMI program who were selected to be interviewed because of their current involvement in AMI.



### 3.2.5. Inclusion criteria

For mentees to register at the CSD and to participate in the AMI, a diagnosis of ASD had to be provided by at least one of the following trained professionals: a registered psychologist, psychiatrist, paediatrician or physician. If this diagnostic report was more than three years old, supplemental information was most often provided by having a psychiatrist or registered psychologist complete a psychiatric disability form provided by SFU. Diagnoses were made according to the DSM IV or V using at least one of the following diagnostic assessments: the Autism Diagnostic Observation Schedule (ADOS™) and/or the Autism Diagnostic Interview (ADI-R™), and/or through psychoeducational assessment or psychological evaluation. Diagnostic information is listed in Tables 3.2 and 3.3 below. Mentees also had to be enrolled as an SFU student in any program of study throughout Term One and Term Two and could be in any year of study at the undergraduate level.

**Table 3.2 AMI Mentee Diagnoses**

Mentee	Date of Diagnosis	Diagnosis	Other Diagnoses
Tom	2011; 2013	AS; ASD	none
Paul	2009	AD	none
Steve	2013	ASD	Genetic Generalized Epilepsy
Brian	2010	AD	Tourette Syndrome, Anxiety Disorder, Mixed Learning Disability
David	2005; 2014	AD; ASD	Developmental Coordination Disorder
Sarah	2000	AD	Obsessive Compulsive Disorder
John	2002	AS	Nonverbal Learning Disability
Amy	2001; 2014	AD; ASD	none
Chris	2004; 2014	AD; ASD	ADHD Combined Subtype

*AD = Autistic Disorder (DSM-IV)*

*ASD = Autism Spectrum Disorder (DSM-V)*

*AS = Asperger Syndrome (DSM-IV)*

*ADHD = Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder*

Mentors met requirements as a senior undergraduate (completed approximately half of their undergraduate program at university) or graduate student in good academic standing and enrolled at SFU throughout Term One and Term Two. Mentors were required

to have some knowledge of either ASD or mentoring experience. Mentors underwent an interview that assessed their intentions and capabilities as an AMI mentor. Mentors also provided their resume and cover letter and a list of references when applying for the mentor position.

### **3.2.6. Matching participants**

Matching mentees with their mentors is a process with unpredictable outcome such that some partnerships will work out well while others will be less successful (Horner, Miller, & Rettew, 2008). Horner et al. (2008) reported that personality plays an important role in mentoring and determines the type of relationship that develops between the mentee and mentor. He states that this has an impact on the success of the mentoring program. It is reasonable to consider that students of different backgrounds will possess different perceptions about of what constitutes an effective mentoring program (Adreon & Durocher, 2007). Therefore, the matching process should account for factors that might determine a pairing's success, such as values or personality differences and preferred learning experiences. Other factors, such as cross-gender matching, may not be quite so obvious but, nevertheless, important. Such issues affect the relationship and should be considered when matching the mentee and mentor (Ahmed, 2009).

The matching of mentees with mentors in AMI was conducted by the program coordinator, who is also the learning specialist at the Centre for Students with Disabilities (CSD). Due to her role as both a learning specialist and the AMI program coordinator, she was the most familiar with many of the mentees and mentors and, therefore, was appointed the role of matching based on her judgement of which personalities would best go together. Another criteria she used was to match the mentees who seemed to need the most support, either academically or socially or both, to mentors who had more experience or seemed more competent for working with adults with ASD. The interplay between these two procedures led to her decision for matching mentee-mentor pairs. The mentees completed an initial interview with myself, the research coordinator, at the beginning of Term One, which the program coordinator used as a reference for the mentees' likes and interests. The program coordinator consulted with the clinicians, who are known as the supervisors in AMI. The AMI supervisors had met the mentors at the

initial mentor training meeting at the beginning of Term One and, therefore, had the opportunity to assess the mentors' personalities and their own impressions of the mentors following this training meeting.

Once the mentees had completed their initial interviews, and the mentors completed their initial interviews and first training meeting, mentees were matched with a mentor, forming mentorship pairs. The program coordinator then met with each mentor separately and shared information with them about their mentee. Next, the program coordinator emailed each mentee attaching their mentor to the email as a first (online) introduction. This was followed by an in-person introductory meeting between the mentee, mentor, and the program coordinator. From there, it was decided which form of contact was best to use for each pair (i.e. phone or email) and how to set up the first few meetings together. Finally, during this meeting, pairs reviewed the Goal Setting form together in order to get an idea of where to start their mentorship process.

### **3.2.7. Conducting initial mentee interviews**

Interviews containing both structured and semi-structured questions were conducted with mentees in the beginning of Term One to give myself, as the researcher, a chance to meet the mentees and build a rapport with them. Establishing rapport within interview settings is vital to the interview process with individuals with ASD (Nirmal, 2015). These interviews also allowed me to assess mentees' ability to converse in an interview setting (see Appendix F). From these interviews, I had concluded that many of the mentees were capable of providing elaborate answers to possible future, less structured interview questions. However, I would need to make modifications to the typical interview process normally seen in a grounded theory interview approach, in order to achieve rich descriptions of their experiences in AMI. My senior supervisor and I had decided that further consultation and recommendations be discussed with the AMI team and an outside advisor who specializes in working with adults with ASD. This collaboration informed the decisions made for how to structure the interviews in Term Two.

### **3.2.8. Conducting pilot interviews with mentors**

Four pilot interviews were conducted to assess the questions in the AMI Interviews with Mentors form. Conducting pilot interviews is a good way to determine which interview questions are most important or problematic to the phenomenon being studied (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). What is important to the participants is the key to guide the researcher on where to focus her questions for her research project. These pilot interviews proved to be extremely useful in determining which questions were relevant and clear to the interviewees. Two of the pilot participants were AMI mentors, themselves. As mentioned in the Participant Profile section, one of these mentors was involved in the program but did not have a mentee in either term. The other mentor, Susan, who was part of Term One (but not Term Two) also took part in the pilot interviews. Of the other pilot participants, one was a graduate student in Educational Psychology at SFU who knew about AMI, and the other was a young working professional who was informed about AMI through his personal connection with myself, the researcher. Feedback from these four perspectives informed me to clarify my questions and to include more specific examples for the mentee questions. No mentees participated in pilot interviews, due to the fact that I wanted to conduct as many in-depth full-length interviews as I could and did not want to risk losing any important information due to piloting the data. This approach was recommended by my secondary supervisor who informed me that I could adjust my questions accordingly as I conducted my interviews, in order to best capture each individual style of description.

### **3.2.9. The site for study**

The AMI is a mentorship program designed for university students with a diagnosis of ASD that started in the fall term of 2013. The AMI is a collaborative program run by the CSD, the Faculty of Education, and the Psychology Department. Thus, the site for study for AMI was at SFU, which involved both my senior supervisor as one of the clinicians, and myself as the research coordinator. In AMI, each mentee is paired with a mentor over the course of 2 semesters. Mentees and mentors meet weekly to discuss the mentee's learning, communication, and social goals, through individualized guidance and support. AMI offers students with ASD the opportunity to work one-on-one with a mentor for up to 2-3 hours per week throughout each semester. The focus of support is tailored to the

mentee's individual needs and could range from practical problems to more personal issues.

Direct supervision is ongoing with educational workshops and social events being offered throughout the year. At the start of the mentorship, mentors undergo a full day of training that involves information about ASD and how it presents in a post-secondary setting. Mentors who were part of the previous year of mentoring in AMI attend and share their experiences with the newly hired mentors, such as the challenges they faced or positive experiences that they had with their mentees. Mentors were provided with a training manual and given access to online modules that offered ideas on how to work on goals with mentees. Therefore, in addition to supporting mentees, AMI provided opportunities for mentors to gain skills and experience working with students who have an ASD.

Interviews mostly took place at the CSD at SFU. If, for some reason, accessing the CSD was not possible for an interview, then the interview was conducted in a research lab at SFU. The rooms used for the interviews were very quiet and minimally visually distracting. The CSD interview room was the chosen room for interviews because the CSD is a familiar and frequented location by the mentees and mentors, as they meet with the program coordinator there on an ongoing basis throughout the two terms. Familiarity and comfort were my main concerns for conducting these interviews in order to provide the most relaxed environment for interviewing, which can be a stressful and intimidating procedure, especially for individuals with ASD who often suffer from social anxiety. Each interviewee participated in an interview that took approximately half an hour to one hour. Before each interview began, participants were informed that they could take breaks and had the right to withdraw from the study at any point in time.

### **3.2.10. The role of the researcher and waving the red flag**

My immersion in this study came from a personal, professional and academic background of interacting and working as a behavioural therapist with children, adolescents, and adults with ASD for the last ten years. As the AMI research coordinator and the primary researcher of this study, I had extensive training in using a qualitative

software program called NVivo (QSR International Pty Ltd. Version 10, 2014) that helped me to organize my data in a systematic and efficient manner, so that the data was easily accessible which freed up time and energy for myself to focus upon building theoretical analyses. I also joined a Grounded Theory club that conversed through email on an ongoing basis which helped me to question my methods and to further investigate how to best conduct a grounded theory.

Researchers bring their own biases, beliefs, and assumptions to the investigation in qualitative research (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). It is necessary to self-consciously bring disciplinary and research experience into the analysis but to do so in a way that enhances the creative aspects of the analysis, avoiding “forcing” my own ideas into the data, and instead allowing themes to emerge from the data. Comparing my own assumptions against the data in a directed way helped to bring these assumptions to the surface. These assumptions were compared against the actual data, allowing emergence of themes to drive the analyses.

### **3.2.11. Data collection**

#### ***Verbal and typed-written interviews***

An interview was conducted with the mentors in Term One (see Appendix G). This interview took place towards the end of October and beginning of November, 2014. This timeframe was late enough in the year to give the mentee-mentor pairs time to have a few meetings and experience their involvement with AMI, yet early enough to assess their experiences during the start of the program. These interviews were done with selective sampling and questions were designed by myself, the researcher, my senior supervisor who specializes in ASD, and my other supervisor who is experienced in qualitative research. My familiarity with ASD and training in qualitative research allowed me to sufficiently put together an interview. There are three types of interviews: unstructured, semi-structured, and structured, all of which can be used in grounded theory, although the more open-ended are considered to provide the richest source of data for theory-building (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). For this reason, as a beginning researcher, I decided to interview the mentors with unstructured questions to get at the true essence of grounded theory methodology. Indeed, giving more control to the participants in these interviews led

to more pertinent questions in the interviews in Term Two. Corbin and Strauss (2015) state that while doing unstructured interviews is not easy, it allows for participants to determine what subject to talk about, at what pace, in what order, and to what depth.

In Term Two, semi-structured interviews were conducted, using typed and verbal methods, with both mentees (see Appendix H) and mentors (see appendix I). The typed answers were used for the discussion during the verbal part of the interview. I paraphrased the answers to clarify responses, followed by questions to elaborate on the participants' responses (e.g. "How so?", "Can you give me an example?", "What do you mean by this?", "Why/Why Not?", etc.). Slightly more structure was needed for the interviews in Term Two, involving the mentees, due to the difficulties individuals with ASD face when it comes to requiring more abstract and responses to less structured questions (Grandin, 1995; Nind 2008). Importantly, there are a few studies that have looked at first-hand accounts of individuals with ASD that provide valuable insight into the subjective experiences of those with ASD (Smith & Sharp, 2013). Thus, it was hoped that the current study could add to the literature in this way.

Qualitative research in the field of special education is gaining momentum, as researchers point out the absence of voices of individuals with disabilities, such as those with ASD (Müller et al., 2011). Higher-functioning individuals on the spectrum are able to speak about their experiences in the social world and provide insight into the experiences of their inner worlds (Müller et al., 2011). However, in a study by Nind (2008) the author points out that individuals with learning and /or communication difficulties can face problems with the interviewing process due to inarticulateness, and unresponsiveness to open questioning (including difficulty generalizing from experience and thinking on abstract terms). Therefore, it was considered that students with ASD may also face difficulties with communication in an interview setting. Interviews were thus adapted by employing both verbal and type-written methods to reduce the impact of social communication difficulties within in-person interviews. Indeed, in a study by Armstrong (2011) many participants with high-functioning ASD reported that they preferred to type their answers instead of discussing them verbally with the interviewer, indicating that this may also be the best approach to use for this current study.

For the typed-written form, participants were given a set of questions on a laptop computer and asked to elaborate as much as possible when answering the questions, for which they were given unlimited time. Comment boxes were provided in a word document leaving as much space as needed for their answers, and was demonstrated initially by the researcher. Participants were informed that a verbal discussion would follow their typing session, in order to clarify and/or elaborate on the answers they provided on the computer. These discussions were audiotaped (except for one with a mentee, who did not provide consent to be audiotaped) and transcribed by myself, the researcher. This protocol was used for both mentees and mentors.

### ***Coding***

Before entering the coding stage of grounded theory, I first listened to each interview without making any notes or transcriptions, allowing myself to truly listen to what the participants were saying. The second time I listened to each interview, I started transcribing and note-taking. At the same time, I began coding and taking notes for the typed responses as well. Towards the end of Term Two, I coded the Program Evaluation Surveys, and compared and contrasted the survey data to the data found in the interviews. Strauss and Corbin's method for grounded theory is to fracture the data apart in open coding, then relate it and integrate it back together in axial coding, and lastly, to select a major theme and integrate it in theoretical coding, with overlap occurring amongst this three-phased method (Walker & Myrick, 2006). During the open coding phase for the initial mentor interview, a line-by-line analysis was first conducted as a microanalysis to generate initial categories, including their properties and dimensions. There are various ways to begin open coding, however, for beginning researchers using their first sets of data it is recommended to practice this type of microanalysis. Line-by-line coding involves close examination of the data, placing the data in descriptive lower-level codes. It is the most time-consuming form of analysis, albeit an important one to set the stage for looking at the data in different ways (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Therefore, I took each line of each transcribed interview and assigned it to a particular code, which began my grounded theory analysis as I started to question if one line could belong to the same coded concept as another line. Hence, constant comparison of the data had begun as I asked myself "How do I interpret what the interviewee is saying?" "What is the important message being conveyed here?" The interplay between the data and myself, as researcher, had also



begun in this microanalysis as I actively worked with the data to produce codes that would later become higher-level categories.

For the next level of open coding, I moved into phrases and sentences, and then into whole paragraphs. Again, I assigned the data to descriptive categories, sticking close to the actual data itself. I constantly asked questions about which labels each phrase belonged to and if I put a phrase into an existing category, then assessed how this compared to all other phrases within that category according to the properties and dimensions found within these categories. I was satisfied once I had exhausted all possibilities for placement of this phrase. With practice, I had become faster and more efficient in this coding process, allowing me more time to be sceptical about each coded phrase. Therefore, for the interviews in Term Two, I began the open coding phase with phrasal and sentence-level coding, as is recommended by Strauss and Corbin (1998) if the researcher feels she has become more experienced in looking at the data in different ways.

Axial coding was also part of the microanalysis. During this coding paradigm, much of it seemed to overlap with open coding, as I had already begun to think about the relationships between the categories that I was developing. Axial coding allowed me to combine categories to form more abstract categories, moving away from simple description, which had been the purpose of open coding. This stage of coding introduced further organization, reducing the number of categories that I was analyzing. During Term One, it allowed me to further question the data comparatively, which started spurring ideas for my next round of interviews that I was planning for Term Two. During Term Two, axial coding continued to elicit ideas for further analysis, as I felt myself questioning which categories could possibly be a core category and which ones were not so important to an overall analysis.

Selective coding occurred in Term Two, after all interviews had been transcribed and all data analyzed through open and axial coding. Many discussions were made with my academic supervisors, and the program coordinator and supervisors of AMI. However, any decision around a potential core category always came back to looking at the data to confirm a hypothesis built around the information given by the AMI participants. It was

during this stage that I truly felt I had moved from an inductive to a deductive approach for analyzing my data as I developed a theory for the mentorship process in AMI.

### ***Asking questions and making comparisons***

Strauss and Corbin (1998) stress the importance of using two analytic tools: making comparisons and asking questions, which are devices and techniques used by the research in order to facilitate the coding process. These tools allow the researcher to code theoretically, meaning coding on the basis of concepts and how they vary according to their dimensions and properties. Strauss and Corbin (1998) state that these tools stimulate the inductive process and focus on the data so it is not taken for granted. Such questions that can be asked are the following: Who? What? When? Where? Why? How? How much? With what results? These questions serve as the stimuli for thinking about where to go for theoretical sampling or for developing further interview questions.

Making comparisons is important for identifying categories and for further development of these categories as the researcher looks for similarities and differences between their properties and dimensions. Constant comparison is a procedure where each piece of data obtained is compared to the incoming data for each category. In this study, comparisons were made constantly as one piece of data was pitted against another both between and within documents in order to determine if two data are conceptually the same or different (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). If data were conceptually the same, they were grouped into the same category further reifying their distinctions from other categories simultaneously. This process was done in NVivo by collapsing nodes (categories) together under the same node and then questioning if they should remain as a sub-node (sub-theme or sub-category) or become part of the description of the overall category. Supplemental analyses were done with highlighters and paper, drawing out diagrams and making connections between categories as well. Again, these decisions were made by asking questions about the properties and dimensions of the data. Using the constant comparative method, data were compared, codes refined, and categories and themes were developed.

### ***Negative case analyses***

The negative case is a case that does not fit the pattern of the other data. It is an exception to the main theme or core concept of the research (Corbin and Strauss, 2015). In assessing the data for negative cases, the researcher applies her hypothesis to the story of every participant until she finds any existing negative cases, to which end her hypothesis must be revised in order to make the hypothesis work for all cases (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). In this study, the core category of a Mentee-centered Approach between pairs involved each pair building a relationship and working together to ensure the success of learning and university adjustment for the mentee by providing support tailored the individualistic needs of the mentee. However, there were exceptions to achieving a Mentee-centered Approach. Thus, the negative cases proved there were exceptions to the rule, which provided the need for fuller exploration of the concept in order to determine the properties and dimensions that lay within this theme.

### ***Program evaluation surveys***

Both mentees and mentors filled out Program Evaluation Surveys at the end of Term Two. These surveys were used to supplement and further clarify responses made within the interviews. In particular, there was one mentee who dropped out of the program before the interviews with the mentees were conducted, yet this mentee filled out a survey. Therefore, I was able to gain some insight into his experience through asking both closed and open-ended questions within the survey.

### ***Memoing and journaling***

Grounded theorists may deepen the understanding of the background of the phenomenon under study while controlling for the effects of preconceived ideas. This is done by referring to one's theoretical background while simultaneously engaging oneself in the process of *memoing*. Memoing allows the researcher to take emerging ideas apart, analyze them, and then use them as an outline for further data collection (Strauss & Corbin, 2008). Memos are analytical descriptions that can be quite lengthy and involve in-depth thinking about concepts. Memoing allowed me to track my every move while coding for categories within my research and, by using NVivo software, each memo was automatically dated and could easily be traced back to its original data source. Memos

were usually written after the interviews and were more complex and analytical than journaling or field noting. Because of the immersion that I experienced as a researcher, journaling was a helpful way to do periodic self-reflection and keep notes about feelings and impression of the data separate from the logical reasoning of memoing. This self-reflection helped to bring biases and assumptions to consciousness to see when and how my own beliefs and opinions were influencing interpretations of the data.

### **3.2.12. Development of emerging broad themes and subthemes**

The data was analyzed into a hierarchical order of codes, then categories, and then themes. In this study, broad themes began to emerge within the axial coding process and subthemes as early as open coding. Albeit, many of the subthemes from open coding initially seemed to have potential as broader themes, such as the theme of *Normalizing University Experiences*. However, when further data was collected and collapsed, themes such as *Normalizing University Experiences* fell within a broader, more encompassing abstract theme titled *University Adjustment* and further incorporated under one of the main themes titled *Learning Together*. Therefore, categories that emerged as concepts were built from the ground up to form the broader themes that are discussed in more detail in the Findings chapter.

As further analyses of the data from the interviews of both mentees and mentors in Term Two was conducted, an overarching theme of a Mentee-centered Approach warranted for an overall analysis of looking at and seeing how the mentee and mentor experiences and perspectives were related or unrelated. It was this final analysis that confirmed the analysis was nearing saturation of the data within this study, such that all themes were becoming exhaustively analyzed until no further concepts could emerge.

### **3.2.13. Saturation of data**

Saturation occurs when no new concepts emerge from the data. It also confirms that concepts are developed fully in terms of their properties and dimensional variation and the researcher keeps interviewing participants until she feels her analysis has been saturated (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Thus, the researcher should be sure that the

properties and dimensions of these properties within each concept have utilized the data as much as possible to provide sufficient description for a fully “fleshed out” theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Too often, researchers claim that their categories are saturated when in reality the research ended due to limited time and money. However, Corbin & Strauss (2015) state that this usually relates to studies that have only conducted five to six one-hour interviews. After extensive coding on several different levels for twenty-three different interviews in this study’s analyses and from experiencing repeated themes time-and-time again towards the end of the analyses, it was decided that the final themes that emerged from this study were, in fact, due to saturation.

### **3.2.14. Validation**

#### ***Validity and reliability***

As mentioned previously, grounded theory analysis is considered to be both an art and a science. Therefore, validation here means to check out interpretations with participants against data during the research process while altering or discarding any interpretations from data that are considered contradictory to the incoming data. Ongoing discussion of these findings occurred throughout Term One and Term Two. Conversing with my supervisors helped me to further analyze my interpretations. Fortunately, the online grounded theory group that I had joined consisted of academics, scholars, doctoral and graduate students from around North America and provided ongoing conversations through email for which the feedback was critical to decisions made throughout the research process. Also, meeting with NVivo specialists who were trained in grounded theory methods also opened up discussion about grounded theory and how this study could best be applied to its methodology. Additionally, discussion with other professionals who work with and conduct research on ASD and the supervisors in AMI, helped in the maintenance of *researcher reflexivity*.

#### ***Researcher reflexivity***

Researcher reflexivity is a practice in grounded theory where researchers strive to make their influence on the research, and thus the research influence upon them, explicit to both themselves and to their audience (Gentles, Jack, Nicholas, & McKibbon, 2014).

The objective of reflexivity is to increase the trustworthiness of the research. It is expected that researchers make explicit reference to reflexivity in their studies in order to legitimize their qualitative research. While the guidance on how to best approach reflexivity is still in the early stages, researchers must consider that reflexivity will be used in divergent ways depending upon their study (Gentles et al., 2014). Therefore, the researcher must strive to do her best to address and report reflexivity-related observations through memoing and journaling. Self-reflection is key to keeping reflexive in the research. Corbin and Strauss (2015) state that “we don’t separate who we are as persons from the research and analysis we do. Therefore, we must be self-reflective about how we influence the research process and, in turn, how it influences us”. In order to remain analytical in analyzing the data, ongoing dialogues between my supervisors and I were important for maintaining and encouraging me to further develop themes and go back to the data to check the fit of these themes.

### ***Triangulation***

Grounded theory also allows for methodological triangulation, which is the use of multiple methods to study a single process (Patton, 2001). Methodological triangulation strengthens the study because it utilizes multiple sources to ensure the integrity of the findings. Using only a single source of information is argued to carry more researcher bias in the interpretations made about the data. Multiple methods allow the researcher to cross-reference the data sources, reducing research bias. Triangulation was used in this study given the nature of the participants with ASD and the difficulties that may have come with answering open-ended questions in an interview alone. It should be used to support what the participants are saying, and has proven to be important to this study where many of the interviews needed further elaboration that could not be obtained in the interview process. Therefore, this study began with triangulating different types of participants (mentees and mentors) followed by triangulating different types of data and methods of data collection. The supporting evidence came from documents such as the mentor’s progress notes and the Program Evaluation Surveys (see Appendices J and K) and observations from being involved in the program, such as in the supervision meetings and from administering questionnaires to the mentees on an ongoing basis. These processes allowed me to meet with the mentees repeatedly throughout the year and engage in short conversations about how university life and AMI was going for them. The supervision

meetings gave me the opportunity to meet with the mentors on a monthly basis as well, which also informed me of how they were experiencing AMI.

### ***Member-checking***

A final summary of the major themes and their subthemes were emailed to the mentors to check for accuracy of the meanings of these themes (see Appendices L and M). Questions were asked to clarify their responses one last time and how they relate to themes that emerged from the data to ensure that the findings had not been “forced” by the researcher’s influences and biases, but allowed to “emerge” from the data taken from the interviews. The mentors were asked if the descriptions were complete, if the themes were accurate and if the interpretations were fair and representative (Creswell, 2012). Confirmation of these themes were made through an email response and if any changes needed to be made, the themes were reanalyzed and the necessary changes were made for the final analysis. Member checking was conducted with the mentees within the interviews, to verify their answers. For example, the mentees were verbally asked to confirm if my paraphrases accurately explained the meaning of each typed description for each written response. They were asked to verify by providing a ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answer, often followed by the question “How so?” This method seemed to set up a good structure for reviewing their typed-written answers to ensure I had interpreted their experiences correctly.

### **3.2.15. Transferability**

Grounded theory, as a qualitative approach, allows for the greatest degree of generalizability, more specifically known as *transferability* (Charmaz, 1990). Tracy (2010) states, “Transferability is achieved when readers feel as though the story of the research overlaps with their own situation and they intuitively transfer the research to their own action” (p. 845). Transferability to other contexts is not necessary, but up to the study’s readers to determine if another context would fit for the transfer of findings. Therefore, for this study, I made certain to describe the mentoring program itself and the context in which the research took place. Babchuk (1996) addresses the issue that there are differences between approaches to grounded theory, with differences found within these approaches as well. Therefore, it is important for the researcher to specify which approach she has

taken in order to inform readers in their decision for transferability to other studies and populations. This study mostly employed the grounded theory approach by Corbin and Strauss (2015; 2008; 1998; 1990), with a focus on their most recent work.

### **3.2.16. Summary**

A mentorship is a relationship, therefore, this study called for both mentee and mentor perspectives in order to determine the components involved in AMI. Thus, having both mentee and mentor perspectives was believed to provide a richer description of the experiences of the participants in AMI. The process of engaging in grounded theory has a two-fold effect here in this study. The very basis of grounded theory is to build a theory from the ground up, from the data, and from the perspectives of the participants, while recognizing one's own influences into the analyses. Undergoing such immersion for emergence has brought to light the importance of taking the perspectives of others. In this case, the goal of this research is to portray the perspectives of both mentors and mentees to gain an in-depth understanding of how AMI was experienced by the participants. The two fold is this: grounded theory provides the opportunity to explore the social processes of others using their perspectives and, in doing so, has shown that the importance of taking the perspectives of those with ASD. It was my intention to analyze this study to the best of my ability by employing all the necessary components of the grounded theory approach, in order to provide the perspectives of the students with ASD. Grounded theory strives to provide the most efficient way to see the world from the participants' viewpoints and to assess these viewpoints within the context of the phenomenon being studied, which is what I aimed to do for the participants in AMI.



## Chapter 4. Findings

The purpose of the current study was to develop a theory that explains how mentorship was experienced by the participants throughout their involvement in AMI. Grounded theory methodology was used to analyze the data from interviews and documents in order to allow for themes to emerge. By relating these major themes together in the analysis, a theory was developed that is explained by the connections between these themes. In the words of Corbin and Strauss (2015) “The core abstract concept summarizes in a word or two what the theory is all about and provides a means for integrating the other concepts around it”. Thus, the core theme stands above other major themes while integrating these themes together, creating a theory. This analysis resulted in one core overarching theme labeled ‘A Mentee-centered Approach’. Under this central theme, five other major themes emerged that contributed to this approach: “The Natural Progression of the Relationship”, “The Versatile Mentor”, “The Meeting Process”, “Identifying and Implementing Goals” and “Learning Together”, with mention of the challenges that impeded the mentorship process, titled “Barriers to a Beneficial Mentorship”. These themes were comprised of more specific sub-themes, which are described in the analyses below (See Table 4.1.).

**Table 4.1. The Main Themes and Subthemes of A Mentee-centered Approach**

<b>Main Themes</b>	<b>Sub-themes</b>
The Natural Progression of the Relationship	Releasing the Structure The Self-advocating Mentee Setting and Maintaining Boundaries Being on the Right Level Enjoying Time Together
The Versatile Mentor	A Familiar Supportive Connection
The Meeting Process	Same Time, Same Place Check-ins, Follow-ups, and Sign-offs Being on the Same Page An Implicit Interaction in Itself
Identifying and Implementing Goals	Goal Domains Hierarchy of Goals Macro and Micro Goals
Learning Together	University Adjustment Creating Cohesion and Collaboration

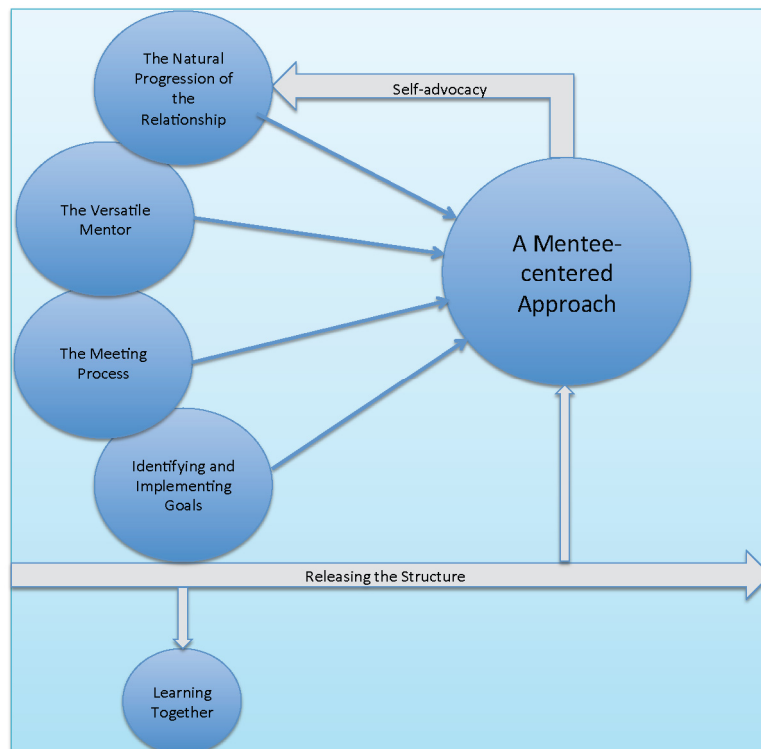
## **4.1. Core Theme**

### **A Mentee-centered Approach: “An Individualized Mentoring Program”**

A Mentee-centered Approach was a holistic person-centered, semi-structured approach that focused on the mentee’s individual needs. For the mentor, this involved a combination of getting to know the mentee and getting to know the mentee’s goals. For the mentee, it involved identifying and communicating his or her goals. A Mentee-centered Approach emerged out of the process of developing a relationship between mentee and mentor, towards a more open and communicative relationship. This theory posits that through a natural progression of the relationship, mentor-mentee meetings became less

formal and structured, and more informal and unstructured. This progression allowed for more disclosure by the mentee, but without being too informal or overstepping the professional boundaries of the mentoring process.

The integration of these themes around a core theme, and how they relate, create the emergent theory for AMI. Theoretical integration involves linking themes around a core theme to form a theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Other salient themes emerged that were of importance to the experiences of AMI for mentees and mentors. These major themes were connected and related to the core theme of A Mentee-centered Approach, providing an explanatory theory for this interrelated process (See Figure 4.1.).



**Figure 4.1. A Mentorship Framework**

#### **4.1.1. A Mentee-centered Approach as explained by participants**

AMI participants who were interviewed for this study indicated that a Mentee-centered Approach was the main conceptual entity of the mentoring process. This approach involved several factors including the mentor being a guide but a friend; the

meeting process having both structure and flexibility; the goals being both mentor-led and mentee-led; and the relationship being both friendly and professional. Over time spent in university and within AMI, mentees learned how to be more *open*, as in more expressive and self-advocating. This was aided by the natural progression of the mentoring relationship as it became less formal, hence, releasing its structure over time. Therefore, the Mentee-Centered Approach was a flexible approach that placed AMI as neither a formal nor informal program, but a combination of both, that addressed the various needs and goals of the mentee as a university student. Its focus was not to address the disability itself, but to address individual needs, both between and within, each student. Thus, the mentors supported the mentees in learning how to better advocate for themselves, and such learning further strengthened the mentoring relationship. During this process, the mentors learned how to mentor and support high-functioning students with ASD. To this end, both mentee and mentor learned and benefitted from the mentorship, such that they were learning simultaneously throughout their time in AMI, which became a product of providing a Mentee-centered Approach.

Mentors and mentees reported feeling like AMI was geared towards providing support that was specific to the mentee. If the mentee needed to work on a goal, and he/she could communicate this to their mentor, then this is what the pair worked on. The success of this communication came from building rapport together, in providing the mentee with a comfortable atmosphere in which to disclose his/her personal information, concerns, and questions around goals. Mentees who struggled with communication difficulties were encouraged by the mentors to communicate more as the mentor would scaffold the process of determining and working on goals. Mentors made suggestions, such as what they felt were the best goals for their mentee to work on and gave advice through offering strategies for working on these goals. Fundamentally, it was up to the mentee to decide which goals they would primarily focus on.

The mentee's self-advocacy developed from the scaffold of the mentor and through building a closer and more open relationship. This generated a more active role for the mentee in AMI, which led to the mentor taking a more passive role on the "sidelines" (Michelle, mentor). Each mentee began the program needing different levels of support, some needing more support than others, and this differentiated process continued

throughout AMI. One mentee, Brian, recognized this fact, saying, “Everyone needs different levels of support” in AMI. The versatility of the mentors aided this process as they were willing to help the mentees with a variety of issues. Jamie (mentor) understood that AMI was a person-centered approach that involved the mentor helping the mentee to identify and work on goals. He said,

It really depends on the individual right? It’s like, whatever problems they’re having, and having the mentor kind of work with them and troubleshoot those problems as they arise because that’s what I mean about the concept, you know. It’s not a structured program. It’s an individualized mentoring program. It’s catered toward helping each individual with whatever specific needs they have.

Lisa (mentor) agreed that each mentee had his/her own individually tailored experience. She also pointed out how it involved her, as a mentor, in the process as well. As a mentor, Lisa supported two mentees; she felt she had a “tool box” that allowed her to employ different strategies to support both of her mentees’ needs. Thus, she took an active role in her mentees’ university experience as she guided them and connected them at university. She acknowledged that her mentees developed an active role over time, in providing their perspectives on what they needed as university students. She also felt that through the increasingly active roles of her mentees, she became the one to learn from them. She stated,

I think [AMI] has helped to kind of make a connection between my experiences and maybe how that might be different for a student living with autism. And then learning so much just from them, you know, like really getting an individual perspective because each student is so different. Getting an individual perspective of what it might be like for them and how to kind of connect the services that SFU can offer to them so that they have a really positive experience. So yeah, it’s been fun. It’s been kind of like having this tool box and figuring different ways of making sure these students have a good experience here.

When Lisa’s mentee, Paul, was asked who decided which goals they worked on in AMI, he stated, “It’s my choice”. Paul had struggled with communicating his goals when he and Lisa first met. Over time, and after building rapport together, he was better able to communicate his needs to her and could identify and advocate for his own needs as a

university student. When Paul was asked about how he and his mentor decided upon which goals to work on in AMI, he replied, “It’s what I told her I want to work on”.

However, Paul also acknowledged that Lisa had supported him in these decisions, and he recognized the versatility of a mentor’s role. “An AMI mentor helps improve life skills of an individual with various strategies depending on the individual”. More specifically, he said, “[Lisa] helps [me] by providing advice and resources that explain a variety of topics”.

Lisa’s support helped to scaffold Paul into determining his goals. Within Paul’s own experience in AMI, he had a variety of goals that he and his mentor worked on together. Megan (mentor) believed that AMI’s biggest strength was the fact that it was set up to address the specific needs of each individual mentee:

I mean it’s very specific to the mentee. So, it’s not like a set kind of workshop where everyone works on social skills. It’s meant to be specifically for [the mentees] and what their needs are. I think that’s probably the biggest strength.

Mary (mentor) also acknowledged how the Mentee-Centered Approach meant the mentor had to be flexible in her role in order to more specifically address her mentee’s needs and the importance of having that flexible structure:

I feel there is a lot of flexibility for the mentor in this program. We don’t really have very structured rules and goals that a mentor needs to practice and achieve. In a way, I like it because it allows me to prepare according to my mentee’s needs, and I won’t be pressured to meet some behavioural goals as a mentor.

Meeting the needs of their mentees was the ultimate goal for the mentors. To best achieve this, mentors felt they had to tailor the mentoring process according to what each individual mentee needed in terms of support. The mentees specified the goals for which their mentors could help them to better adjust to university in various ways. As time progressed and relationships developed, mentees and mentors worked together to achieve these goals. Mary (mentor) simply said it best, “With my mentee I feel, what he thinks, what he needs, is really the core part.”

## 4.2. The “Natural Progression” of the Relationship: Becoming “Open” and “Comfortable”

The Natural Progression of the Relationship was a salient theme in AMI that involved mentors and mentees developing an open and comfortable relationship as they got to know, relate, and understand each other. As comfort levels increased between mentees and mentors, so did the degree of open communication, further developing the relationship and levels of comfort. Therefore, the “natural progression” that occurred within the relationships was the interplay between being open and being comfortable. Importantly, the mentee him/herself became more open, in being more expressive and, therefore, advocating for his/her own goals. Also, as time progressed in AMI, both mentors and mentees reported feeling as though their relationships and, therefore, their interactions in meetings, had become less formal and more casual. Mentoring pairs reported enjoying their time together as they became more comfortable with one another.

Both mentees and mentors showed an appreciation for the relationship they had built together. Mentoring pairs were invested in working towards a better relationship. It was a friendly, yet professional, relationship in which the mentees felt comfortable enough to communicate their goals to the mentors—a crucial process for A Mentee-Centered Approach to emerge. The broad theme of The “Natural Progression” of the Relationship: Becoming “Open” and “Comfortable” was represented through the following five subthemes, which include *Releasing the Structure*, *The Self-advocating Mentee*, *Setting and Maintaining Boundaries*, *Being on the Right Level*, and *Enjoying Time Together*.

All mentoring pairs, regardless of how formal the relationship started, experienced the natural progression process, albeit to varying degrees. Anna (mentor) and her mentee, John, had begun as fairly casual, yet, still experienced more casualness as time progressed and they got to know each other. Anna explained how getting to know John made their relationship feel more comfortable. Also, knowing what he wanted from her as a mentor helped to make the mentoring process easier. Anna said,

I think with any relationship the more you get to know a person, the more comfortable it feels in terms of what to expect. In the beginning, it was getting to know this new person and getting to know the role that you were in as well. So, it’s not just like you’re meeting a new classmate.

It's like you're trying to establish what he's expecting and what you're expecting and kind of where you guys feel like you're going to take the relationship and how you feel like you're going to approach things. And now I think we've come to a place where he knows that I'm open to discussing whatever he wants to discuss and that I'm also here, not just to listen, but to also to still kind of give advice, if he's willing to take it. So, I think that natural progression of just being more comfortable and knowing what the other person wants and kind of expects just, it's helpful.

Becoming "open" involved both the mentee becoming more open to expressively communicate with his/her mentor, but also the mentor letting the mentee know that he/she too was open -- as in, available to discuss various issues that arose. For Anna and John, even though they had begun as more casual than many of the other mentoring pairs, they still started with some structure in their meetings and a communication style that was mostly one-sided, where the mentor was leading and doing most of the talking. Anna (mentor) explained how this changed over time, throughout Term One and Term Two:

In our conversations it's also really open too. We had a lot of back and forth. In the beginning it was mostly me trying to get answers, so it was like asking questions and then the response. Whereas now, it feels more like an actual flow of conversation. So that's another benefit, the kind of change that you can see throughout from the first term.

This feeling of the "flow of conversation" describes how Anna felt her relationship with John had opened up. Even though this pair did not experience a big change in their relationship, they were still able to recognize that their relationship was progressing, as Anna explained,

Our relationship has remained relatively stable throughout the relationship except for the fact that it seems to get more comfortable each time that we meet. We set off establishing a very open and comfortable relationship and we emphasized that we could discuss whatever came to mind. That relationship has continued to be open and the comfort level has become even greater.

It was important for mentoring pairs to have a relationship that naturally progressed in this way. Another mentor, Lisa, mentioned the importance of open communication and how it had affected her relationship with one of her mentees, Tom. Lisa and Tom had started their mentoring process two years ago, when the program first started in 2013, and



began as a very formal pair. Throughout their time spent together, Lisa explained how they had developed more dialogue together and this led to feeling more comfortable in communicating with one another. Lisa said,

When we first met, we spent a lot of time getting to know each other, which was, I think, a really positive thing. It created a good ground for the kind of mentorship that we have now. Sort of the evolution of what we talk about has gone quite far. At the beginning, things were like, I might check in about how classes are going or more like stress levels or that kind of thing. At the beginning it would be very, you know, maybe not get as much information. But now, we will sit down for like a whole hour and we can really talk about each class and talk about maybe stress in a more complex way and it's taken over a year to really get there. But now we have quite a comfortable communication channel. And so in that way, I think it's been positive because that's something that I've really noticed that has changed.

For Mary (mentor) and Steve (mentee), the relationship also began as very formal, with Steven needing much support from Mary in order to communicate his goals. However, Steve began to engage in more open communication, albeit slowly, as they spent more time together and built rapport. In the process, Steve could better express himself. Mary said,

I feel overall he's become more open to me like he's sharing something. Though still, I need to probe a lot. At least if I ask a general question he will answer more detailed, rather than once. Those answers were quite simple. Now he's able to fully explain a situation to me.

Maybe it's because he feels more secure to express [himself], at this moment, than when we first met. Maybe it's about the rapport built between us. Or maybe he feels he's being understood and he's being supported. So he's more willing to express [himself].

Both Michelle (mentor) and Amy (mentee) recognized how open communication and comfort developed within their relationship and the importance of this to understanding each other. For Michelle, this progression helped her to know what suggestions to give to Amy to assist her with her goals. Open communication also involved Amy being able to better communicate her needs to Michelle. Michelle thought, "Having a good relationship makes it more comfortable to make suggestions as well for things which your mentee could do to make things easier."

Michelle emphasized the importance of developing a relationship to work on goals together to “make things easier” at university. Amy and Michelle spent time together by doing things other than meeting about goals. They often went to the gym or to the coffee shop together. This mentoring pair valued their time together and used much of this time to get to know each other and to better understand each other. A better understanding led to a more open and comfortable relationship for Amy and Michelle, as Amy stated, “I think [spending time together] is equally important because that way there can be more of a relationship and by spending more time together we’re able to understand each other more and what our lives are like.”

Julie (mentor) also recognized that getting to know her mentee, Brian, created trust in their relationship as it progressed. Brian became more open and comfortable as they built rapport and, therefore, was better able to communicate his needs to Julie. Julie also saw how the process of her mentee becoming more comfortable went in concordance with him becoming more open:

My relationship with my mentee has definitely improved since the start of the program because we have gotten to know each other better and have more trust in our relationship. He is more open to me than when we first met, and even sometimes asks for help, when previously he was reluctant to share such information.

Brian began to share more information with Julie as they developed their relationship. He was invested in doing so because, as he had stated, one of his goals in AMI was to “build a connection with [his] mentor”. Julie and Brian had the trust and investment in each other that was essential for developing an open and comfortable relationship. They also got to know one another better and felt their relationship had improved over time. They saw the value in letting their relationship naturally progress. Brian said, “I keep it real. Like, I just keep it natural and real.”

#### **4.2.1. Releasing the structure**

The subtheme, *Releasing the Structure*, is related to how the meetings between mentees and mentors started out as structured and mentor-led. However, as relationships developed, the meetings became less structured and more mentee-led. Mentors and

mentees compared and contrasted this change in meeting structure. At the beginning of the year, before relationships had developed, meetings were often quite structured to get the momentum going of addressing goals. Over time, it was best to release this structure in order to provide “more opportunities for the mentees to speak up”, as Mary (mentor) mentioned when discussing her meetings with her mentee, Steve. Lisa (mentor) explains how releasing the structure of the meetings with her mentee, Paul, had been a positive thing:

When we first started probably in the first two to three semesters, things were very structured, things were very goal-oriented. I would come in with a plan and we would kind of address the plan. We had fairly set ways of addressing goals. So we did like SMART goals, we made goals, broke down the goals, we tracked the goals, and like all that kind of stuff, and that was good. But as of last semester, beginning of last semester, we talked about it and kind of decided that we didn't need to be that structured anymore, and that's actually worked really well. So now we just touch in on the goals and we have a conversation about the goals and we kind of, like, you know, we just, kind of talk.

I was definitely coming with more structure to make sure that I was checking in about things and making sure that there was little bit more structure. That was necessary at the beginning. And now we kind of have a mentorship relationship where we can kind of check in about issues in a more open way I think. So, that's been good...we kind of released all the structure.

For Lisa's other mentee, Paul, releasing the structure took longer and did not release as much as it did with Tom, reflecting that there were differences between how much structure was needed between pairs. Although, Lisa did state, “I am starting to see that with my other mentee too”—how the structure between them was being released. However, Lisa did mention that she had spent more time with Tom than Paul. As Lisa discussed her meetings with Paul, she said,

I think things have changed a little bit, I mean, I think in the beginning things were very—things are still quite structured in that relationship. But I do find that there is more of, like, he will come to the meeting with some sort of something he would like to address. Whereas before I did feel like it was a lot of addressing what *I* wanted to address, or what *I* thought.

Megan (mentor) and David (mentee) started as a fairly formal mentoring pair, with a good amount of structure in the beginning. Their meetings became less structured as they began to incorporate casual components, such as discussing common interests together. This created more casual conversation between them while still addressing academic topics, as Megan described,

In the beginning, the meetings were a lot more of me asking questions and him answering. Now, he talks a lot more and [initiated] conversation and we talk about other things that interest him when we finish talking about school-related topics.

I very much directed the conversation. It's like I'd ask him questions and he would talk but that was it, there'd be a silence and I'd be like okay like next question. But now he just wants to talk. Our meetings have kind of turned from very much from what *I* think he should work on. Now it's like, as we built rapport, we talk about stuff like TV shows and it just became more friend-like.

Mentors explained how they saw that their mentees were talking more often during meetings over time and how this led to more back and forth conversation and less of a "deadline, deadline, deadline" kind of structure, as Michelle had put it. Her mentee, Amy, explained how they went from having a structured plan around goals, that was mostly led by Michelle, to a "play it more by ear" approach:

I think in the beginning it was more of like talk-it-out meetings, and then sometimes my mentor would pull out some binder given to her for the program. But I think as time has gone by we've been able to play it more by ear and sort of do our own thing.

Mentors and mentees made decisions together on how to structure their meetings. This part of the meeting process was not always explicitly stated and was determined by the types of relationships that mentors and mentees had together. Lisa (mentor) had mentioned, "we talked about it and kind of decided that we didn't need to be that structured anymore"; this arrangement was made explicitly between her and her mentee, Tom. However, other mentoring pairs let the structure release more implicitly, as mentees began to participate more in discussion with their mentors.

#### 4.2.2. The self-advocating mentee

The subtheme, *The Self-advocating Mentee*, reflects that as time progressed, the mentee showed an increase in expressive communication and, therefore, active participation in the mentorship. Thus, this subtheme refers to how the mentee, in becoming more open (i.e. expressive) as relationships became open, developed self-advocacy. The mentee role involved a continuum between being active and passive, such that some mentees started as more passive and developed an active role at a slower rate than others. The passive mentee was one who looked to the mentor more to help assist him or her to decide which goals to work on. When the mentee was more passive, the mentor accommodated this role and maintained a more formal style within the relationship. The active mentee, on the other hand, took the initiative to engage the mentor in discussion and goal setting. The active role of the mentee meant that the mentor took a more passive approach, such as when Michelle mentioned how she would just “sit and...listen” to her mentee, Amy, discuss her own progress and explain her goals. Thus, becoming an active mentee meant becoming more expressive and becoming a self-advocate, which reflected a sense of *menteeship* in AMI. Menteeship is the “proactive effort by self-leaders to establish, manage, and sustain a relationship with a mentor who will guide and support the self-leaders’ goals, outcomes and vision.” (Zigarmi, Fowler, & Lyles, 2007). Lisa (mentor) described how Tom began to show proactive effort when working on goals together and “...taking more initiat[ive] in finding out what he needs to do to be successful”. Lisa stated “This is quite a change from when we first started meeting and it is great to see him take a lead in our meetings.” Anna (mentor) also described how her mentee took an active role in the mentorship. She said, “It kind of depends on the week and what he has going on and what he has to focus on and touch up on. It’s generally open to him to kind of steer it too.”

Megan, another mentor, stated that she saw “improvement [in] how [David]’s more open and volunteering information and stuff” as he became “more independent” and self-advocated for his goals and choices at university. Amy (mentee) discussed how she could go to her mentor, Michelle, with her “game plan” and then Michelle would give her advice on her plan. Michelle discussed how Amy began to take more control of her decisions at

university, as time progressed in AMI, stating how Amy had progressed from Term One to Term Two,

She currently has things under control for the most part and I feel as though I'm there more as a 'just in case' something comes up or to hear about her week and point out or suggest things which she could do which may be helpful for her.

When asked about how things had improved at university, Amy described how she and her mentor worked on studying behaviours and how they had improved. She stated, "I think it just came from like, you know, with our meetings like me saying this is my plan and then, going into the weekend, knowing that plan and then seeing how all that turned out." Amy, like other mentees, had become more active in the goal-planning process, throughout her time in AMI. Therefore, developing self-advocacy seemed to be an outcome of having an open and comfortable relationship that encouraged the mentee to be open, hence active, in the mentorship.

#### **4.2.3. Setting and maintaining boundaries: Having "clear guidelines"**

Mentees felt comfortable to open up to their mentors once relationships started developing. Additionally, these relationships had boundaries. *Setting and Maintaining Boundaries* clarified and affirmed the rules of the mentoring relationships in AMI, making the roles of the mentees and mentors much clearer. Discussions of boundaries were focused upon how it helped the mentee. Setting and maintaining boundaries was about knowing the limits of the relationship as it became more open and comfortable. As far back as the training meeting for mentors, the mentor was expected to be a 'coach' and was not to be the mentee's therapist, academic advisor, close personal friend, or romantic partner. Similarly, restrictions on when the mentee could contact the mentor—during agreed-upon times using agreed-upon methods (i.e. either by email or text)—served to reinforce these boundaries. Once the role of the mentor was made clear to the mentee, it created a reassurance that the mentor was a professional who would respect the rights, privacy, and confidentiality of the mentee when disclosing themselves and their needs and goals to their mentors.

Having a good balance of professionalism and friendliness through setting boundaries “open[ed] lines of communication” (Anna, mentor). This led to positive outcomes, such as with Anna and John’s relationship. John shared his personal issues but that they both knew where they should stop. John discussed how Anna helped him with his social anxiety by helping him to see that not everyone was always judging him. She had also helped him to talk more to other students in his dorm to make friends, through the conversations they shared and discussed how she had experienced these things at university as well. However, when it came to more personal issues, John and Anna had boundaries for discussing these issues in any more depth. John said, “In such cases, I got more of the help from the therapist. But [Anna] helped like a little, I guess. Social anxiety, I don’t think, is her expertise.” Anna also discussed how there were limitations:

Well, I mean, as comfortable as this relationship is, I think there’s still obviously boundaries. We don’t go into like very intimate topics or like private things that maybe you would have with another friend you’ve known for a while just naturally.

Lisa (mentor) had set these initial boundaries with both of her mentees, Tom and Paul. She felt this made their relationship more comfortable from the start. While she and Tom spent much time engaging in the friendly elements of their relationship, Lisa and Paul placed emphasis on the boundaries between them. She sensed that Paul needed these boundaries to be very clear in order for him to feel comfortable around her:

I perceive that setting boundaries makes certain things less stressful, for that student, because there’s just clear guidelines. Whether it’s like text messages are only for emergency situations or, you know, those kinds of boundaries. Like being very clear about it kind of cuts away, I think, a certain amount of stress and leaves open for a little bit freer communication.

Setting boundaries provided clear guidelines to the mentee on where they stood within the relationship. As was seen with Anna and John, setting boundaries “helps just to make that relationship more comfortable” (Anna, mentor) for the mentee to openly disclose information.

#### 4.2.4. Being on the right level: “Not some hierarchy”

As mentees became more open, relationships also became less one-sided, creating a more balanced, peer-like interaction. *Being on the Right Level* meant finding a balance between “authority” and “comradery” to develop “a form of peer-education” (Julie, mentor) within AMI. Thus, a more equal-partnered relationship came from developing casual peer-like interactions and letting the relationship develop naturally. Being more peer-like led to less of a hierarchical relationship where mentees and mentors were on a closer level with each other. Lisa (mentor) explained,

It’s not just like you’re an overarching mentor figure, you know. I think it’s important that they understand that they’re also part of the relationship right. It’s not just like a one-way of information floating down to them.

Julie discussed how a balanced relationship between authority and comradery involved a mentor being someone who had enough authority to support a mentee’s needs yet was a peer for whom the mentee could openly share information:

In my opinion, this program is definitely beneficial because it is a form of peer-education and allows students to have a closer and more uncensored mentorship relationship than those of parents or staff members. The mentorship relationship has a good balance of authority and comradery, which encourages mentees to disclose and get help for things they may not otherwise share with more authoritative figures such as professors, or parents.

Anna (mentor) and John (mentee) had developed comradery fairly quickly. During this process, they found it was important to incorporate peer-like interactions in their mentorship. This established open lines of communication, where both mentee and mentor could share stories as students. Anna explained,

We basically sit down and we kind of share how our week has been and it used to be mostly just him but now it’s a little bit of me sharing how my week has been and we can kind of compare and contrast how classes are going and how social life is going and I think it just really helps just to make that relationship more comfortable. It kind of sets a baseline, like that it’s not some hierarchy within our relationship. And I think that really helps to establish open lines of communication, which is really important.



Mentoring pairs worked on creating a balanced relationship that was mostly peer-like but still maintained some authority, in that the mentor was the more experienced peer who provided his/her expertise. John emphasized this point by explaining how his relationship with Anna, to him, did not mean that they were friends, like his other personal friends. Instead, he appreciated that he had a peer-like interaction with Anna but not to the point where it would have become uncomfortable for him. John and Anna had managed to progress their relationship, but not past any level that would sacrifice the comfort they had together. John stated, “We’re not like *friends* and we don’t really like dislike each other or anything. We’re just, I think it’s like the most comfortable relationship for [mentoring].” Mentees felt comfortable to disclose information with a mentor who was not an authority figure or a personal friend, but somewhere in between. This balance provided the most comfortable relationship for mentorship in AMI.

#### **4.2.5. Enjoying time together**

The broad theme of *Enjoying Time Together*, involved getting to know one another and, for mentors specifically, seeing their mentee do well. Developing peer-like interactions was aided by enjoying time together, which involved laughing and joking together, making the meetings feel “less stiff” (Michelle, mentor). Therefore, the theme *Enjoying Time Together* addresses *how* relationships were able to become and maintain positive interactions that were open and comfortable, such as through laughing and joking, and getting to know one another. Interactions were not so “forced” (Michelle; mentor) as more enjoyable friendly elements and building rapport became part of the mentoring relationship. In turn, this enjoyment led to further strengthening the relationship. Lisa (mentor) expressed how her and her mentee, Tom, had fun together when they met: “We laugh a lot.” Michelle (mentor) explained how this process had evolved over time,

I think at first it was very much a business relationship. My mentee took a while to open up and for me to see more of her personality. Now that she has become more open, we will often joke and laugh during meetings which eases the overall feel of the sessions and makes them less stiff.

I mean, like I like talking to her and think she’s a cool person so it’s enjoyable just in like sitting down and talking about her week and then I talk about my week a little.

Michelle's mentee, Amy, had also felt "I do enjoy her company" through their conversations, their jokes and laughter, and the time they spent together at the coffee shops and at the gym. Anna (mentor) had also mentioned how the laughter that her and her mentee, John, shared created a natural and casual feeling in their relationship. She stated, "We can laugh and share conversation quite easily, and nothing feels forced." Laughing and joking together eased the stiffness between mentees and mentors, which was aided by sharing a similar sense of humour, as is discussed in *Finding Common Ground*.

### ***Finding "common ground"***

Getting to know each other was an important component for enjoying time spent together. As part of enjoying their time together, mentoring pairs reported the importance of finding similarities and connecting through shared interests. Anna stated, "It's been really enjoyable getting to know my mentee and seeing how much we have in common". This led to trust and honesty between pairs and made it easier to talk to one another. Finding "common ground" (Megan, mentor) involved discovering similarities between each other such as similar personalities or relating through the fact that both partners were SFU students. It also involved getting to know each other's interests and hobbies. Two types of sharing occurred between mentees and mentors: *Shared* interests and *sharing in* interests. Shared interests were common interests such as liking the same activities. Sharing in interests involved disclosing information about one's interests to the other partner. For some mentoring pairs, this came more easily as they connected over similarities. For other mentoring pairs, they had to work harder at finding commonalities and learning more about each other, however, succeeded in doing so by sharing information about their likes and dislikes. Finding common ground opened lines of communication by introducing more topics to discuss, which helped to build rapport and a stronger connection, and created more flow to conversations together.

Anna and John had a strong connection from the beginning, as they had similar personalities. This made it easier for them to build rapport and get to know each other, as they got along really well. Anna explained, "Our personalities are also quite similar, and we are able to read one another quite well...he's kind of quiet and I'm a little bit more quiet too so, it plays well" which shows how her and John had shared interests. She also

discussed, “We get along well and have some similar interests, which makes it easier to talk during down time and also easier to connect”, which shows how shared interests opened their lines of communication.

Getting to know one another meant getting to know each other on a more personal level. From spending time together, mentoring pairs were able to work on goals, but also equally important to them was working on building a relationship by connecting with one another. Amy (mentee) had previously mentioned that spending more time with her mentor, Michelle, allowed them to “understand each other more and what our lives are like.” For Michelle, having a similar sense of humour had helped for her and Amy to connect.

It took a while for her to kind of open up but I feel as if we have like similar, almost like sense of humour. We can understand each other in a pretty good way. So that makes it easy to just talk and I also think that if you have a good relationship then it’s easier to help someone because they’ll trust you more.

We also talk a lot more about [my] mentee’s hobbies and interests as we have built rapport.

There was an interdependence between developing the relationship and incorporating more friendly elements into the mentoring process. In this case, these elements involved getting to know each other. Julie and Brian had first struggled in building rapport and getting to know each other because they felt they were very different, having different interests. Instead of shared interests, they connected by sharing *in* interests. They used an activity where they had to engage in more open dialogue about each others’ interests and hobbies. Julie felt this activity was a turning point for her and Brian in their relationship:

I think the “Twenty Questions” thing actually really helped because before that it was very like, I kind of just went right into it because I’m like, oh you only want to meet for an hour so let’s do what you want to do, let me help you with this. But, just taking some time to get to know him I think, like just after that meeting I already felt a bit of a change. I just learned a lot about him that I didn’t know, like what music he liked and what his hobbies were because he did talk about what he was interested in but it was mainly focused on like the same couple of things.

Brian also felt connected to Julie. While they both stated that they were really different people, he was very positive when asked about their relationship. He noted many of the similarities that he had found in connecting with Julie, as he said, “We are both goal-driven. We are both ambitious in life. We both have a cause in our lives, and we’re both constantly willing to learn and be mature.” Despite not having shared interests, Julie and Brian worked at finding common ground and found some positivity in doing so. When they didn’t share similar ideas they embraced the situation as a learning opportunity placing value on getting to know someone who is different than oneself, as Julie elaborated,

I feel like me and my mentee are like really different people. So, it’s bad in that I feel like we can’t always relate to each other. Because I think we just think about things differently or like have different opinions on things. But it’s also good because we’re not so alike, that we’re always kind of like learning about each other and it’s always kind of new. So, I think that’s good.

When they couldn’t always find tangible similarities, there were other ways that mentoring pairs found to connect, such as relating to both being SFU students. Anna and John used this common ground to further connect. Anna said,

I asked him what his interests were and we kind of established his interests and he asked me what my major was and what I was interested in. So, even though we don’t have similar majors it was nice to just to talk about school in general and classes and that was something that was the most obvious thing that we have in common, just navigating school and stress and exams and stuff.

Other mentoring pairs connected in more tangible ways. Mary (mentor) felt she had connected more with her mentee, Steve, because they were both from Asian countries and spoke English as a second language. For Mary, she felt she better understood how Steve struggled with communication, in addition to having communication difficulties from autism:

I don’t know about other mentees but my mentee is from Japan, so I’m from China, so [they are] similar but not identical backgrounds. I feel maybe he perceives me as someone who can appreciate some of [his] cultural background more than if I’m like completely like a Westerner. Also, English is his second language so I can completely understand that sometimes he speaks slowly and may not articulate perfectly. I completely understand because I’m doing the same thing too. I hope

maybe this will serve as an asset for building the relationship, between me and my mentee.

Tangible components also involved sharing in the same types of activities. For Megan and David, they connected over watching the same TV shows. Megan had been accommodating to David in first learning about what his interests were and then engaging in these interests herself. While she did share in liking the same sorts of shows, she watched these more often and made sure to watch the same ones as David in order to maintain this common ground. David commented on his relationship with Megan, “She is helpful with work and we do share certain interests.”

Megan further explained how these common interests were mostly based around watching the same TV shows and then discussing them colloquially in their meetings. This laid the foundation for discussing even more topics together, and helped to build their relationship.

I think [watching TV shows] has really helped our relationship grow because this was kind of like last sort of November-ish. So that’s been kind of a common ground, type thing.

We both watch like How to Get Away with Murder, which is a new show so we talk about that and he thinks the ending’s going to be and stuff like that. There’s a couple others. We both watched House when it was out and were talking about like, well I’m a person into medical stuff and he really liked the solving of the mystery kind of thing, and we were comparing it to Sherlock Holmes and, so yeah, stuff like that. Then, just in general, he’s from a small town and we talk about what that’s like and I guess that kind of thing, and his experiences moving up here and kind of like what his friends from high school are doing and stuff like that. I guess kind of like, connecting.

So I guess just, the friendship, is just that we talk about things that he’s interested in and, like I said, How to Get away with Murder, it’s like we’re both interested in, and then he often tells me about the music he likes and stuff like that too, so.

David was able to share more information about himself to Megan, which was a similar process that occurred with Lisa and her mentee, Tom. Lisa said, “We have similar

interests and a similar sense of humour. I think we have built a good mentoring relationship where we can be quite honest about issues regarding his experience at SFU.”

As can be seen here, as connections were being made and rapport being built, mentees and mentors were becoming more “friend-like”. This was an important process within relationship-building, as Lisa (mentor) confirmed:

I think that if you just focus on like strict goals, I mean like you’re meeting with this person once a week and you do build a bit of a relationship with them and so talking about like interests especially if they’re shared, is really important because it builds trust and it’s fun for you too.

Lisa and her mentee, Tom, were able to connect through a game they had played together. Through more discussion they had realized that they both enjoyed playing the same types of board games and had decided this would be a great way to get to know each other better. Lisa said, “The game really helped at the beginning”. She said it “helped as a way to connect”. Tom had stated at the beginning of their mentoring process that he was “interested in games”. Lisa continued to explain,

I think it was just a matter of getting to know each other, being little bit shy. We connected over, like I brought a game that we would play together at the very beginning of our mentorship. And so that really helped to kind of break the ice. We could talk about the game and then from there, you know we kind of didn’t need the game anymore. We could just start talking. So that was really helpful. At our very first meeting I wanted to try to find some kind of common ground and it seemed like that was there and so [playing a game] seemed like a really good way to kind of break the ice, get to know each other, without having a focus on something else. And now it’s very, very open communication. Like, we generally meet for an hour. It’s kind of a constant back and forth dialogue. We’re very crazy.

That was kind of how we built the relationship and it’s still something that we talk about. Probably every meeting we touch in on like what games are you playing? That’s something that’s also part of it.

There was much utility for the mentors in getting to know their mentees. It was two-fold in that it helped to further develop the relationship, but also, it helped them to know

what strategies to suggest when working on goals together. Lisa stated that “Just knowing what they’re kind of into” let the mentors know “what might work better for each student”.

### ***Making a difference: Reaffirmation and motivation***

Mentors discussed how they had joined AMI to help make a difference in the life of a student with ASD. Therefore, this became a goal that the mentors, themselves, worked on in AMI and a theme within *Enjoying Time Together*. Seeing mentees do well gave enjoyment to the mentors, which reaffirmed their decisions to become AMI mentors. Furthermore, it provided the motivation to continue to help mentees. Lisa (mentor) said,

I really enjoy working with my students and am motivated to help find alternatives that support their post secondary experience. I am motivated by continuing to build the mentor/mentee relationship and identify opportunities that best suit each student.

Anna (mentor) discussed how the success of her mentee reaffirmed her decision to be a mentor:

I think, um, that you go in really wanting to make a difference but you’re kind of unsure in the beginning how it’s going to go and if you’re really going to make that. I think slowly as you start to see the progression it really kind of reaffirms why I did this in the first place and it kind of motivates you to keep going and, and to keep kind of coming up with new ideas and addressing new topics that you both want to kind of solve and like get through together. Because you want to see that progress going. You don’t want to stop. It’s nice, to see it.

I think, in the beginning, we all just kind of set out to achieve, what we could. And I don’t think any of us were expecting to make leaps and bounds but I think that with what I’ve experienced with my mentee and seeing the progress that we’ve made, I think it’s made a difference in his life and in his functioning and I think that’s all that I really set out to do so I’m very pleased.

He’s a really kind person so it’s always kind of nice to meet up with him and see how his week has been going and you know, we share little conversations and that feeling, if you can help him in any way or assist him or give him a little tip for something that he is wondering about then that’s um that just makes you feel good, so yeah anything. It doesn’t have to be some big major kind of revelation, you know but just little tips here and there definitely is good.

Helping their mentees to succeed gave the mentors the motivation to keep mentoring as they felt they were useful to their mentees. Importantly, their mentees' successes did not have to be extravagant. Michelle (mentor) said,

I actually have a lot of fun with it, like I just get excited. Like, you know, even when like the small things happen and if I know that she had a good week or something I'm like great, you had a good week! Like, I'm rooting for you! And, I don't know, I just always leave school or like the meetings happier. It's like my Friday awesomeness, I guess.

Improvements made by the mentees, whether large or small, helped the mentors feel like they were making a difference in their mentee's lives, and this is something they enjoyed about being mentors in AMI. Megan (mentor) reported how her mentee, David, became more competent and independent and felt her guidance helped him in this process. When asked if she enjoyed being an AMI mentor she explained,

I am, definitely...my mentee was uncomfortable about certain aspects of university like time management and staying organized, as well as what his professors would expect from him because he had heard everyone's grades are going to go down once you enter university and he was really worried about that. But we worked on reading together, like hav[ing] expectations for papers, and it's just really nice to see him being more competent about writing or doing school work on his own. Like, he saw for the first paper he need[ed] more guidance and now he feels like he's gotten the hang of it and that's nice to hear. So that's why I enjoy it.

Megan felt she had given David the guidance and support he needed to help him with his school work. As David learned from Megan and started to develop independence from her guidance, Megan felt enjoyment in knowing she was useful and helpful to her mentee. This reaffirmed her decision as a mentor and gave her the motivation to keep mentoring and supporting David. Seeing mentees succeed to any degree was enjoyable for mentors.

#### **4.2.6. Summary of The Natural Progression of the Relationship: Becoming "Open" and "Comfortable"**

The natural progression of the relationship, and how it became more open and comfortable over time, meant incorporating friendly elements into the mentoring



relationship while maintaining the professional boundaries between mentee and mentor. It was important for mentees to have these rules and boundaries around what was appropriate or inappropriate to do as a mentee, and knowing what to expect from their mentor. Knowing where the boundaries lay added comfort and clarity to the mentoring process, leading to a relationship that could become more open, but not too open, and mentees who engaged in more active effort for their goals. In doing so, mentees benefitted from their mentors' support, which provided affirmation for the mentors within the mentorship, which further reified and strengthened mentoring relationships.

### **4.3. The Versatile Mentor: “Figure Out Which Hat You Put On”**

There was great discussion of understanding the mentor's role within AMI. While setting and maintaining boundaries within the mentoring relationship was important to first clarify the role of the mentor to the mentees, the theme *The Versatile Mentor* explains how this role actually worked. In a mentorship, the mentor is the more experienced or more knowledgeable person that helps to guide the less experienced or less knowledgeable person, the mentee, within a personal developmental relationship (Zigarmi et al., 2007). The mentor's role in AMI was given to the undergraduate and graduate students who had more experience and knowledge being an SFU student, so that he/she could employ and impart his/her knowledge onto the mentee. The mentor had to be supportive and flexible to accommodate each individual mentee as he/she guided the mentee through Term One and Term Two. Being a “versatile” mentor meant acquiring different sub-roles such as being a supportive point of contact, while playing the role of both a guide and a friend. As follows, being a guide and friend meant being supportive in guiding the mentee through his/her academic and social experiences; and being supportive as a friend by providing peer support (i.e. listening, relating, casually talking).

To be part of the mentorship, the mentor provided a consistent and reliable resource for the mentees. To this end, the mentors had positive attributes that helped them to be supportive to their mentees. Brian (mentee) described these characteristics quite well when he said,

The role of an AMI mentor is to put his/her mentee in the correct path and help the mentee in achieving his/her vision and goals in life. The responsibilities of an AMI mentor, is to be understanding, empathetic, punctual, flexible, professional, on time, well organized and most of all passionate, dedicated, and willing to learn new things alongside his/her mentee.

In order to adapt to this supportive role, the mentors had to be knowledgeable, responsible, and invest in their mentees. Mentors were open-minded to learning how to be an effective mentor. The mentor also had to be flexible in order to help the mentee achieve what was important to the mentee, while also understanding what the mentee needed for support as a university student with a disability. Thus, the mentors were versatile in order to fulfill their role and accommodate their mentees.

The mentor was both an academic and social connection that the mentee would not have otherwise at university. Through this support, mentees could further develop their academic and social skills, and learn how to navigate university life. The mentor would follow up on the mentee's progress in working on his/her goals by reviewing and discussing goals with the mentee, while being supportive and helpful. The broad theme of *The Versatile Mentor* was further represented through the following subthemes of *A Familiar Supportive Connection* and *The Mentor as a Guide and Formal Friend*.

#### **4.3.1. A familiar supportive connection**

The AMI mentor was a familiar supportive connection for helping the mentee to navigate university. The mentor acted as a familiar and supportive person for whom the mentee could rely upon for academic and social support. AMI mentors kept in regular contact with the mentees, on a weekly or bi-weekly basis, continuously helping them with any difficulties that they faced at university. The mentor was someone who was trained and had knowledge about ASD. The mentor was also the person who could "follow up" on the mentee to track their progress without being too overbearing. The mentor was an "added resource" as the person whose role fell in between being a professional and being a personal friend. Therefore, an AMI mentor was a connection that the mentee would not have otherwise for support at university, who provided a source of trusted and reliable support for the mentees. Amy (mentee) explained,

I think it's just helpful to have mentors that kind of understand that they're dealing with people with autism. I think, other programs you know, I'd have to tell my mentor hey this is what I'm like but they may not know what that is or understand how to deal with people who have [ASD].

With the AMI program I have support and guidance that I may not have otherwise, and it understands my needs.

Amy felt that having an understanding of ASD was a great asset for mentors in AMI. Mentors were supportive by being sensitive to the mentee as the mentee shared information about issues. Mentors had to keep in mind that they were working with students with a disability. Therefore, to this extent, had to approach situations in a supportive way that did not undermine or disrespect the mentee. Steve explained the role of a mentor in this way:

To support the mental handicap of university students with disability. Responsibility of a mentor is to be careful that what they say does not unexpectedly discourage the student with [a] disability.

Embedding an understanding of ASD in AMI freed up time to work on goals. Mentors received ongoing training and advice throughout their time in AMI and mentees benefitted from this process. In turn, mentors could also be the ones who followed up on the progress of goals, reminding mentees of their responsibilities in working on and committing to their goals. One mentor, Lisa, had said, "I always check in about classes". Mentees found it helpful to have this support, as Amy (mentee) said,

Generally, when I meet with [my mentor] it's kind of my way of just being able to probably say like this is what I'm going to do, and I think it's helpful that I'm able to tell someone else who can follow up on me and see how I'm doing.

Michelle, Amy's mentor, explained how she was someone that Amy could trust with disclosing information and getting help with issues:

I think it's also helps her just to have someone to bounce things off of, because I mean, she's met a couple people through school and stuff like that but she hasn't made like any solid connections. I mean it's kind of tough talking to someone about stress and stuff like, especially that

you've barely ever met but I feel as if the mentor is sort of more, like you trust them, easier, to begin with. But yeah, nothing like super serious has come up but just I think having that outlet for her is good.

Other mentors, too, recognized the need to be both sensitive and supportive. Anna stated,

I've tried my best to listen and to kind of get a sense and feel for when he wants to meet, when he really has something on his mind and, if he doesn't, then to not push him and to let him sometimes come to me and ask for help if he needs it. I think that's really important just so he doesn't feel like this is a weekly like I'm checking in on you, like I'm your mother sort of thing.

The mentor was also an "added resource", as someone who the mentee could turn to for issues that they could not discuss with a professional or a personal friend. The mentor was a relatable and friendly contact at university who had the education and experience as a university student, even for issues that the mentee felt "may not necessarily want to be discussed with a friend" (Anna, mentor). This occurred with Anna and John when they addressed his social anxiety issues. This issue was too personal for John to bring to a professor or faculty member, and although he discussed his anxiety issues with his therapist, John wanted the advice from another student, as someone who was closer to his age and acted like a peer. Yet, he also needed advice from someone who was more experienced and had the maturity to help guide him in the right direction. John felt Anna was a good support for offering him the advice he needed on this subject, such as tips on how to talk to his peers. When the issue had components that were rooted in deeper psychological problems, then John would bring these issues to his therapist. Otherwise, John sought for help from Anna as well for his anxiety issues. Anna had said,

My understanding of the role of a mentor in AMI is of an individual that attempts to provide whatever assistance is appropriate for the mentee that they are working with. In my opinion, the mentor is an added resource for the mentee to go to if they have any questions, concerns, or topics they want to discuss. As a fellow student, it provides a factor to the relationship that doesn't exist with a professor or a TA, and allows an outlet for discussion about things that may not necessarily want to be discussed with a friend for various reasons. This has been my thought of what a mentor in AMI is since the beginning of the program, and throughout my role it has been reaffirmed.

John had also explained how Anna helped to support him through his issues with social anxiety. He said,

She was always available when I needed her and she would often give me advice that I hadn't considered. I remember asking her how I would make friends with my professors, because I had no idea what I would talk to them about, and she suggested asking questions about stuff I didn't understand or stuff that was vague in lectures and readings. This would give me the ability to understand things better in class, and it would also serve as an appropriate conversation starter.

Mentors were in a position where they could provide a supportive connection for mentees at SFU that no one else could. Tom explained it was an interaction "that would otherwise be non-existent if I was to be left to my own devices." His mentor, Lisa, also saw the importance of their connection and how AMI was an opportunity for them to connect. Her mentee, Tom, had struggled with making social connections at university. Lisa stated that "The program provides a place where students can connect and build relationships that may not have otherwise occurred." Thus, an AMI mentor also provided a unique social connection for the mentee as well. Susan (mentor) also described how this connection afforded social opportunity for mentees. Her mentee, Steve, had struggled with making connections as well. Therefore, she felt that she was a good connection for him at university and having this connection may have helped to alleviate some of his stress:

Specifically, one of my mentees, I don't think that he would have very much connection with other university students or, you know, somebody other than a tutor or a teacher. Obviously my job is neither one of those so it's nice, specifically speaking for him, it's nice that he has another connection because I don't necessarily think that he would seek one on his own. So, I think that maybe it helps to alleviate his stress.

Amy (mentee) and Sarah (mentee) mentioned how their mentors were a connection that they appreciated. An AMI mentor provided the help and social interaction they needed. Their mentors gave them somewhere to go and someone to talk to. Amy said, "I mean we like, sometimes we do talk about stuff other than the academic stuff because it's easy to have somebody to talk to, you know." Sarah (mentee) agreed that this connection was valuable in supporting her at university as well. She explained, "Just kind of knowing like if there's anything that I need help with. I have somewhere to go. I'm not just wandering lost."

### ***The mentor as a guide and formal friend***

Having somewhere to go and someone to talk to required the mentors to be both a guide and a friend to the mentees. The mentor as a guide was someone who helped the mentee to navigate university life by helping them to figure out how to achieve their goals. The mentor as a friend was someone who talked more casually with the mentee on topics other than goals, without getting too personal. The mentor could be more of a guide or more of a friend but was always both, to varying degrees, depending upon what the mentee needed both over time and within any given moment. Mentors explained how they had to play different roles within each meeting, and over time, depending upon what the issue was for their mentees. If the mentee needed more of a social partner and someone to listen and care about him, then the mentor was that partner. If the mentee needed more of a guide to support him with working on goals more specifically, then the mentor did that too. As one mentor, Anna, put it, "...the role of each mentor can vary a lot." Lisa (mentor) discussed this more when she said "I think you just have to be versatile. Like, I try as much as possible to let the mentorship be guided by them." The versatility of the mentor was described by the mentees as well. When mentees were asked what their AMI mentor meant to them, there was mention of a mentor having both elements of a guide and a friend. Lisa's mentee, Tom, put it best when he described what an AMI mentor was to him:

I guess kind of a combination of friend, a peer, and a teacher. A peer in that we aren't very far apart in age, a friend in that I feel comfortable talking to [Lisa] and we seem to have similar interests, and a teacher in that [she is] able to provide insights that I would not have thought of which are new and useful.

David (mentee) also discussed how the mentor role had both elements of a guide and a friend. He said, "My mentor is more of a tutor and somewhat of a peer." Julie (mentor) further supported this notion when she also discussed how a mentor guided the mentee while being friendly and casual. When asked what she thought her role as a mentor was she replied, "I think it's almost kind of like a friend tutor-ish, sort of thing." She continued to explain,

We're quite casual with each other. So, it's not so formal. It's not like teacher-student, or it's not quite like a tutor with like single goals. But it's kind of like we're casual and friendly and relaxed but I'm still trying

to help him with things, and he knows that's sort of my job, if that makes sense.

Megan (mentor) discussed how being a guide and a friend, for her, meant encouraging her mentee to engage more in university life both academically and socially while taking time to relate and talk to her mentee, David, like a peer:

I feel that I am like a guide in the various aspects of university life. This could be like learning how to create a mind map, or just encouraging him to spend time in Clubs Day exploring what the university has to offer. Being a mentor also has friendship elements as well, like I showed him [ratemyprof.com](http://ratemyprof.com) or where is my favourite place to eat or study on campus.

For some mentors, learning to be both a guide and a friend took more time than others. However, mentors report being both and, in doing so, felt as that it was the role of being a "friend" that needed more time to develop. Developing the role of a friend, as part of the overall mentor role, had an impact on the way in which the mentor guided the mentee. The mentor learned that to be the most effective mentor, he/she did not just have to simply provide knowledge and information to the mentee, but to be someone who the mentee could rely upon for help with issues as a university student. Jamie (mentor) had experienced this:

My perception of my role has changed quite a bit. Specifically, when I first entered the program I thought of myself as more of an "educator." Someone who could pass on my knowledge and experience to him.

Now, I see the mentor's role as more of a friend and a guide—someone he can always turn to with problems or questions he is experiencing about any topic.

In order to support mentees, mentors were sensitive to know when to take on the appropriate role. In being versatile, mentors could adjust this role to meet the needs of the mentees in a style that was not too overbearing without undermining the mentee's opinions and ideas. At the same time, mentors offered support and guidance while also being a peer and a special type of friend to the mentees. Consequently, mentors could help mentees to navigate university life at SFU. The mentor as a guide and the mentor as a friend are further discussed below.

**The mentor as a guide.** The mentor's role as a guide involved helping the mentee adjust through university by showing him or her how to navigate university life both academically and socially. More specifically, the mentor as a guide supported the mentees in working towards achieving goals by being a more experienced support person who was knowledgeable about the SFU campus. The mentors had a unique role in that they educated the mentees about the university resources at SFU from a student's perspective. Within this role, mentees had identified their mentor as a "guide", "peer-tutor", "tutor", "facilitator", or being "teacher-like". Mentors identified their role as a "guide", "support system", "facilitator", "tutor", "teacher", "back-up", "personal supporter", "touch-point", "front-line", "vessel of information", "liaison", and "a gentle reminder". Both mentees and mentors determined that the mentor was "just like a guide" in helping the mentee navigate university life.

David (mentee) had said, "A mentor's objective is to guide their student through the first few steps of university, and getting used to the system within." Julie (mentor) elaborated on this statement by explaining how she felt that a mentor's role as a guide was to pass on her own knowledge of being a university student. She said, "To me, the role of a mentor in AMI is to guide the student in aspects of university life, offer advice from personal experience, and provide and educate them about all the resources and services available to them."

A mentor as a guide was much like a tutor or facilitator of knowledge, who could help with various needs. In many cases, when the mentees discussed how their mentors guided them through university they often eluded to the idea that this was a type of mentor who "advises or shows the way to others". Steve (mentee) had said, "A mentor is like a tutor to me. They teach a lesson about how I should live or spend the day or interact with other people." In keeping in line with Steve's idea, Mary who was Steve's mentor, felt she was like a personal supporter. She said, "I think more like a personal supporter. It's like it's very tailored to his needs." Thus, the mentor was a guide who accommodated the mentee in order to address his/her specific goals and needs.

The mentor as a guide was someone who was also a reference point for the mentees to locate resources and other sources of support on campus, if need be. The



mentor guided the mentee by showing him where to go for further help, such as to an academic advisor, to a counselor, or to the learning specialist for further assistance. Lisa (mentor) described guide-like elements using various descriptors such as “touch-point”, “front-line”, “vessel of information”, and “liaison”. In using these descriptions, she discussed how an AMI mentor was reliable and useful to the mentee in being a consistent source of information for them to seek help and information. The mentors facilitated the connections between the mentees and other university sources, getting them to the right professional for further support. When mentors felt that an issue was out of their realm, they guided and referred their mentee to a professional in that area to further assist him/her. Mentors mentioned that this kind of circumstance would occur when the mentee needed more of a counsellor or and academic advisor to further support their needs. Lisa (mentor) also discussed this when she said,

I think that it's kind of like any one of those that's needed in the moment, not one in particular. I think it depends on the issue. I think the key to it though is that you do get to be the one sort of like the front line. And then you kind of can figure out which hat you put on in order to address it. Or you figure out what resource, like if it's above you or it's not something you can, you know, really handle or shouldn't handle. Then you can kind of figure out who the right person is to connect that person to. So yeah, just depends.

I understand my role as a mentor to be a touch-point for the student to talk about issues that arise during their post secondary experience and to provide information about resources available to students here at SFU.

So in that way it's good because I do feel like over time I become more of a person that they can touch in with if necessary, right? Which, I think, is an important role.

Lisa felt she could guide her mentees in many different ways. She could connect them to resources on campus or online to help them get organized and study better, she could connect them to academic advisors to help them plan courses, and she could connect them to the learning specialist if they needed further accommodations at university. Lisa said,

I think it's been helpful for me to be there to basically provide a liaison between me, him, and the learning specialist.

I was just able to contact the learning specialist and we were able to get in there really quickly and so like I've always felt that I'm sort of a vessel for the information that the AMI project is creating.

Yeah and that if things go above me, I know exactly where to go.

Lisa was a familiar and consistent support system for her mentees, even when they needed extra academic help that was "above" her role as a mentor. However, within her role, meaning within the appropriate boundaries of being a mentor, she could be any form of support that her mentees needed as they faced challenges in university. Tracey (mentor) also felt it was necessary to be the type of mentor who could support a mentee in various ways.

The role of mentor was still seen to me as being there for any form of support that the mentee required. I felt I would be needed to help guide them through any difficult concerns they had on how to navigate university life. In that way, my view of my role has stayed the same.

Tracey's mentee, Sarah, agreed that this support was, indeed, very helpful. She stated, "The thing I like best about AMI is having someone to ask questions to if I need any help."

Ultimately, to the AMI participants, the mentor as a guide also meant the mentor was a "peer tutor". Both mentees and mentors referred to the mentor as a "peer" when discussing how they were a more experienced student helping a less experienced student at SFU, to emphasize that being a guide involved being a peer as well. Paul (mentee) stated, "[Lisa] is also a peer who provides advice from her student experience." Megan (mentor) said, "...like a peer kind of but like a more experienced peer." Finally, Brian (mentee) referred to his mentor, Julie, as a "peer tutor". Additionally, the fact that mentors were more experienced SFU students was appreciated by mentees. This experience allowed them to take on the role as a guide. Mentees reported,

It is important to have a mentor who is a student because they can understand a situation better and provide support. (Paul, mentee)

I like that she has more experience and she knows more about the school and how to handle situations with the school, like whether it's

having to talk to a professor or, you know, how to handle late assignments, you know, things like that. (Amy, mentee)

They can relate to specifically SFU-based things, such as room locations or professors. They are better suited to provide information on what is available to SFU students as there are things they used or knew of when they were here. (Tom, mentee)

A mentor who is also an SFU student knows what it's like to be an SFU student and would generally know more about the school than someone who wasn't so they can help better by knowing what it's like to be a student at SFU and know what resources are available and how things at SFU work. (Sarah, mentee)

Tracey, Sarah's mentor, also saw the utility in having experience as an SFU student. This knowledge was useful in supporting her mentee. When asked what the role of an AMI mentor meant to her, she explained,

Having that individual kind of help them and be there every week being like I'm here if you need me, whatever is the question, like how do I get into a club, like how do I manage all this school. Like anything, it's just knowing that you have that support system there and that they've already been through it because we're all like upper levels, somewhat. So, having that idea of someone who's been through it all and is experienced and so they made it, I can make it. Just having that support, experience, it helps.

Having experience as an SFU student was an asset to being a mentor that worked in great favour to the AMI program. In addition to having experience, it was necessary for mentors to be flexible and to evolve *within* the role as a guide as well. As such, throughout Term One and Term Two, mentors went from being a "forceful guide" to a "on the sidelines guide" (Michelle, mentor). A *forceful* guide was a mentor who led most of the discussion and had a larger input on which goals to work on. An *on the sidelines* guide was a mentor who was more passive in his/her role in the meetings, where he/she would listen when the mentee took a more active approach in the meetings by providing more input into goal decisions. Michelle (mentor) explained,

I almost want to say like a guide...last semester it was like I was a *forceful guide* and this semester, I'm like, you know, more *on the*

*sidelines guide* but kind of there to push back in line if need be, if that makes sense.

Michelle also referred to this “sidelines” role as a “gentle reminder” such that she could still offer her mentee advice, but in a way that was more casual and laid-back. Michelle stated,

I feel as if I’m more like a gentle reminder, kind of being like okay well remember this is what you could do, but it’s less like deadline, deadline, deadline! And more just like I sit and I listen and then just if something seems a little wonky then I’ll suggest something or if not then like it’s good. You’re rocking, you know?

**The mentor as a formal friend.** When the mentors could just “sit back and listen” and not have to “push back in line”, the role of a mentor began to include elements of being a friend. For mentors, it was the sitting back, and not the pushing back, that led to incorporating elements of a friend within the mentor role. Thus, being an “on the sidelines guide” related closely to the mentor role as a friend. The sub-theme *Mentor as a Formal Friend* explains how the role of a mentor as a friend actually worked in AMI, which involved the mentor being a “formal friend”. Mentees identified their mentor as a “friend”, “formal friend”, “trusted acquaintance” or as having “friend-like elements”. Mentors also identified their role also as a “friend”. This did not mean the mentor was a friend like one would expect in a personal friend but, instead, a formal friend who was a social connection at university that respected both privacy and responsibility when helping the mentee.

An interesting finding within this subtheme, was that this concept was emphasized mostly by the mentees. The mentees, while they appreciated having a friendly connection with their mentor in AMI, stressed the importance for them in having a mentor who maintained formality in his/her role. This provided both consistency and predictability in knowing what to expect from their mentor. John (mentee) discussed how his mentor, Anna was a formal friend to him because Anna was friend-like to him, but they did not hang out like friends would outside of AMI. He said, “My mentor is like a really formal friend. As in, she’s a friend who I can turn to when I need advice, but not someone who I would hang out with or spend time with otherwise.” Brian (mentee) also described his mentor Julie as having “elements of a friend” but within the formalities of the mentorship. Brian said,

My mentor to me is a peer tutor with elements of a friend, since our relationship is a bit formal to be called friends she is a peer tutor and semi-friend, since she is closer to my age...is an undergrad at SFU and is someone I can relate to, since she is at a similar age and educational maturity level as myself.

David and Megan were formal friends. They engaged in friend-like discussions, yet respected that Megan's role was part of the mentorship. This meant she was friend-like to David, yet a formal friend, as this friendship remained within the limits of the mentorship. As David explained,

We're friendly. We discuss things that are and aren't important to the course-load. We met enough times so we're well-acquainted...but we don't talk outside of our meeting times...and for the sake of the mentor it's probably better to have a trusted acquaintance than a friend.

#### **4.3.2. Summary of The Versatile Mentor**

Overall, the mentor was a familiar supportive connection, in being both a guide and a friend, and helping the mentee to navigate university. To be part of the mentorship, the mentor provided a consistent and reliable resource for the mentees. The mentor role was comprised of many roles and characteristics as a supportive connection at SFU. The mentor had to adapt to this role, by employing the varying roles within, while learning what his/her mentee needed for support as a university student with a disability while being respectful of the limits of the mentorship. Thus, the mentors had to be supportive, friendly, respectful, and ultimately, versatile in order to fulfill their role and accommodate their mentees.

#### **4.4. The Meeting Process**

Meetings between mentees and mentors had a certain consistency throughout the mentoring process in AMI. At the beginning of the mentorship, meetings were very much structured and mentees were scaffolded by mentors to get the momentum of discussion going in the meetings. A fairly structured routine developed from the start of the program, which was needed in order for mentoring pairs to work on goals. As time progressed in AMI, meetings became less structured, yet still retained enough structure in order to focus

upon goals. The theme *The Meeting Process* explains *how* the meetings were structured, including how decisions were made and goals were addressed. Throughout their time in AMI, mentoring pairs had consistent schedules in order to keep a routine to the meeting process. Mentees met with their mentors on a weekly or biweekly basis and the pairs followed a similar routine each meeting. Mentoring pairs were more successful in working on goals together if they could accept each others' opinions and if both agreed upon which goals to address. Both partners made decisions of *what* goals to work on and *how* to work on the goals of the mentees. These decisions were based upon the opinions of what mentors and mentees had thought was in the best interest of the mentee. The theme of *The Meeting Process* was represented through the following four subthemes, which include *Same Time, Same Place; Check-ins, Follow-ups, and Sign-offs, Being on the Same Page, and An Implicit Interaction in Itself*.

#### **4.4.1. Same time, same place**

*Same Time, Same Place* was a subtheme that emerged as part of the meeting process. Mentoring pairs usually met at the same time, in the same place, each week in order to provide consistency and make the meeting process less complicated. This consistency provided familiarity within the process so that the mentee could easily remember and know where to go. With most mentees being first-year students, this was very much needed, especially in the beginning. As time progressed, some mentoring pairs would meet at different places. However, for the most part, they kept the meeting place the same. Unless scheduling conflicts arose, mentoring pairs also kept the meeting times the same as well each term. Therefore, the mentors were accommodating to the mentees in deciding where and when to meet. Paul, a mentee, conferred "Meetings are every Monday at 10:30. This takes place at the student-advising centre". Another mentee, Brian, stated "Our meetings continue every Friday".

Mentors would usually send email reminders to the mentees before their meetings each week, usually one to two days before the meeting. These emails were sent more often at the beginning of the mentorship. These emails sometimes contained information that was important to the next meeting (i.e. a meeting schedule, resource(s) to review, list of things to discuss together, etc.).

On average, as reported by three mentors, mentees would take two days to respond. Emails were a great communication tool for which to plan and coordinate meetings, including informing one another of cancellations. There were two mentoring pairs that discussed using text messages as well, once they became more comfortable with one another. Having set times and places made it easier to anticipate schedules, so that if anything did come up (e.g. a family issue, needing more time to study, etc.) mentees and mentors could let each other know in advance. One mentor, Michelle, mentioned,

We've been meeting the exact same day, the exact same time every single Friday. Then if anything comes, like we were supposed to go to the gym together last week and her mom was in town and all this stuff, so she emailed me that week being like 'Oh can we not go this week because of all this stuff?'. I noticed it takes her about two days to respond to emails, which, there hasn't been a time crunch on anything but if there was that could potentially be an issue. But also, I remember there was one day when we were meeting by the Renaissance [café] there was graduation so there was nowhere to sit and because she always gets there before me because she gets out of class, she emailed me being like 'Oh hey, I hope you get this before you get up here but I'm just sitting outside here. So I saw and checked my email hoping for an email like that and there was one so that was good.

Meetings were allowed to take place in public locations on campus. More private locations (e.g. dorm room) were prohibited in order to protect the safety of both mentees and mentors. Mentoring pairs could meet off-campus if they wished but had to inform the program coordinator in advance. However, the mentoring pairs in this study kept their meetings on-campus only. Most mentoring pairs chose locations that were not too noisy or busy in order to limit distraction and avoid over-stimulation in case the mentee was sensitive to the noise of public places. Once meeting places became familiar, mentors and mentees sometimes tried different places to meet on campus. If there was an issue with changing the meeting place or time then mentors and mentees decided to go back to the original plan to accommodate the mentee. Tracey explained,

We always meet at the CSD and then we go to the library, so we always go to the library. Near the end of the last semester...it was like, well, we already go there anyway so we might as well go there. But when the new semester started she just wouldn't show up. So I figured it could have been because of this change in meeting. It was a little harder to find people so it makes it a little more difficult...or she just really can't find me so I found it easier to bring it back to the CSD and then I found

she was coming and then she didn't come again but then she's coming, so I feel like it might have been helpful to like bring it back to the comfort level of coming to the same place and then not switch it. So, we do meet at the same time and the same place.

#### **4.4.2. Check-ins, follow-ups, and sign-offs**

The AMI mentoring pairs followed a similar structure within their meetings. They would first check in to see how their previous week had gone, then address and follow up on any goals they were working on and which goals to set for the next week. Following up on mentees also meant sending emails, either to remind mentees of meetings or things they were working on, or as a means to communicate if a meeting was missed. Lastly, they would see if there were any other lingering issues, confirm their next meeting, and part ways. Some mentoring pairs mentioned that they would have a casual discussion either before addressing goals, as part of the checking-in process, or after addressing goals, as part of the signing-off process, to wind the meeting down before parting ways. Through check-ins, follow-ups, and sign-offs, the mentors scaffolded the process of working on goals for the mentees as they demonstrated how to problem-solve for goals (i.e. overcoming any barriers that prevented the mentee from achieving his/her goals).

When I meet with my mentor she usually starts by asking me how everything is going. Then I talk about any problems I have and she talks to me about ways I can fix my problems or what I can do to improve them. (Sarah, mentee)

We generally check in on how classes are going and troubleshoot any challenges faced during the week. We usually meet for about an hour and will follow up on any discussions we had the previous week. We also check in about classes and I always offer the opportunity to bring up any issues faced during the week. (Lisa, mentor)

I first talk about if there was anything special about this week, and then go to what I want to know about. That could be checking social events or how to write a resume. Then we talk about some points I should fix. Lastly, we talk about some things that I might draw interest to. (Steve, mentee)

Finally, mentoring pairs would settle up the meeting by confirming that issues had been addressed and usually ask one last time if there was anything else that the mentees



needed to cover, in terms of goals or issues. If so, they would address this first and then wrap up. If not, they would conclude the meeting. John (mentee) summed up this process as he said, “Usually after I’ve gotten advice or anything and after things are all pretty much settled, she says well is that it? Or like something like that, and then [we] part ways.”

If a meeting was missed, mentors would encourage mentees to touch base via email, which sometimes worked and sometimes didn’t. Julie, mentor said, “If we don’t meet for the week, I usually try to follow up with him through email, like get him to update me. He sometimes will and sometimes won’t.” Mentors felt that sometimes their mentees may have been overloaded with emails, and therefore, tried not to send too many emails but just enough to keep their mentees informed of the meeting process and any useful information they should have for university. Mentoring pairs also used an online information system called *Canvas* during their meetings to look at campus resources and information (e.g. campus maps, modules with study tips, campus club information, supplemental learning videos, etc.).

Mentors and mentees who were part of more informal relationships had meetings that became much less structured over time. However, even for these pairs, the structure of the meeting process followed a pattern of checking in, following up and signing off, especially in the beginning of the mentorship. Michelle (mentor) described her meetings with her mentee, Amy:

We sit down and the first couple minutes are always kind of just oh and how was your [week], because we meet on Fridays, so it’s kind of a good summary of how the week went. And just talk about it, if either of us had any, you know, big exams or term papers or how everything went. Just like a general life discussion I guess. And then the first thing we do is we go over the stuff that we talked about in the meeting prior. So say if she had a term paper due then we talk about how that went, you know, if she did go to that meeting that she had with her TA and that kind of stuff. Just kind of go over how our goals from the week before went. Then I always ask her do you have any things that you want to talk about this week or anything like that and then she’ll tell me whatever it is and we set new goals and figure out how to go over achieving those goals. Then that’s usually when I have anything to say like if [AMI staff] told us to remind them of anything, or if I want to go over the goal setting sheet or something like that, that’s when I’ll bring that up. I always, like right before the end, say is there anything that you want to talk about one more time?

Brian (mentee) emphasized having a “general life discussion” between him and his mentor, Julie. The more often they met, the more they incorporated this discussion into their meetings together. He said, “When I meet with my mentor, we greet each other, ask each other about our respective weeks, do small talk and conversations getting to know about each other deeper and then discuss issues I need mentoring in.” Thus, checking and following up was a good conversation starter and gave purpose to the discussions within the meetings. Discussing goals then led to discussing further topics as well. Another mentee, David also mentioned how discussion was incorporated into his meetings with his mentor as well and how their discussion of academic topics lead them into discussing topics that were more social in nature. He said,

We meet, talk about what work and classes I am currently attending, as well as what kind of assignments I have to do. She then gives me time management advice and tips on how to do work effectively. We then discuss life at SFU briefly and then finish off with a chat about TV shows or books (my interests).

There was more room for discussion of a wider range of topics within the meetings, as mentoring pairs met more often throughout their mentorship. Thus, by having a fairly consistent pattern during the meetings in AMI, provided opportunity for the mentors to scaffold working on goals but at the same time, provided purpose and topic of conversation between mentee and mentor, which often led to further discussions that eased the process of working on goals together within the meetings. Other components that eased the implementation of working on goals together are discussed in the following subtheme, *Being on the Same Page*.

#### **4.4.3. Being on the “same page”**

Being on the “same page” in the meetings, not only meant working together, but working *well* together. Being on the same page involved the agreement, acceptance, and ease of implementation around goal decisions within the meeting process. If mentees and mentors were on the same page, then meetings ran smoothly and they could successfully work on goals together. Both the mentor and the mentee were involved in the identification and implementation of goals. Together, mentors and mentees agreed upon which of these goals to focus through accepting each other’s opinions on what was in the best interest of

the mentee. Therefore, this theme addresses the acceptance of both partners actively making decisions and suggestions for goal strategies, such that the mentee respectfully accepted the advice and guidance given by mentors, and the mentors accept that the mentees actively contribute to decisions around goals for themselves as well. Anna (mentor) shared,

He wanted to learn skills for better communication, and various ways in which he could meet new people. I was on the same page in terms of what goals I felt that he should work on. His academic progress was very good, we did go over a couple of time management and planning skills and I thought that was an area that he could set goals in and try to achieve as well.

John had been reluctant at first to accept Anna's advice on his academic goals. Anna had felt that her advice on studying strategies was in John's best interest, such as breaking down his term papers into manageable steps and taking notes when doing his readings so he could better remember and organize his thoughts. John explained how he began to accept Anna's advice once he tried her strategies, which helped him with his study habits. Once John had seen how helpful Anna's advice was, he was convinced that she was on the same page as him. The success of the mentors' advice led the mentees to believe that their mentors could be helpful and had their best interest in mind. John said,

I feel like if I'm having trouble with something she'll give me studying strategies. I remember she recommended actually like taking notes for the readings and then I'm like, I don't want to do that, but then I actually tried it and it actually really helped me to memorize a lot of the things.

Therefore, being on the same page was an element of the mentoring process that took time to develop as mentees tested the successes of mentors' strategies. Lisa (mentor) explained how her and Tom took time as well to come to a congruence with their perspectives on goals. Improvements in communication, getting to know each other, and being able to discuss more topics other than academic goals, for this mentoring pair, was how they managed to develop similar perspectives on topics and issues that they discussed. Lisa shared,

I think when we meet we kind of have a similar perspective now, or at least we can kind of see each other's perspectives a bit when talking about school and when talking about issues that come up.

Lisa's mentee, Tom agreed. He said, "I think we work well together, we seem to be on the same page." Therefore, being on the same page took some time to fully develop to the point where both mentee and mentor had the confidence that they could accomplish goals through the active participation of both partners.

#### **4.4.4. An implicit interaction in itself**

Mentors recognized that not every goal had to be explicitly taught in AMI. Whether it was their intention or not, mentors felt that just by meeting with their mentees, their mentees were afforded social opportunity and a chance to work on their time management skills. Thus, meetings were used for both explicit and implicit learning. For example, social skills were implicitly addressed such that the meeting between mentee and mentor became as a "social interaction in itself" (Jamie, mentor); and arriving to the mentoring meetings on time taught the mentees how to be on time for appointments with others on campus. Working on goals implicitly was felt, by the mentors, to be a less intrusive way to teach the mentees important social and academic skills, that would be useful for them at university and beyond (i.e. when getting a job after university). Also, working on goals implicitly was a way for the mentor to suggest strategies for the mentee without being condescending and made learning within the meetings quite natural. Implicit learning did not involve making explanations and outlining goals overtly, which was one way that mentoring pairs worked on goals. Implicit learning, instead, allowed the mentee to make his/her own conclusions and assimilate information in a way that made sense to him/her. In the end, mentors had hoped that their mentees appreciated this type of learning as well.

Jamie (mentor) explained how his meetings with his mentee, Chris, gave them the opportunity to socialize with one another:

I'm not someone who's trained in social skills interventions or that's not the point of our program obviously but even just you know, meeting for half an hour or an hour each week is a social interaction in itself regardless of what we talk about which, given what he really wants to work on, I think is important. So, I certainly see that so hopefully he sees that as well, the usefulness of that.

For Mary (mentor) and Tracey (mentor), they saw how working on time management was necessary in order to for the mentee to learn to be on time for their meetings together and used their meetings as an opportunity to work on time management skills. Mary explained how she first discussed time management in an explicit way with her mentee, Steve, and then later used their meetings as a way to reify if he was applying the time management skills she had taught him. She explained,

I taught him something about like being punctual. So...I'm not sure if he will do this in the future, but he's very punctual to our meetings, so I'm assuming he's taking this message.

Tracey discussed how her and her mentee, Sarah, worked explicitly on time management but took advantage of the meetings to further incorporate these skills in a more sensitive manner. Tracey shared,

It's definitely something I haven't particularly like said, this is what you need to work on, because it just seems a little bit harsh. I've told her like you should let me know if you can't make it but it's hard to be like this is something you need to work on. So, it's a little hard to get into that, being so direct about it. But I do think it's a goal that we haven't formally addressed, but something we've talked about, that kind of goes under the umbrella of time management. So, it's just like making sure you make it to the appointment.

#### **4.4.5. Summary of The Meeting Process**

The meeting process gave structure to the mentorship that allowed for the scaffolding of learning how to address goals for the mentees. By providing some consistency and predictability within the meetings, the mentees and mentors were able to efficiently work on goals together. The agreement and acceptance of opinions within the meetings also allowed mentors and mentees to better work on goals. Lastly, using the meetings as a way to implicitly teach the mentees time management and to socialize with another student was a natural and efficient way to address the mentees goals.

## 4.5. Identifying and Implementing Goals

Working on goals together was the purpose of the meeting process between mentees and mentors. When asked to describe the meetings in the interviews, both mentees and mentors addressed the types of goals they were working on and how these goals fit within the meeting process. Initially, goals were broadly identified by the mentee on the Goal Setting form. This form was filled out at the start of Term One and, therefore, mentees had to predict and envision what their goals would be for the next two terms. While this was a good starting point for the mentees to reflect upon the types of skills they felt they would need to work on, as university students, the goals became more relevant to the mentee as time in university progressed. Over the time spent in AMI, the mentees' goals became less broad and more specific to his/her individual experiences at university. The broad theme of *Implementing Goals* was represented through the following three subthemes, which include *Goal Domains*, *Hierarchy of Goals*, and *Macro and Micro Goals*.

### 4.5.1. Goal domains

There were different goal domains within AMI that fell into four main categories: *academic*, *job/career goals*, *social*, and *emotional* goals. Each mentee chose to work on goals that fell into at least three out of four of these areas, albeit, placed varying levels of importance upon each area when asked to rate the importance of the goal to them. Academic goals involved working on study habits, organization and time management, whereas job and career goals included working on skills to find a job, such as a summer job, or how to do a job interview. Social goals addressed aspects such as how to talk to peers, professors, and others on campus. Lastly, emotional goals addressed anxiety issues, based around academic and social difficulties. There was a great deal of overlap between goals, such as social communication and time management skills in working on job skills, and dealing with anxiety as an emotional goal when working on social interaction skills. The following discussion addresses the different types of goals that were targeted in AMI, followed by the level of importance placed upon goals, and how these goals had changed over time.

### ***Academic goals***

Megan (mentor) discussed how her mentee, David, mostly wanted to address academic goals. She stated, "My mentee's main goal was to make sure his grades did not drop from high school to university, mainly by improving on planning and scheduling of study time." David also explained that his main goal was "to be able to work well academically at SFU with as few difficulties as possible. When asked how Megan helped him to work on these goals he discussed, "Academically and with lifestyle, she has helped quite a bit... Helping me understand some of the standards of university classes, helping me organize my workload and giving information that helps make the SFU lifestyle easier." For David, academic goals took the highest priority when working with his mentor, in order to make his lifestyle easier at university.

Sarah (mentee) described how her mentor, Tracey, helped her to work on her time management skills as part of her academic preparation. She stated, "Time management. She helps me, usually when I have papers and midterms due and she helps me more or less organize so that I'm not cramming. This helps me more around exam time."

### ***Job and career goals***

Mary (mentor) discussed how her mentee, Steve, was focused on wanting to address job skills. She explained, "The theme of my mentee's goal is finding a job. There are some sub-goals under this broad goal, such as strengthening interpersonal skills, conversation skills, job-searching skills, interview skills, etcetera." 'Job and Career' goals were also discussed by Julie. She mentioned how her mentee, Brian, was more geared toward career-based goals. Julie said Brian would often discuss that he was interested in becoming an entrepreneur after he finished university. Julie said,

My mentee's goals this semester have been largely related to entrepreneurship, as he has decided it is something he wants to pursue. His long-term goals are to become an independent business owner or entrepreneur and make lots of money by himself rather than working for someone else or a company.

### ***Social goals.***

Anna gave a good example of how she and her mentee, John, focused and worked on social skills together. Anna shared,

I think it's going pretty well. He initially said he wanted to focus on more social aspects and interactions and stuff like that so we've just had kind of very laid back casual conversations about how to interact with people, whether they're in class or if in the dorms or stuff like that, advice on like hang outs and how to go about asking people to hang out if they're free, joining clubs, all that kind of stuff. So, I think he's definitely taken some points and tried to apply those and I think that they're mostly beneficial.

### ***Emotional goals***

Emotional goals involved feelings of anxiety and stress, both around academic and social challenges. Tracey (mentor) mentioned how her mentee, Sarah, felt stressed over the many academic demands she faced. Tracey said, "We've touched on stress and like, just recognizing that courses can be a handful, especially because she's taking five courses." Megan discussed how her mentee, David, also shared how he experienced stress and anxiety in trying to keep up with academic demands and expectations. Megan said,

...my mentee was uncomfortable about certain aspects of university like, time management and staying organized, as well as like what his professors would expect from him because he had like heard...everyone's grades are going to go down once you enter university and he was like really worried about that.

Anna explained how her and John worked on his anxiety around socializing with peers on campus. The success of the social difficulties that John was having was further compounded by dealing with his social anxiety. Anna shared,

My mentee set out in the beginning to improve his social skills, to try to make friends, and try to meet people that shared interests. We came up with applying to couple clubs or certain ways that he could approach people and have discussion that's kind of casual and would reduce his anxiety. Now he's part of clubs and now he's shared that he hangs out regularly, has a group of friends, has study groups, so I think that's definitely an improvement. I'm really glad that we could, you know, help out with that.



#### 4.5.2. Hierarchy of goals

The consensus from the interviews with mentees and mentors was that academic goals were addressed first, and then social goals were addressed once the mentee felt he/she was performing better academically. If the mentee was strong academically, from the beginning of the mentorship, then social goals were the focus. Job/career goals also took precedence over social goals as well, although was a less common goal amongst mentees. Emotional goals were focused upon the least, as they were closely tied to how the mentee was affected by his/her academic and social challenges, so were discussed in relation to other goals.

Even though Anna and John had spent a great deal of their time working on social goals, John stated that working on academic goals was still his priority in AMI. John said simply, “Yeah, out of what percent it’s most helpful, it’s like academic and then social.” Prioritizing academic goals was a trend that Michelle (mentor) also noticed within her mentorship with her mentee, Amy. Michelle elaborated,

I think it was kind of almost like a hierarchy. Like, last semester she was super stressed like she was falling behind in everything so it was kind of like okay well we’re not going to get you to join clubs because you don’t have time for that right now, but then I guess when she kind of figured out how to manage things better and not procrastinate, because procrastination’s a big one, but she hasn’t been doing that this semester. And then last semester we would try to like go to the gym and stuff, but stuff would come up so now this semester we’ve been going regularly because we have more time, everything is managed better and the same with like the clubs and everything, right? She has time to go to all the meetings. So like once one thing kind of got under control, we were able to work from there, I guess.

It seemed as though, even if the mentees placed great importance upon working on social goals on their Goal Setting form (i.e. “Very Important” or “Somewhat Important”), as Amy had done, if they were struggling at all academically, academic goals still had to be the first focus. Once academics were being managed, this freed up the time to turn the focus to social goals. Megan (mentor) discussed the hierarchy of goals that she experienced with her mentee, David. Megan said,

My mentee’s main goal was to make sure his grades did not drop from high school to university, mainly by improving on planning and

scheduling of study time. While the social aspect of university was not as important to my mentee in the beginning of the year, now that he is starting to manage his classes, he seems more open to engaging in social activities.

Megan also said, “I feel from him—but also on the initial Goal Setting sheet—he had academics and scheduled organization as his highest priority and social stuff were on the side.” Megan’s mentee, David, reiterated how his academic goals came first followed by social goals, “For meeting people too, is definitely a part of it. Not something that I’ve been focusing on too much these past two semesters. We’ve been focusing more on academics and the way things work on campus.”

### **4.5.3. Macro and micro goals**

Mentors and mentees discussed how the goals of the mentee that were stated on the Goal Setting form had evolved and changed over time as the mentee experienced university. The Goal Setting sheet helped to set up macro goals and was initially used by the mentors and mentees to address goals then later revisited, if needed. Macro goals were broad goals that were predicted from start of program, which gave the mentor a starting point to support mentees. Mentors worked with mentees to break down macro goals into smaller goals, which also became more specific to the mentee. Micro goals were specific goals that targeted the individualistic needs of the mentee. Micro goals developed from macro goals and from any issues that arose throughout the AMI process. Micro goals emerged over Term One and Term Two. Thus, as mentees began to experience university and receive support from the mentors, they could better self-identify their needs and self-advocate for these needs by identifying their specific goals.

In the beginning of AMI, mentors encouraged the mentees to discuss what they felt they needed to address for goals. Anna discussed how her and her mentee used many of the materials provided by AMI, as a way to start the mentoring process and get to working on goals. Anna shared,

In the beginning, when you’re a mentor, it’s kind of difficult to delve right into what needs to be done or what your mentee wants to go through and so those modules are kind of nice to have that in case you don’t come up with something or your mentor is a little bit shy in the

beginning, that you can kind of refer to those and start off and then it kind of takes its natural course.

By virtue of the goals being broad at the start, the mentors gave their input on what to focus on and work on to help the mentee adjust to university. Brown et al. (2014) stated that students with ASD in higher education may lack the decisions and initiation of goals, as they often rely on goals that others set for them. These students may have vague goals and not know how to break their goals down into smaller steps that are more achievable (Brown et al., 2014). Macro goals were also goals that mentors suggested may have been driven by parents and not so much by the mentee him/herself. While mentors had more say in how to work on goals in the beginning, they encouraged the mentees to start thinking about what they felt they needed for themselves. Mary expressed,

It's just like with everything, I listen to him. I will always ask him, what do you think first, before I carry on the next step. It's like I'm more respectful [this way]. I really carry the conversation towards his individual needs, rather than just what *I* think he would need.

Susan (mentor) explained the process of how she experienced the initial goal setting with her mentees and how she felt she had to guide them along in starting to think about the types of goals that they wanted for themselves. In doing so, she began to encourage more self-advocacy within her mentees:

I remember when I first started working with both mentees. I do believe it's important for them to sort of identify what goals they want to work on but at the same time, their goals seemed in the beginning seemed to be very general and just kind of in line with the questionnaire that they were given. So it was like they marked, you know, joining a club. I think that just about everybody marked on that sheet to join a club, but it was like well, unless they're really forthcoming of their interests, which wasn't my experience, then it was like what club are we going to join? You just need to join a club but for what reason? For instance, if I knew that goal was specifically driven by mom and dad then I would be able to get at a little bit more of well what are *you* interested in? That would give me sort of a launching point of understanding holistically what I was up against as opposed to okay cool he wants to be involved. I remember that to be really challenging. He marked that he wanted to be in a club and he's not making any effort to even try to be in a club and he doesn't know what club he wants to be in, so what good does this goal do me if I can't figure it out, you know, getting that background information. If mom and dad think it's important for him to join a club, then not only were we able to try to fulfill that goal that mom and dad

had but it also gave room to sort of talk about well mom and dad want you to do this but what do *you* want? And sort of go into more of the, you know, self-advocacy aspect of being an adult which was, for this specific mentee, was new.

Not knowing what the mentees specifically wanted for themselves made the mentors question why the mentees had joined university in the first place. Some mentors wondered if university, in general, was a goal for their mentee, or was going to university a goal imposed upon them by someone else (i.e. parents)? Nevertheless, as mentors worked on discussing goals with their mentees, their conversations began to guide the mentees into thinking more about their own needs and how to address challenging areas that they felt were necessary for their own learning and development. Soon enough, mentees were learning how to identify and discuss issues important to them as a university student. Lisa explained how her mentee, Tom, took time to show that he had the motivation and interest to participate in university and in the process of self-identifying goals. Lisa shared,

Recently, one of my students has started showing much more enthusiasm and motivation for attending and taking part in school. He has started bringing ideas to our meeting that he wants to look into including how to get volunteer experience and possibly doing co-op.

To aid in goal identification and implementation, mentors also would refer back to the Goal Setting form to review their mentee's goals with them and to see how goals had changed since the beginning of Term One. Michelle (mentor) explained how her mentee, Amy, felt better once she knew what to expect as a university student. This was the start to Amy being able to self-identify her needs. Michelle said,

I had a meeting with her on Friday and we discussed how she felt at the beginning of the semester versus now because we had the Goal Setting sheet. And I brought it back out again and I asked her, you know, you had these things written down, how do you feel about them now? And she said that she feels that this semester is going really good. She feels that when she filled out the sheet she was really uncertain as to how post-secondary is going to be because it's her first year, but she thinks that things are going positively and she feels a lot better just not, I guess, as stressed out as she was at the beginning.

Mentees were encouraged to reflect upon previously identified goals and to think about their current goals. Mentors supported mentees initially by breaking down the goals for them but then, through discussion with the mentee, goals became more mentee-led. Thus, micro goals started from the mentors breaking down the macro goals into smaller units. During this process, the mentees were also developing more experience as a university student. The combination of the scaffolding by the mentor and the development of experience by the mentee, led to the emergence of micro goals. Tracey (mentor) explained how she began the scaffolding process of the macro goals, helping her mentee, Sarah, to micronize her goals. Tracey discussed,

Well in the beginning I asked her what her goal was and her goal was just to like improve time management and so we discuss how she can do that. And so we try to micro, like, break down into micro goals I guess you could say. But it's not so vividly like this is your goal, you're going to do this. But it's more like progressively seeing how has your time management has gone in general in the sense, but in the small sense it's like do you watch so much TV at night, do you still continuously stay up late watching TV. So we discuss that or we discuss like during the weekends did you just completely blow off homework, did you go to the library on these days that you said you would in order to get your like one to two hours in. So we just break it down into little things she wanted to work on and doing in order to improve because we started off saying like if you do this, do you think this would help your progress? So, she like kind of broke it down into like if I go to the library maybe I'll study more, if I turn off my laptop then I'll study, like these little things that she could do to improve her studying habits. So, I just verify that she's continuously doing these things that will hopefully end up causing her to progress and manage more.

Tracey stated Sarah's goals as falling "under the umbrella of time management". Thus, macro goals started as umbrella[s] of different goal domains and became more micro as mentors broke them down. Eventually, the mentees took more action within this process, coming to the mentors with their ideas and their individual problems. This created more specified goals that were individually-tailored to each mentee week to week, helping the mentee, "...whether the mentee feels like they need help in many areas or just added tips" (Anna, mentor). When mentees were asked about their "game plan" (Amy, mentee) in Term Two, they discussed goals that were self-identified and specific to them. Amy shared, "I mean, it's like, it's more like the tiny academic goals. Like within specific courses and specific assignments, you know on, a weekly basis." Michelle her mentor added,

It is mostly just small things. I think the thing, like when one her exams got lost and she was like yeah and then you know they'll figure it out. I was like, no, take initiative and, you know, ask about it kind of thing. Yeah, just small things like that I guess.

#### **4.5.4. Summary of Identifying and Implementing Goals**

In AMI there was an increasing clarity of goals for both the mentees and mentors as they helped each other to understand how to identify and implement goals. By understanding the areas of goals and knowing the level of importance of the goals, mentors had a better idea of how to help support their mentees. In particular, the progression of moving from macro to micro goals provided a mentoring approach that could address the specific needs of the mentee.

### **4.6. Learning Together**

The mentees in AMI joined the program in order to receive support in university adjustment. University adjustment, for them, involved adjusting academically and socially while navigating university life. The mentors joined AMI because they were motivated to learn more about ASD, especially in adulthood, through a hands-on approach and how to be a mentor to improve their skills as a student, such as learning to be more responsible. Through supporting the mentees, the mentors helped the mentees to understand that many of their challenges as a university students were common to most others in post-secondary school. The mentors, therefore, normalized the experiences of the mentees. 'Normalization', to the AMI mentors, was a method they used to ease the stress and anxiety of their mentees, in starting a new university or even starting a new term (for those who were beyond their first-year of studies). In order to better support the mentees, mentors were trained and collaborated with other mentors and AMI team staff, such as the AMI clinicians, so that each individual mentee's needs could be discussed to provide strategies that were specific and relevant to each individual mentee. Mentees also collaborated with other mentees during social events. Thus, both mentees and mentors felt supported within AMI through both receiving and learning to support one another. The theme *Learning Together* was comprised of the following subthemes: *University Adjustment* and *Creating Cohesion and Collaboration*.

#### 4.6.1. University adjustment

Mentees stated in their interviews that the purpose of AMI, for them, was to receive support in transitioning and adjusting to university. The mentors supported the mentees throughout Term One and Term Two by providing strategies that helped the mentees with their individual goals. While most mentees were first year students, there were four mentees who ranged from second to fourth year as well. Thus, university adjustment for the mentees was an ongoing process that does not just simply occur in the first term or first year of the mentees' time at university. Furthermore, many of the challenges that the mentees faced from having an ASD diagnosis (i.e. social or executive function deficits) could be addressed within AMI. Thus, AMI was helping mentees to adjust to university both as a university student and as an individual learning to manage their symptoms of ASD. Sarah (mentee) explained that university adjustment meant "Being able to conquer any challenges university gives you. For example, completing assignments, interacting with others such as students and professors." According to Baker and Siryk (1999), *university adjustment* refers to "a student's success in coping with the academic, social, and emotional demands inherent to the college experience, as well as his/her attachment to the particular institution he/she attends". The consensus amongst how mentees described what university adjustment meant to them seemed to fit quite well with this description.

David (mentee) shared his reasons for joining AMI, which were "To adjust to life at SFU and ease into the new academic and social way of life it brings." He believed that the purpose of AMI was "To help students transition into university and manage the work and lifestyle of SFU." Mentees saw the purpose of AMI as supporting any challenges that the mentees faced as a university student, whether they were transitioning or continuing their studies. Sarah said, "I think the purpose of AMI is to help those who need more help than others get adjusted to university and all the challenges that come with it."

One mentee, John, specifically stated that AMI was a unique program in that it was tailored to help autistic students and the different challenges and learning styles that they bring with them to university. He said,

I think the purpose is to help autistic students learn strategies so that they can adapt better to SFU. It's not unusual for autistic students to have trouble doing work, and moving to an entirely new community can be really intimidating.

Another mentee pointed out that AMI especially helped mentees by providing a setting where they received help from others who understood that they have ASD and who were trained to support the needs of students with ASD. AMI was a program that supported the mentees in adjusting to university because of its understanding of the diversity of the strengths and weaknesses of individuals with ASD. Amy (mentee) shared,

I know often people with autism do not visibly show their disability. And if they do, sometimes people may try to avoid them. I think the purpose of this program is to guide students with autism with their academic careers and school life.

For Tom, who was a third-year student, he stated that the purpose of AMI was to help him adjust to university and that this was a gradual process for him. Tom described that AMI was aiding him in his university career and that "It's kind of a gradual thing" for him. He explained how AMI was useful in helping mentees adapt and navigate university life, while also helping them feel more connected to the institution. Tom stated the purpose of AMI:

To help people, both the mentee in acclimating to life and the institution, through the mentor, such as to be able to accommodate the mentee and others like him/her, to be able to get the full "proper" experience.

The mentees, whether they were first year or further into their degree, felt that their mentor helped them to adjust to university through guidance and support and helping them feel connected to the institution. Mentees not only faced the challenges of being a university student but also the challenges that came with having ASD. AMI was unique in that it not only addressed the challenges faced by mentees as university students, but also addressed the specific needs and learning challenges of the mentees that came from having ASD.



## ***Normalizing university experiences***

As mentioned, many of the challenges faced by the mentees were common experiences shared by other non-ASD students on campus. Thus, mentors used their own experiences and knowledge as a university student to relate to the mentees and to let them know that the challenges and stress they were facing were part of being a university student and not specific to their diagnosis of ASD. Mentors normalized the experiences of the mentees by letting them know they weren't the only students who felt stressed and overwhelmed by competing academic demands, the many changes in scheduling and classes, and the difficulties in making social connections. Mentors also used normalization as a way to connect with their mentees. Therefore, normalizing the university experiences for the mentees was a big part of the mentoring process, especially in Term One when mentees were faced with many new competing demands. Susan (mentor) explained,

At least help them to know that you know not everything is personal, you know. If they get a bad grade then, you know, it's not just because of their disability. Kind of normalize some of their some of their insecurities or lack of skill. You know this population tends to kind of isolate themselves perhaps. At least my two mentees somewhat have, so connecting them and sort of showing them that you're not the only one who's failed a class, you're not the only one who's bad at time management, can be comforting and at the same time, can sort of help them to feel normal.

Helping the mentees to feel 'normal', as mentioned by the AMI mentors, meant knowing that feeling stressed and overwhelmed is a common experience among university students. The mentees were not alone in this process, as mentors normalized university as way to connect with their mentees. Susan pointed out how others go through similar challenges as a university student and how she believed this relation provided comfort for her mentees. Michelle, another mentor, also mentioned how providing normalcy involved relating to her mentee:

I feel as if I try to make things very relatable. So like one thing where she was talking about how, I mean she's met people but she hasn't made any really really close friends and I told her that, you know, I've been in post-secondary for too many years, probably like six or seven and I can say that I have maybe three or four close friends in all of that time. And mostly everyone else you meet will just kind of be that classroom friend or semester friend but then eventually you do start to meet those people that you connect with more, because it's hard to just

go in and expect that you're going to make fifty new best friends, right? And so, I feel as if I have a lot of stories, that I can normalize the feelings. If that's the proper way of saying it.

Lisa (mentor) further elaborated on how the process of feeling challenged and feeling overwhelmed is experienced by other university students. When Lisa was asked the purpose of AMI, she expressed,

I think the purpose is to facilitate a natural experience at university for students with autism. I think that it's a like a new area that universities are having, like post-secondary education institutions are having to look into because students generally in school, like in high school, have a lot of support. And then coming into university it's not that they're not, you know, capable of doing the work but there's so much that goes on to university for any student, right? It's totally normal to be overwhelmed by everything. There's nobody checking in, like to make sure you do your homework, or no one's going to call your parents if you don't show up to class. There's a lot more open. And I think that can be a challenging arena to navigate, regardless of if you have autism or not.

Jamie (mentor) also stated how university is challenging, regardless of having a diagnosis or not. He added,

I think socially just having that support system and having that someone to talk to is really important in helping them adjust to university especially sort of learning from someone who's gone through the same thing, because adjusting to university is hard for everyone, I mean, regardless of diagnosis.

Importantly, Anna (mentor) pointed out that while students with ASD face many of the same challenges as other non-ASD students, the stress and challenges are even greater for students with ASD. Anna alluded to the idea that if university is challenging for all students in general, it just be even more challenging for someone with ASD, who needs extra support to assist them with their learning. Anna said,

I think because maybe those students sometimes have a harder time expressing that they either are feeling overwhelmed or that there's anxiety, they might have a hard time interacting with people and getting them to understand where they are coming from, what problems, if any, they are dealing with. So, I think having a program like this, it establishes the autism part but then it kind of sets it aside and says okay we're just going to go about the problems that you have like any

other person, which kind of eases their, I think, their distress on trying to get the other person to understand like I also have either a disorder or [I'm] on the spectrum. It's like another thing to deal with.

Mentors felt that mentees, while they faced many challenges, faced them to a greater degree than other university students. Therefore, having the support from the mentors was helpful if they could ease some of the stress and anxiety for the mentees. A program like AMI, however, focuses on the needs of each individual, and not the disability, which the mentors believed, had been a successful approach to helping the mentees adjust to university life.

#### **4.6.2. Creating cohesion and collaboration**

In order for the mentors to best support the mentees and understand their needs as both a university student and a student with ASD they had training and collaborated with other mentors and AMI clinicians and program coordinators to best address the specific needs of each individual mentee. Through discussions with others, mentors were able to bring up any issues that their mentee was facing and get the professional support from the AMI clinicians and support from other mentors who had experienced similar things with their mentees. Thus, collaboration was essential within the mentor training and ultimately gave the mentors the confidence to support the mentees. Having a strong support network in AMI for the mentors led to them being able to better support the mentees. The mentees were further supported in AMI by providing social events, which gave some mentees a chance to connect with others students in the AMI program, such as other mentees and mentors. Thus, AMI recognized the importance of increasing social opportunities for the mentees and not only provided one-on-one academic and social support in the meetings but also opportunities for mentees to socialize with others in a group setting.

##### ***The social events***

The AMI social events occurred at least once in both Term One and Term Two and included both mentees and mentors, one time per term. These events gave the mentees and mentors the opportunities to socialize together which involved movies, games, and pizza. Those who attended gave positive feedback, yet less than half of the

mentees had attended these events. In fact, most mentees were not interested and preferred to not go. When later asked the reasons why they chose not to attend the mentees said it was either due to scheduling conflicts or that they chose not to go. Tom (mentee) said “I can’t really say I particularly like anything about them but its not like I dislike anything about them either. I mean don’t really enjoy the social part of the social events, as I would rather stay home.” Another mentee, Paul said, “Timing of the events had been an issue but attending and event may be possible in the future”, and Brian (mentee) shared, “I need to think about this since my schedule has and will continue to be very busy. Wanted to, but other events got in the way, midterms, got lost, was busy, social anxiety one time. Wouldn’t mind trying one at a later date.”

Mentees attended the social events where they met other mentees and mentors. However, while some enjoyed the movie and pizza and socializing with others, some mentees were not interested and preferred to not go. Instead, they recommended that AMI hold more events geared towards their learning, rather than focusing upon socializing, such as learning (e.g. study strategies) and/or job seminars (e.g. resume building). Nonetheless, suggestions were made by the mentees for more ideas on how to make these events more interesting so that more participants would attend. Their suggestions reflected the diversity of interests for events, showing that perhaps the best way to offer events in a mentorship program for students with ASD is to vary the types and topics of events, so that the program can meet the interests and needs of each unique individual involved. Even mentors felt that perhaps different types of events would encourage more mentees and mentors to get together. Jamie (mentor) discussed,

I would in general like to see more cohesion in the entire AMI club, finding more ways that multiple mentors and mentees can interact at the same time. Maybe even find ways that there could be more group activities between mentors and mentees rather than just only having one mentor meeting with one mentee all the time. Even the social activities that we have planned, I think the first one’s next week, as far as I’ve heard there’s only one mentee signed up so that’s not, you know, necessarily anything. That’s not the fault of AMI, the supervisors or anything, but I think it will be a challenge moving forward figuring out things that we can do that mentees actually want to go to and are willing to show up to.

Susan had a suggestion to involve the mentees in the planning of the events, to help teach them executive function skills, such as planning, organizing, and time management. She felt this would also help to build more cohesion between the mentee and mentors as well. She explained,

I think it might be really cool to have maybe a mentor and mentee sort of plan an event or plan a lecture or something. It would definitely help with time management planning skills as well as getting the whole group together for a lesson in resume building or whatever it is the mentee and mentor pick out. I think that would be kind of cool to have these socials or activities planned by the mentee and mentor. I think there might be more turnout and it could be a really successful and helpful way of getting at planning and time management, which seems to be an overarching theme for this population. Also, getting the mentees involved in the planning of events. This is not only something to do with your mentor but gives them the planning and organization skills they need, that doesn't feel so teacher-student-like, and you get mentees together.

Michelle (mentor) pointed out that calling the event a "social" event may have deterred mentees who were less interested in socializing or anxious about attending an event based upon social interactions. She suggested an approach that could get mentees and mentors together, without having to set the expectation that socializing is the purpose of the event. Michelle said,

Then the social events, I guess, there was the issue of calling it a "social event", where a lot of the mentees didn't want to come. I didn't have that issue though because I reminded my mentee on Friday about it and she's like, oh yeah I totally want to go, and instantly filled out the survey and she seemed really excited to go. But I think it would be cool to find a way to get more people out. I don't know if this would be beneficial at all but have a meeting, like one for the mentors and one for the mentees, and then have one for the mentors *and* mentees, maybe. I don't know how that would work. Like, find a way to kind of like ease into it.

I think it would be an improvement to somehow make the AMI socials more social or frequent because it would be neat to have more of a community feel within the program but I also have no idea how that could be done.

Amy, Michelle's mentee, attended the social events, yet also had the suggestion to encourage more AMI members to participate, as she stated "I think maybe find a way to encourage more people to come to events." For others, like Amy, who did attend the social events, they had an appreciation that AMI offered events outside of the meetings. Mentees shared

I thought that movie was interesting, and did not give a thought as to if the event was interesting or not. All I did that night was watch the movie. (Steve, mentee)

I appreciate they fulfilled my request for Hawaiian pizza and it was nice to finally see the Lego Movie. I didn't really enjoy how it was somewhat boring, it's nice to sit around and eat food while watching a movie, but there wasn't much to actually do. (Sarah, mentee)

I liked the free food, and the people seemed friendly enough. (John, mentee)

I like them because they're very relaxed, there's good pizza, and we get to watch cool movies. I don't think there's anything not to like so far. (Amy, mentee)

When given several choices on the Program Evaluation survey, mentees selected academic learning (study strategies, how to plan and organize school work), job learning (e.g. resume-building, co-op presentation, how to find job or volunteer opportunities), and social learning seminars (how to improve soft skills such as interacting with others personally and professionally, how to contribute to group projects, how to meet others on campus) over social events, off-campus activities, and outdoor activities. Therefore, providing a variety of events seems like it may work best to accommodate the different interests of the mentees.

### ***Mentors' learning, training, and support***

There was a great amount of collaboration for and amongst mentors throughout AMI. Mentors received a full one-day training seminar at the beginning of Term One. From there, ongoing support was available through email, meeting with the program coordinator and from supervision meetings. Mentors reported feeling very much supported in AMI and

particularly found the supervision meetings the most helpful. These meetings consisted of all the mentors and AMI staff in a collaborative fashion where everyone discussed the successes and challenges being faced within the mentoring process. They were focus-group sessions that allowed the mentors to explain and describe their mentoring experiences and then receive advice on how to deal with any problems and issues they were experiencing. Throughout these meetings mentors also shared positive moments with their mentees, giving updates on their progress as well. For mentors, this was a very important and influential element of AMI. Jamie (mentor) put it best when he said,

I mean one of the strengths is really the positive and supportive environment that's been created in our supervision meetings and even our initial meeting at the beginning of the year even before we were matched with mentees. I definitely feel like I know if I ever have any issue or problem there'll be several people at my disposal that I can call upon. So I do feel, the level of support, I think is one of the strengths of this program.

The mentors knew they would learn about ASD, but had not expected they would learn so much. Tracey stated how she felt that the thing she learned most about in AMI was how diversified ASD can be, within the entire spectrum and across the age span, especially how it can affect individuals as adults who are also university students and have the cognitive capability to be in post-secondary:

So, I guess, mainly autism. Because obviously you learn about it in class but that's just such a, like, one-chapter kind of thing in class. It's not very specific and it doesn't show the dimensions of it and all that stuff so the training sessions really helped with that—helped with like understanding it a little more. And then actually experiencing it, having and being able to understand it in more of a—like I learned about it having it in front of me. It's a little, like, recognising it.

I really enjoy the... supervision meetings because not being just one-on-one kind of allows me to, like, the experiences I'm getting from my mentee are not the same as what the others are experiencing. I don't have the social aspect issues. So having heard it from others, it's a little bit like I'm learning from them, even though I'm not doing it with my own mentee. So I really enjoy that aspect of it because I'm hearing about it and realizing what other people are doing to help that. So, I'm like learning from that even though it's not happening within my own mentee. So it's just really great to still learn from other peoples' experiences within the program. So I really like that part of it.

Lisa (mentor) also felt the supervision meetings were a very positive element of AMI. Lisa said,

I think it's been great to have the supervision meetings. I think it's nice to be able to touch base on how your mentorship is going, and to have other people kind of provide feedback, It's really nice to have the coordinators and kind of the organizers being there, so that's really positive.

#### **4.6.3. Summary of Learning Together**

Creating more community and connection within AMI was beneficial to the mentees and mentors both within one-on-one meetings and amongst other mentees and mentors as well. While there was group learning and socializing events in AMI, both mentors and mentees felt their suggestions would help to create more support in AMI. A successful approach used by the mentors, normalizing university experiences seemed to relieve stress and help the mentees better adjust to university, as reported by the mentors. Furthermore, through the current support that the mentees were receiving from their mentors, mentees felt that AMI was helping them to adjust to university.

#### **4.7. “Barriers to a Beneficial [Mentorship]”**

In determining how *A Mentee-centered Approach* worked in its entirety, the data were analyzed for cases that may offer any alternate descriptions of the core theme. Ideally, mentoring relationships were becoming open, informal, casual, and friendly, while still maintaining some professionalism, leading to a beneficial mentorship. While pairs were striving towards this type of optimal relationship, there were alternative cases that pointed out that “life is not exact” (Corbin & Strauss, 2015) and, in some cases, mentors struggled to provide effective mentoring strategies; mentees struggled to feel supported; and mentors and mentees, together, struggled in developing their relationships. These exceptional cases where a Mentee-centered Approach could not be fully employed, provided a richer description of the theory by offering further dimensions into the types of relationships experienced within AMI. Such challenges to the main themes are summarized in Table 4.7.1. and discussed below in the section on *Barriers to a Beneficial Mentorship*.



**Table 4.2 Subthemes for Barriers to a Beneficial Mentorship**

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Varying Degrees of “Just Right”  
Being on a Different Page  
We Can’t Always Relate  
It’s “Not [Always] Fun”  
“Some Type of Progress”

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Within the AMI process, there were varying degrees that each mentoring pair reached in terms of achieving an ideal Mentee-centered Approach. There were three relationships, in particular, that showed how the relationship process broke down due to challenges faced within the process of creating a Mentee-centered Approach. Two of these relationships managed to overcome many of their difficulties, and one could not be redeemed after the challenges experienced between the mentee and the mentor. Mentoring relationships were considered successful, overall, if the mentoring pairs were able to continually hold meetings together until the end of Term Two. The following discussion points out cases where mentoring relationships faced difficulties and instances when the mentorship was not as beneficial as was found with other mentoring pairs.

One mentoring pair, in particular, had a relationship that slowly dissolved over the two terms, eventually leading to termination of their mentoring meetings. The mentor, Jamie, and the mentee, Chris, started their relationship with many challenges. Both struggled to get to know each other and understand how to best work on goals together. Over time, their relationship somewhat began to move into a more positive direction, albeit, not enough to sustain their relationship. Their meetings became fewer and fewer as time went along until, in Term Two, they were no longer meeting face-to-face anymore. Jamie reports feeling like their relationship felt cold and uncomfortable and this, for them, had led to negative feelings between them. Jamie (mentor) said,

I would like our relationship to move towards a more friendly and less professional relationship as our meetings still seem cold, formal and impersonal. He seems slightly more comfortable with me than he used to, but our meetings do not seem relaxing or enjoyable to him. Frankly, I question whether he likes me at all. I am not saying this to feel sorry for myself. It is more a concern that this has been a barrier to a beneficial relationship.

While the pair did make some progress in that Chris became more comfortable with Jamie over time, their relationship did not reach a point where they could sustain their mentorship. Jamie stated that he would have liked to have had more of a positive relationship with Chris. Chris's feedback could only be taken from the year-end Program Evaluation Survey, due to his lack of involvement with AMI (i.e. he had dropped out of meetings and interviews). Within this survey he reported that although he felt fairly comfortable with Jamie, he felt that he and Jamie were not on the same page when it came to how to work on his social skills goals. Overall, he felt neutral about Jamie being a good match for him and also had neutral feelings about having a good connection. While their relationship did involve some positive elements, there were barriers that impeded building rapport and improving communication between them, which are discussed within the following subthemes.

#### **4.7.1. Varying degrees of “just right”**

The subtheme *Varying Degrees of “Just Right”* highly relates to the broad theme of *The Natural Progression of the Relationship*. Mentoring pairs fell along a continuum of having an open and comfortable relationship. Being “just right” meant the relationship had a good balance of openness and comfort combined with professionalism. Importantly, the right balance was found by releasing the right amount of structure within the meetings and interactions for the mentee and mentor, such that each mentoring pair showed progression towards developing positive relationships, albeit, to varying degrees. There were four main factors that contributed to greater difficulty for some mentoring pairs to develop an open relationship. Firstly, there were two mentoring pairs that only began their mentorship in Term Two, leaving less time for their relationship to develop. Second, some mentees struggled with social communication more than others and had much more difficulty in becoming open than others who were more expressive. Third, finding common ground between played an important factor to developing a closer relationship. Finally, fourth, knowing how much emphasis to place upon setting and maintaining boundaries was important as some mentees needed to be reassured that there were boundaries in place throughout the mentoring relationship. However, finding the right balance between emphasizing boundaries and letting the relationship develop naturally, was key to accommodate the needs of the mentee while working towards a Mentee-centered

Approach. Thus, some mentoring pairs moved slower in developing their relationship, for the various reasons discussed below.

For the following pair, the mentor (Mary) and the mentee (Steve), communication was improving although they're relationship was not as open as were other mentoring pairs. This may have been due to the fact that this pair did not start their mentoring process until Term Two. Therefore, had only spent four months together by the time these interviews were conducted. Additionally, this pair began their mentorship as a formal relationship as Steve found it very difficult to be open or expressive, therefore, needing much guidance and structure from Mary. Mary explained how she had started not knowing what goals to work on with Steve. However, after going over the Goal Setting form together this gave a good start for Mary being able to provide structure into their meetings to increase the productivity in their meetings. Once structure was in place, they could begin to work on building a relationship that was more open and comfortable. Mary said,

Because my official meetings with my mentee started this semester, I was quite unsure what to do in the first couple of meetings. As I know more about my mentee and his needs, I am able to plan for the meetings and make them slightly structured, and have a main focus for each meeting. At the beginning, I did more talking over the course of the meeting. Later, I realized that I needed to create more opportunities for my mentee to speak up. So in later sessions, there will be more back-and-forth conversation.

Steve discussed what he liked least about AMI was that in his meetings with his mentor, Mary, "We must talk for the whole time that we are meeting with the mentor". Steve found it difficult to carry on conversation for the entire mentoring meeting. However, he discussed that while he did not enjoy this level of discussion, he felt it was necessary in order for them to have a productive meeting. Steve shared, "I think it's just right. Just that I don't like talking too much, and that's all."

As such, over time, Mary began to notice changes within Steve and their relationship when they would meet. She felt as though communication was improving and he was becoming more open to her, which she reported as being a positive thing. Mary said,

I only started meeting him this semester so it's not long enough to observe like very significant differences. But I feel like when we first met I did most of the talking. And probably it's because I did not quite know what he wanted, so I needed to ask more and say more to get information, more like, if I ask he will say. If I don't ask, he will just not say anything. But now, because sometimes we do role-playing, he knows there's an expectance that he needs to say something and follow up with my sentence. So, he's willing to do this. Like, the last meeting, our conversation was very positive I would say. He's even showing some emotion and tone in the conversation rather than just like flat tone. You can hear the change. I was really quite surprised that he's actually showing that to me and I feel that this is a really positive side.

Mary and Steve did not quite reach the levels of openness and comfort as found in other AML pairs, due to Steve's struggles with communication and the short amount of time they had spent together. Thus, Steve's communication difficulties stood as a barrier in becoming more open. However, in spite of these difficulties, Mary and Steve still managed to progress towards more openness in their relationship. Another mentor, Lisa, had a unique experience in AML, where she had worked with two mentees and was able to describe how they developed in comparison with each with another. For both of these mentoring relationships, they began as formal relationships, with both mentees also having great difficulties with becoming open. However, Lisa felt the amount of time spent together was an important factor that aided the development of their relationship. She had spent more time with her first mentee, Tom, and felt this contributed to her being able to develop a closer relationship with him.

Another factor involved, as Lisa stated, was that her and Tom had more in common and because of this were able to find common ground and relate to one another better. As previously mentioned in *Finding Common Ground*, Tom and Lisa had also been able to develop a closer relationship because they found similarities to discuss between them, opening up the relationship for better communication. Lisa's second mentee, Paul, although had spent the full Term One and Term Two semesters with Lisa, did not reach the same level of informality as with Tom. Her and Paul did not find as much common ground as she had with Tom, which may have been part of the reason for the slower progression, in addition to the amount of time they had spent together. She also acknowledged that Paul struggled more with social communication, therefore, she had to approach this relationship differently. Lisa also reported that this was also due to the

dynamic between her and Paul, in that they moved much slower in general than her and Tom had in developing a closer relationship. Lisa stated,

The other mentee, I think that that's starting to happen. I've been meeting with this mentee for not as long, so this is the second semester. I am now definitely starting to get kind of more communication going there too. I think my experience with my first mentee was really valuable. With my second mentee just knowing that it's a process, you know, and kind of what to expect and when to ask for some more detail and when to, kind of respect boundaries. Well, always respecting boundaries but maybe to ask for more. And so I'm definitely starting to see that with my other mentee too.

But my second student, this is like I guess the second semester and I think that I'm now learning how to best communicate. I think communication is higher up on the goal list too for this student, definitely something they would like to work on. I know that it can be stressful. So, I think even now, even my last meeting it was like a huge improvement. There was like a lot more back and forth. But it has definitely been a learning experience for me, how to kind of facilitate a dialogue, right? Because at the beginning it didn't come super naturally. But I think it's definitely improving. I think definitely with the second student, like the email component and the verbal communication component is something that they've identified as struggling with, so I have to take that into consideration.

Lisa recognized that it took time to develop a more positive relationship, where communication was more open and conversations were more reciprocal. When mentees had more difficulty in expression and open communication, the mentors felt they were doing more of the talking and the conversations were less reciprocal. In such cases, the relationship felt more one-sided and it took longer for both the mentee and the relationship to become more open. The relationship also took more time when it was difficult to find commonalities. This factor also slowed down the progression of the relationship. While setting and maintaining boundaries was important to all mentoring relationships, the key was to find the right balance of how much to emphasize that there were boundaries, in order to accommodate and provide a comfortable relationship for the mentee. Developing a beneficial relationship meant accommodating the mentee in providing a mentorship that could be "just right" for each mentee.

### ***The need for more structure***

In a positive mentoring relationship, the natural progression of the relationship guides the release of structure in the meetings. In AMI, if the mentorship began with too little structure or the structure that was in place was released too quickly (i.e. the informal casual part of the relationship moved too fast for the mentee) then the result was a breakdown in the relationship and difficulty in trying to work on goals together. Sarah (mentee) discussed how she had wished that there was more structure. She felt her mentor did not provide enough structure in their mentorship. After interviewing both Tracey and Sarah on this topic, it seemed that they had not built enough rapport to support a more casual style of mentorship. The result of lack of rapport, therefore, meant their mentorship could not sustain itself without structure. If mentoring pairs had built enough rapport, then they had more to talk about in their meetings, such as their hobbies and interests, and these topics were enough to carry a meeting on casually. Therefore, for Tracey and Sarah, the interaction between them was too unstructured, as their relationship was not yet strong enough to handle a casual style of mentoring. Sarah explained,

I guess I feel like also at times I don't really know like what to ask or what to work on, but if there was more of a structure of like, okay, these are the areas you should make sure you're doing well in and then just kind of like going over them. I wish there was more structure to the program because most of the time I don't have much to discuss during the meetings and feel like there's more she could help me with but nothing during the meetings other than obvious small problems I have come to mind.

I feel like AMI could improve if the mentors had specific topics and questions to ask their mentee about how they're doing in different aspects of university life, instead of leaving everything up to the mentee to ask for help.

Sarah felt the lack of discussion coupled by the informal and unstructured meetings between her and Tracey stood as a barrier to their mentorship. Ultimately, mentoring pairs needed to first start with structure and then build rapport before letting the mentorship become informal. The more positive relationships had a trend of releasing the structure after they had worked on building rapport and getting to know one another.

### ***Setting the level too high or too low***

*Setting the Level Too High or Too Low* is a subtheme related to both *Setting and Maintaining Boundaries* and *Being on the Right Level* in order to for a beneficial relationship to develop that could be “just right” for the mentee. If there was a hierarchy within the mentoring relationship that made the mentor seem too authoritative, then it was difficult to achieve peer-like interactions and more equal-partnered relationships. Thus, the mentor ended up on a level that involved too much authority in his/her role (i.e. too high). Conversely, if the mentor did not maintain enough authority within his/her role (i.e. too low), to provide his/her professional expertise, this resulted in lack of respect felt on the mentor’s behalf. However, this barrier could be overcome with the process of finding common ground together—a process that has been seen to be a crucial factor to developing a beneficial relationship in AMI.

The following mentoring pair, Susan and Steve, did not develop as friendly a relationship as other pairs due to setting the mentor’s role on a level that was too high. Susan explains why she felt this had occurred,

It’s also tough to know the boundaries. I think maybe too much emphasis on this got in the way of being friends. It’s tough because you need boundaries but they create an illusion that you’re not their friends. For one of my mentees, it was like, he didn’t think I was his friend.

I also feel like there is a hierarchy. I mean, there’s schedules, checking in, how are you doing with school, personal admin stuff. And then there’s spending time together, getting to know each other, investing in them as a person. But then there was a lot of emphasis placed on boundaries in the [initial] training meeting. This emphasis really made me feel like we were separate and emphasized the fact that the mentees had a diagnosis and we didn’t. I think with a different orientation approach we may be able to change this way of thinking so that we are more able to be “friends” and it could take away much of the hierarchy in the relationship.

Susan felt that the boundaries set between her and Steve were emphasized too much and this stood in the way of letting the relationship develop naturally. Susan also mentioned that acting with too authority had separated her from Steve and stood as a barrier to developing peer-like interactions together. In Term Two, when Susan left the program,

Steve was paired with Mary (mentor). Mary felt that her and Steve had begun as a very formal relationship but she felt some common ground with Steve, sharing similar cultural backgrounds and being closer in age. Because of this, she felt they had a closer a relationship with improved communication, as she said,

I feel that he is willing to disclose and maintains a closer physical distance with me comparing to the beginning of the program. The previous mentor told me that the mentee refused to walk beside the mentor, but he was able to walk beside me. When we did role-playing, he started to show delighted tones, which is significantly different from his usual speech. I interpret this as a sign of an established rapport and trust.

Steve seemed to maintain fairly formal relationships with both of his mentors, yet in Term Two, with Mary, he was able to show more open communication and there seemed to be less of a hierarchy between them.

However, another mentoring pair struggled with their relationship because it began with the mentor being too authoritative and was maintained on a level that was too high and superior, therefore, not allowing for more friendly interactions. Jamie (mentor) faced this issue with his mentee Chris. Chris did not participate in the interviews conducted with mentees in Term Two, therefore, this challenge was described from the perspective of Jamie, as he stated,

Part of the problem is that I think AMI works best when it is a "peer-to-peer" mentoring program. From day one, I told my mentee that I was...interested in researching autism, social skills, etcetera. At the time, I didn't think anything of it and that telling him this would give me some credibility. In hindsight, I think this may have been a barrier to forming a friendly relationship. I have the impression that he may think of himself as my "lab rat" instead of someone who genuinely wants to help him succeed in university. I think he looks at me as more of a superior than a peer.

Jamie believed that he acted superior to Chris, which he believes contributed to the challenges they faced in their relationship. Jamie had originally thought that he was being friendly enough to Chris, yet Chris stated that he felt Jamie was only slightly friendly. It seems that Jamie set his authority level too high and this added to the difficulty in breaking down the "invisible wall" (Jamie; mentor) between them, as he mentioned when



describing his relationship between him and Chris. Jamie came to realize that he may have approached their relationship with too much authority, and suggests how he could have perhaps approached their relationship differently. Jamie shared,

It's kind of cold. I mean it's kind of cold and awkward. I'm not sure exactly why that is. I tried being, I try to be you know, kind and friendly and outgoing with him and not talk to him like a superior or teacher or mentor whatever. But, yeah, it's kind of invisible wall between us that we haven't been able to break down.

So I think I initially sort of thought of it more as someone who could pass on my knowledge about a social skill to him in terms of teaching him what I know and practicing certain things and seeing how they work and stuff like that, and then just based upon like, like what we've talked about in our supervision meetings and the readings and stuff like that. My views on that have kind of changed, just in terms of trying to create more of a friendly relationship and, so I don't know maybe if I had done a better job of creating that dynamic from the beginning, we would be in a better spot now.

In other cases, mentoring pairs began their relationship on a level that was set too low. This challenge came from the relationship being too friendly and too casual, to the detriment of working on goals. The level that Julie had set with her mentee, Brian, involved her *lacking* too much authority from the start, leading to challenges in maintaining the professional boundaries of the relationship. Julie felt that Brian didn't take her advice seriously and that there was too much casual chat time within their meetings and not enough discussion around goals and strategies. Julie said,

It felt a little challenging to be helpful to my mentee when it didn't seem like he thought needed help from me. It was also a little difficult to maintain the boundaries of a mentor-mentee relationship since my mentee liked to socialize a lot.

Her mentee, Brian, mentioned that, "Relationships with mentors should not be too professional". However, this casual interaction may have been too casual. Julie said,

My mentee really wanted a mentor that was his age. But I feel like as a result, he doesn't always like, he's not like disrespectful, but I feel like I don't have that level of authority that mentors usually have. It's not really *authority*, that's too strong a word but you kind of know what I mean, right?

In fact, Julie reported being younger than Brian. She said, “I feel my mentee does not respect me as a mentor as much as he would someone older.” And because of this,

I felt a bit like my mentee didn't want my help, and didn't really see me as a mentor, possibly because we are around the same age and I am a little younger than him. This made it hard sometimes to give advice without sounding like I'm nagging him.

Julie felt as though being too close in age, more specifically being younger, may have actually created a barrier towards creating more professionalism in their relationship. She also mentioned that her mentee liked to socialize a lot, therefore making it difficult to incorporate more professionalism in their meetings. Julie elaborated on this idea by stating how she also attributed her lack of authority to her lack of experience working with adults with autism. While she has had experience working with children with autism, mentoring adults with ASD was a new experience for her and she acknowledged that this was a challenge she faced in feeling competent as a mentor. Julie said,

It might also just be because this is like new to me and I haven't really worked with somebody like this and being in this situation. And so, it might just be more challenging for me. But, otherwise, I think we do pretty well.

Lacking authority made it difficult for mentors to have some control, especially in the beginning of the mentorship, over implementing strategies and suggestions for goals for their mentees. Julie felt this was the case between her and Brian. However, Brian saw their relationship differently, as he stated,

The fact that mentors are closer to my age and educational level are what I enjoy the best about AMI. Plus the fact that AMI provides professional support in the form of dedicated and passionate young mentors is second aspect I like the best.

It seemed, Brian and Julie had different ideas as to how the mentoring process should work. Where Julie thought she had set the authority level for herself too low, Brian felt it was just right. Therefore, it was difficult for them to work together, seeing they had different perspectives on how formal or informal the mentorship should be. These differences in perspectives of the relationships leads into the next barrier, which discusses the importance of seeing eye-to-eye within the mentorship process.

#### 4.7.2. Being on a different page

The subtheme of *Being on a Different Page* addresses how mentors and mentees found it difficult to come to a congruent understanding of how to address goals and which goals to address. This theme relates to *Being on the Same Page*, where mentoring pairs were able to agree and address goals successfully, such that mentors started with more suggestions in the beginning and then mentees started to take more control over implementing and identifying goals for themselves. In being on a different page, this did not come so easily. For some mentoring pairs, it was because the mentees did not seem very committed to participating in the mentorship. Lack of commitment, therefore, also became a barrier when trying to work on goals together.

Julie and Brian faced difficulty when trying to work on goals together. Julie felt that she had a different idea as to what goals Brian should be addressing to help him improve his academic and social skills at university. Julie said,

My mentee's goals this semester have been largely related to entrepreneurship, as he has decided it is something he wants to pursue. His long-term goals are to become an independent business owner or entrepreneur and make lots of money by himself rather than working for someone else or a company. He wishes to do networking and gain potential clients while he is at school, and seems very uninterested in his studies. I feel the goals my mentee should work on are becoming more informed about career options, gaining work experience, as well as organization and time-management skills (though he never mentions needing help with this). I feel he needs to re-evaluate what he wants out of his time at school and his degree, because currently it does not seem like academia is what he wants to pursue.

Despite these differences, Julie discussed how she worked at trying to accommodate Brian's goals. Julie said,

I feel like me and my mentee are a fairly good match but perhaps not the easiest match as he tends to disagree with the way I see things often. This challenges me to be more patient and understanding with him. My mentee is also very passionate about a topic that I am very unfamiliar with, leaving me sometimes a little lost when trying to help him.

After we've gotten to know each other a little better he actually did start talking about graduation and like, maybe even grad school. So I thought

that was good and we did discuss that a lot. I think that's a good goal for him because it's kind of like...it's not like a vague goal if you know what I mean. It's like something doable and like something measurable.

While being on the same page didn't come as easily as it did with other mentoring pairs, Julie and Brian learned to accommodate each other as they got to know each other better. Working on getting to know one another and building a more open relationship helped to create a better dynamic to work on goals together. Julie had mentioned that the progression of their relationship was aided by finding common ground together. Once again, a barrier to a beneficial mentorship is overcome by relating to one another and connecting through sharing in one another's interests. Once Julie and Brian had gotten to know each other better this helped them to recover their relationship. Julie explained,

I think at the beginning of the semester just because I didn't know him as well, it was harder for me to pinpoint what he needed help with and sometimes he wouldn't really share that. So, now that I kind of have a better idea, I can be like, oh do you need help with this? And he'll be like, oh yeah that's a good idea and then I'm like okay, let's do this.

Jamie (mentor) also felt he was on a different page when it came to addressing social skills goals for his mentee, Chris. Jamie tried to balance what he felt his mentee should be working on and what his mentee actually wanted to work on. However, both Jamie and Chris could just not get on the same page together. Jamie explained,

He wanted to work on making friends, which he kind of did on his own through joining clubs and things like that, which is great. But there's some other social quarks and things that he wanted to work on in his goals that weren't perfectly match with what I think needs to be working on, so I try to balance those. I think I'm someone who has the knowledge and empathy to be able to work with him on those types of things but he just hasn't shown that much interest during that.

When Chris was asked about how helpful his meetings with his mentor had been, he replied, "[It was] hard to find subjects of discussion" and that his mentor seemed "to have been trained for mentees with more severe difficulties than myself." Therefore, Jamie's approach wasn't quite matching what Chris felt he needed from a mentor. Jamie later shared,

I think it's mostly just that he may be sort of too high functioning in a lot of areas for me to be very useful to him. For example, at least from what he tells me he's doing fine academically. So, he seems to be reasonably good at communicating with TAs and professors which, from him, he does do and go talk to them, so I don't visually see how those actually look in real life but um, but from my guess is that he's one of the higher functioning mentees in our program and so that's my main reasoning behind why it's been beneficial for him. He's basically doing pretty well adjusting to university from what I can tell. So, that might be part of the reason he's not that invested.

Jamie discussed how he did not always know how to be useful to Chris, seeing Chris was high-functioning. He questioned whether Chris was actually committed to the mentorship in the first place in trying to figure out why he and Chris were facing challenges in working on goals together. There was also mention of the difficulty in knowing what to do as a mentor when working with a student with high-functioning ASD. Most mentors had experience working with individuals with ASD who were lower functioning and, for them, it was quite different to work with adults who are competent enough to be at university, yet need support. Anna (mentor) said,

It would be beneficial if the program provided a little training on establishing positive relationships with mentees that are very high functioning, to those who are lower functioning. In thinking about some ways to interact with each type of mentee, it would help the mentor to be better equipped to know what to focus on.

More information on how to support a student who has high-functioning ASD may have better prepared the mentors to work with the AMI mentees and what to expect when working with this population. Perhaps such further support could have aided mentoring pairs in working on goals together.

#### **4.7.3. We can't always relate**

Many of the challenges that mentoring pairs faced came from difficulties in trying to relate to one another. The subtheme *We Can't Always Relate* addresses the challenges of relating through *shared* interests and *sharing in* interests, which relates to the subtheme *Finding Common Ground*. This barrier relates to Finding Common Ground in that getting

to know one another through shared interests and connecting through similarities was not always an easy task in AMI.

For two mentoring pairs, in particular, they faced challenges in relating to and getting to know one another. Julie and Brian, as mentioned, faced challenges in this domain as well as they tried to relate to one another. This involved Julie recognizing the benefits of having differences because then both her and Brian offer something new and different to their relationship. Furthermore, she goes on to explain how an activity that they did together had allowed them to get to know each other better by learning about their likes and dislikes. To this end, Julie and Brian were moving towards a more positive relationship. Overall, Brian saw their relationship positively and believes that they did, in fact, understand each other and related to one another. At the end of Term Two, Brian shared, “We understand each other well, are able to build a good connection/bond, make deep and meaningful conversations.” However, when asked if there were characteristics about his mentor that he felt were a barrier to relating to one another. Brian said,

Though AMI is already very good, if there were more male mentors it would be better since sometimes mentees may need someone of the same gender in order to relate, find more common ground and connect with better.

Although Brian was satisfied with the relationship he had with Julie, he felt that he could connect with a male mentor better, as in having the same gender would provide more common ground for him in the mentoring process.

Another mentoring pair also faced challenges when it came to relating to one another. Both Tracey (mentor) and Sarah (mentee) saw that they were struggling with building a connection and not knowing enough about one another. In this case, the mentoring relationship remained too formal and it was difficult for the mentee and the mentor to incorporate more friendly elements into their relationship. Sarah said,

We don't usually talk about, I don't know, it's just mostly me asking about university questions. We don't have that much small chat, so I don't know too much about her hobbies.

Tracey elaborated,

It's pretty school-based with her. So, it's hard to try and bring in other fun things to talk about. I want to try and that but, at the same time, she comes in being like okay we've talked about school, okay I'm done bye and just walks away kind of thing. So, it's a little hard to try and gear it to the exciting right away because she'll be like oh, what about school?

Sarah and Tracey saw that they lacked the "small chat", which was casual conversation about each other that other mentoring pairs had together. Their conversations were based upon the goals that they were working on together and didn't involve more friend-like elements to create a more open dialogue between them. With more successful relationships, increased dialogue came from having more topics to discuss other than goals, such as hobbies and interests. Therefore, finding some common ground was important to developing relationships in that it helped to create more communication between mentees and mentors.

When asked about challenges faced in AMI, Chris (mentee) reported "Finding things to talk about" as his biggest challenge. Therefore, building rapport and relating to one another in order to develop a more friendly relationship was a key ingredient to a beneficial mentorship. These exceptional cases show how student similarities reinforced the mentoring relationships through both shared and sharing in interests and experiences. The implications of these challenges resulted in lack of enjoyment in the mentoring relationships, which is discussed in the following subtheme.

#### **4.7.4. It's "not [always] fun"**

Lack of enjoying time together was a barrier in the mentoring relationship that related to *Enjoying Time Together*. Not every mentoring pair experienced a relationship that could implement fun into their meetings to develop friendly and enjoyable interactions. Possible reasons for this breakdown in the relationship was because the mentor did not realize the importance of encouraging friendly interactions within the relationship, despite having a mentee who was socially challenged, and the fact that being a mentee who is socially challenged made it difficult for the mentors to connect with their mentees on a more friendly and enjoyable ground.

Jamie (mentor) explained how he felt he and his mentee, Chris, did not consider their time together as “enjoying” their time together. Jamie’s feelings about the dynamic of his relationship with Chris came from seeing how other relationships and mentoring programs. Jamie compared his relationship with Chris to other mentoring relationships that were incorporating elements of fun and positive social interaction in their meetings. He also mentioned how he was affected by an article, by Jones and Goble (2012) that was assigned by mentors in the supervision meetings, which discussed a mentoring program for university students with intellectual disabilities, emphasizing the importance of having fun in a mentorship for students with disabilities. Jones and Goble stated that “...time for socializing and enjoying each other’s company was an important component...as mentoring partners engaged in meaningful social interactions, the differences between them became less evident.” Thus, taking the time to get to know one another allowed for mentees and mentors to relate better to each other and enjoy time together. This component also had of great value in AMI as well. Jamie explains,

I wish I had done a better job of creating that type of dynamic from day one. There was an article...it emphasized the importance of having fun with your mentee and developing a friendly relationship. I would recommend this article be assigned to all mentors before being matched with their mentee.

I guess we haven’t really talked much about that but um I just had a meeting with [the program coordinator] yesterday for the first time so she shared with me some more things about [Chris] that I didn’t know as far as his interests and things like that. So that’s certainly something that I’ll bring up in our next meeting. Like, for example, I don’t want our discussion of social thinking and social interactions in general, like that’s been fine, but I think at some point we’re going to run out of things to talk about so it would be useful if we were playing a game or something while we have a conversation...I think it would make our meetings more fun and hitting a level of more informal, more friendly interaction and while still talking about important social things and working on stuff while making sure it doesn’t seem like a therapy session. So, yeah, that’s something I’ll try to think more about.

Another mentee, Steve, discussed how he did not find enjoyment in his interactions with his mentors, both Susan in Term One and Mary in Term Two. When Steve was asked what he had learned about himself in AMI, he said,



Most people find being with others comfortable and fun. This is something they are born with, and they cannot come to think that there are people who find being with others not fun.

Therefore, as Steve points out, another barrier to developing relationships that was faced in AMI was the difficulty that he faced within social interactions. The social challenges of the mentees stood as a barrier in developing a relationship that could be more friendly and not too formal. Steve's lack of desire to socialize with others stood as social barrier and slowed the progression of his relationships with his mentors.

#### **4.7.5. “Some type of progress”**

The subtheme of *Some Type of Progress* relates to the subtheme of *Making a Difference*. There was lack of communication between mentees and mentors when conversing face-to-face, as both these pairs reported that they had communication problems in their relationship. Challenges also came from mentors having to trust in the mentees' descriptions when needing to know how they were progressing at university. Overall, these challenges led to these pairs feeling as though they did not make much of a difference in their mentee's adjustment and learning throughout the AMI process. Jamie discussed how he found it difficult to really know and trust that his mentee was doing as well as he claimed. Jamie said,

Part of the reason it's been challenging for me to help him, is because he has no interest in attending various social activities with me. That's fine, but the problem is that, without opportunities to observe him in authentic social interactions I don't have strong understanding of where social interactions fall apart for him. As a result, I'm reliant on him to explain his challenges to me, which isn't easy for him as he seems to have limited insight into his own social strengths and weaknesses and I have to read between the lines and observe him during our meetings to try to figure out what his challenges are.

I only have to go on based on, you know, I only have what he's telling me to and but I feel like, you know, I don't need help with this area then it's, you know there's nothing. He's either telling the truth or not but, either way, I don't feel like it's my responsibility to be searching for all his problems you know. If he tells me he doesn't have a problem in a certain area then I'll assume that he doesn't and move on. So I feel like I don't know for sure.

Tracey (mentor) acknowledged how her and her mentee, Sarah, faced challenges in building a better relationship and working on goals, yet she saw some progression when it came to how comfortable her and Sarah were becoming with another.

I've seen a progression from how my relationship with my mentee has built from the first semester onto here so I see definitely improvement with comfort level and just like discussion of topics and stuff so I feel like that's really gone well. And then the difficulty is that she's not always present at the meetings. So that's the problem. I feel like we could do even more if she just like came to every meeting. So it's getting better. You can see the progression of like a better relationship but it's not to the extent that it could have been.

Mary (mentor) explained how she found it difficult to know how she was performing as a mentor. With no direct feedback on mentor performance in AMI, she experienced times when she questioned whether she was being useful to her mentee. Mary shared,

Right now I feel like I don't know how to assess my own performance. Like, whether I'm doing my job or not because no one's really watching my performance and our supervision [meetings] are more like the issues we struggle with...but not sure how we are doing. Are we really doing the right thing? We never know.

However, Mary soon found ways to know that she was actually making a difference in helping and supporting her mentee, Steve, because he took notes within their meetings which, to Mary, meant he found her advice useful. She said,

I feel I am helping with providing something that he doesn't really know because he's taking notes. It seems that he wants to know information and wants to remember information. So, in that aspect I think I'm helping...I feel it's like very positive when he's able to, like I think he shows a lot of respect to me, and he's really attentive to me, which is great. I feel he's there, he's not just thinking about other stuff and he's even taking notes. It makes me feel like, woah, I'm really like yeah!

For Jamie and Chris, Jamie felt he was not helping Chris very much as a mentor, until one day when he received an email from Chris. Jamie shared,

My best experience was several days ago when he emailed me asking advice about a problem he was having in certain social interactions (he said he noticed his voice volume would spontaneously rise when he was talking about something he was really interested in). This felt like a

victory to me, because paying attention to these types of things (e.g., being self-conscious of unusual behaviours that others may find odd) is exactly what I've been trying to get him to start thinking about in terms of self-awareness. It made me feel like I have made some type of progress with him, albeit painfully slow.

Tracey (mentor) had a similar experience with her mentee, Sarah. Tracey explained,

I think the most positive experience I had at the AMI was when my mentee reached out to me in an email to tell me her struggles this semester. As mentioned, she had not been vocal through email and only a little more in person. Having received this email I felt she was comfortable enough to open up to me and express her concerns. The fact she came to me for support was exactly what I came into this program hoping to do for my mentee.

#### **4.7.6. Summary of Barriers to a Beneficial Mentorship**

Mentoring pairs were quite successful in developing beneficial relationships that ultimately led to a Mentee-centered Approach. However, there were cases where challenges were faced between mentors and mentees, creating barriers to achieve effective mentorship. In the cases mentioned in this section, it is seen that there are times when the experiences between mentees and mentors do not fit the pattern of a Mentee-centered Approach. These cases helped to show the importance of working towards building rapport and knowing how to structure meetings in order to provide an approach tailored to the individual needs of the mentee. As such, being committed and on the same page with another are important components to the mentorship in AMI. A key ingredient is being able to enjoy time together within meetings. Importantly, many of these barriers could be overcome by implementing the process of finding common ground together. For mentors, it was important to find ways to know that they were being useful to their mentees, and how to work with someone who has high-functioning ASD. Ultimately, while most mentoring pairs were able to develop beneficial relationships, there were unique challenges faced within AMI, pointing to the fact that each relationship had its own strengths and weaknesses.

## **Chapter 5. Discussion**

The goal of the current study was to understand the experiences of the mentees and mentors involved in a mentorship program at SFU for students with ASD. An in-depth analysis of participant interviews was afforded by a grounded theory approach. There is a paucity of research on support programs for college and university students with ASD, especially mentoring programs. Additionally, there are no studies to date that have explored the first-hand accounts of students with ASD to provide an in-depth understanding of the components of mentorship, as it was experienced by its participants. This is surprising considering the academic and social challenges that this population faces, which contribute to low retention and graduation rates (Appel, 2011).

A total of nine mentees and nine mentors shared their experiences through semi-structured interviews. Other sources of data included surveys and log notes, which were used to verify the interpretation of the interview data. By asking mentees to share their perspectives as university students with a diagnosis of ASD, this study gave voice to a community that has been, for too long, understudied and underestimated.

### **5.1. Summary of A Mentee-centered Approach**

A Mentee-centered Approach emerged as the overall core theme of the experiences of the AMI participants. Within this core theme emerged 5 interrelated major themes, which comprised a conceptual framework for mentorship. Nora and Crisp (2007) assert that helping students adjust to college life and fully engage in their academic and social environments must be based upon a sound theoretical mentorship framework, more specifically, one that underlies mentoring experiences. The current study has provided a Mentee-centered Approach as the mentorship framework that was reported by the mentees and mentors in AMI. A Mentee-centered Approach was implemented through building an open and comfortable relationship between the mentee and mentor, such that the mentee became more open him/herself. From becoming open (i.e. more expressive in conversation), the mentee began to self-advocate for his/her goals. Importantly, a positive relationship was built upon the rapport between the mentee and mentor, which

was aided by releasing the structure of the interactions between mentoring pairs, and by the pairs enjoying their time together. Enjoying their time together involved getting to know one another and sharing in each other's interests and/or disclosing interests with one another help to foster these relationships.

Providing a setting in which the mentees felt comfortable enough to disclose their ideas and opinions on goals was achieved by striking a balance between being open, on the one hand, and professional, on the other. That is, as mentees and mentors became more open with one another, setting and maintaining the necessary boundaries of the relationship ensured a degree of professionalism. Thus, both a friendly yet professional, open and comfortable, relationship developed which allowed for a self-advocating mentee to emerge. Once all of these components were in place, the ideal Mentee-centered Approach was made possible, as explained by the mentees and mentors in AMI.

In addition to having an open and comfortable relationship, a Mentee-centered Approach included other important components. The AMI mentor had to be versatile – i.e., someone who could accommodate the needs of the mentee. Mentors provided a connection and a form of support that the mentee would not have had otherwise. The meeting process allowed for structure to be incorporated into the meetings, which was key to getting the momentum of the mentorship going, in order to work on goals together. The types of goals addressed in AMI fell into four broad domains (i.e. academic, job/career, social, and emotional), with the consensus as reported by the mentees that academic goals were most important. As time progressed, the mentoring process became tailored to the specific needs of the mentee.

On the other hand, I identified some of the barriers to providing a Mentee-centered Approach. These included, not knowing how to first approach the relationship (e.g., the mentor acting with too much authority to start), not realizing the importance of getting to know one another and building rapport (i.e., through interest-sharing), and not being on the same page (e.g., different ideas on goals or lack of investment in the mentorship). Such barriers put a strain on mentoring relationships, making it difficult to develop an open and comfortable relationship and, therefore, a Mentee-centered Approach.

## **5.2. Relationship of Findings to Existing Literature**

The findings from this thesis are the first of their kind in providing an in-depth understanding of the experiences of students with ASD in a mentoring program in higher education. There is a fair amount of literature on peer mentoring in higher education for neurotypical students and students with disabilities more generally, yet, little research has been done specifically on students with ASD. In this section, I review some of this research and link it with findings that emerged from my study.

### **5.2.1. Open and comfortable relationships**

In this study, the natural progression of the mentoring relationships involved mentees becoming more open with the mentors and the mentors helping to make the mentees feel more comfortable in doing so. In a study by Jones and Goble (2012) on mentoring students with intellectual disabilities, the authors also mentioned how the mentoring partnership offered a “natural” type of support in order to make the mentee feel more comfortable. Both mentors and mentees reported positive experiences around the times they socialized together, such as attending campus events together and socializing outside of the classroom in order to build rapport (Jones & Goble, 2012). They discussed how this component was necessary for a successful mentorship to take place for these students in university. Thus, building and maintaining a friendly, comfortable relationship was important for their mentorship. In the current study, both working towards building an open and comfortable relationship in the meetings as well as attending events together on campus outside of the meetings helped to build more positive friendly relationships. Thus, relationships were reinforced by the natural social interactions and efforts put in place to create a friendly dynamic between one another in AMI. What is more, is that these positive relationships helped to create a better support system for the mentees as meetings became more productive from having built a stronger relationship together.

#### ***Enjoying time together and finding common ground***

Jones and Goble (2012) found that positive relationships developed between mentors and mentees with intellectual disabilities. More specifically, their study suggested

that enjoying time together and finding common ground were key factors. They found that relationships often became strained when time was not allotted for having fun and enjoying each other's time together. If the relationship became too focused on academic deficits, then the mentees lost interest in the relationship. Mentees and mentors suggested that each relationship must prioritize fun along with prioritizing academic goals (Jones & Goble, 2012). Forming a bond of friendship and focusing on the importance of enjoying time together, make the work part of the mentorship effortless and add a pleasurable aspect to the mentoring process (Ward, Thomas, Disch, 2014). Friendly bonds were also found amongst the AMI mentees and mentors, as they took the time to enjoy their time together, through finding common ground and having colloquial discussions where they shared in humour and laughter together.

For the participants in AMI, sharing interests and sharing *in* interests were important to building rapport and becoming more peer-like. Many of the mentors found that they shared similarities with their mentees, including shared interests (e.g. liking the same board games), despite the expectation that individuals with ASD have unique and unusual interests that they find difficult to share with others. The AMI mentees and mentors discovered that they either shared interests or the mentor invested him/herself in developing the same interest in order to relate to his/her mentee. However, there were no interests of the mentees that were so unusual that the mentors could not accommodate or take an interest into themselves, or that the mentoring pairs could not use to find a way to relate to one another.

### ***Maintaining boundaries***

The provision of boundaries was important for mentees to feel comfortable in AMI. While other components, such as enjoying time together and finding common ground directly helped the relationship to become more open, setting and maintaining boundaries were also important for creating an open and comfortable relationship. Implementing boundaries provided the reassurance of what the mentor's role was within AMI, which helped to create more communication between the mentee and mentor. Setting and maintaining boundaries also gave the mentee reassurance that his/her rights and privacy would be respected. Thus, the mentee felt comfortable enough to approach the mentor with problems and issues they were facing in his/her personal life when boundaries were

made clear. Clarifying the rules and roles of the mentorship also informed mentees that interactions and discussions would not get too intimate or too personal. Thus, the mentoring relationship became open, but not too open. To this end, setting and maintaining boundaries, with the right amount of emphasis placed on these boundaries, added to the openness and comfort of the relationship.

Colvin and Ashman (2010) report a similar finding in their study on peer mentoring for neurotypical students in higher education. Clarifying roles and establishing expectations were crucial elements in their study in order for a positive and productive mentorship to flourish (Colvin & Ashman, 2010). Colvin and Ashman (2010) state that a mentoring relationship should provide clear roles and rules, and understanding of how these should be enacted.

### ***Lessening the hierarchy***

Recent research on mentoring identifies relationships that are less hierarchical (Ahmed, 2009). The current study demonstrates how lessening the hierarchy between AMI mentees and mentors helped to create more positive relationships. While mentors in AMI maintained some form of authority, this did not mean that they did not allow peer-like interactions to develop. In fact, interacting like peers while keeping the relationship somewhat professional is what helped to build the mentoring relationship as mentoring pairs related to one another, built rapport, and enjoyed time spent together in casual discussions.

Peer mentors are not trained experts in the mentoring field, but are collaborative partners on a more-equal footing with the mentees (Jones & Goble, 2012). Colvin and Ashman (2010) found that the misuse of power and resources of the mentor led to challenges and resistance between mentees and mentors. Those mentees who did not fully accept and respect their mentors created challenges as the mentor tried to help and work with the mentee. In turn, if mentors tried to push their help and advice onto mentees when they didn't need it, mentees felt pestered, undermined, and viewed their mentors more negatively (Colvin & Ashman, 2010). In the study by Jones and Goble (2012) it was of utmost importance to establish equal partnerships through mentoring, yet, there were some partnerships that had an underlying inequality. These relationships were hindered



by the unequal balance of power (Jones & Goble, 2012). While some authority was maintained in the mentor role, being the more experienced student, the mentoring relationships were more successful if the mentors and mentees interacted as if they were equal within the relationship, as in a professional peer relationship. The current study mirrors these findings in that maintaining equality between mentee and mentor in AMI helped to create more positive relationships that were peer-like. When there was an underlying inequality felt within AMI, such that the mentor presented him/herself with too much authority, relationships were hindered and it became more difficult to work on goals together. When there was more equal footing between mentee and mentor, the mentorship process was more successful as relationships progressively developed.

### **5.2.2. A semi-formal flexible mentorship**

Peer mentoring has taken both formal and informal forms of support. Informal mentoring programs provide opportunities for students to connect with other students without needing much structure in place. Many of these informal programs provide much in the way of social support but are limited in the amount of academic support and follow-up procedures that they provide. For example, students may attend events where they can meet other students and ask them questions and gain advice on any issues they face at college. There is little supervision of the matching process, if any. Also, the process of the mentorship is not followed up, nor are there expectations in place for the next steps in the mentoring relationship (Appel, 2011). Furthermore, informal mentoring is more likely to lead to friendship and there is more commitment to the relationship (Inzer & Crawford, 2009).

On the other hand, a formal mentoring program is more structured, provides clear understanding of the mentoring process to both mentors and mentees and utilizes many different strategies that are supervised by the personnel in the program. A formal program may require the student to complete a bridge course, to help transition from high school. Support in formal college mentoring programs addresses both academic and social goals (Appel, 2011), but formal and informal mentoring programs differ in the emphasis they place upon social and emotional support, with informal mentoring programs tending to be more focused more upon social and/or emotional issues than formal mentoring programs

(Desimone, Hochberg, & Porter, 2014). However, more recently, much of the research into formal forms of mentoring have taken note of the importance of socio-emotional and relationship aspects of the mentoring partnership (Ahmed, 2009). Therefore, both types of mentoring may be important in assisting the mentees in their learning (Desimone et al., 2014).

In AMI, both mentees and mentors described the program as a semi-structured and semi-formal type of mentoring. It was felt that providing some structure, while at the same time, leaving the mentoring relationship open enough to encourage the mentee to take the lead, fostered a Mentee-centered Approach. Thus, a mentoring program that incorporates both formal and informal components and finds the right balance between these components, according to the individual needs of the mentee, seemed to have the most potential for successful mentorship with students with ASD.

### **5.2.3. Promoting self-advocacy**

The ultimate goal of AMI was to address the individual goals of each mentee. However, in order to provide individualized support, the mentees had to learn to self-advocate. The *self-advocating mentee* in this current study was one that learned to express and share ideas; and to communicate more with his/her mentor within the mentorship meetings. The Self-advocating Mentee was particularly important to this study because not only does it add to the paucity of research on self-advocacy in university students with autism but, also, the mentee needed to be able to express his or her goals to the mentor over time in AMI in order for the mentor to provide individualized support.

Test, Fowler, and Wood's (2005) conceptual framework for self-advocacy of students with disabilities within the general education institution relates well with my finding that the mentees became open and active participants in AMI. Test et al.'s (2005) framework involved first knowing one's own strengths and learning style, and knowing one's rights as a student with a disability. The component that follows these previous components, and is very pertinent to the discussion made by the AMI participants, is *communication*. The authors state "Learning how to communicate information effectively with others through negotiation, assertiveness, and problem solving in individual and

group situations is critical to self-advocacy” (p. 45). The same held true for the mentees in AMI, who developed self-advocacy within the mentorship as they became more expressive and communicative when discussing and problem solving goals with their mentors. To add to this framework, I found that a Mentee-centered Approach was essential for promoting self-advocacy in AMI mentees. That is, having a strong positive mentoring relationship that encouraged the mentee to open up to the mentor helped the mentee to become more active in identifying and communicating goals with his/her mentor. The more expressive the mentee became, the more the mentee began to self-advocate for goals in the mentorship. The more active the mentee in identifying and communicating his/her own goals, the greater amount of learning and personal development that took place within the mentorship process.

Hurley (2014) conducted qualitative interviews with college students with ASD to explore their perceptions on adjustment to college and the types of supports they used to help them adjust. She found that the key factors to their adjustment were awareness and acceptance of the diagnosis, self-advocacy skills, and use of mentor support. While it is important to address how students with ASD self-advocate in seeking support services, there still remains a paucity in research on how their self-advocacy develops once they begin navigating life in college and university. In fact, studies of self-advocacy that have been done for post-secondary students, including this study by Hurley (2014) have focused upon how students with ASD undergo disclosing their disorder and how they self-advocate for needed services (Adreon & Durocher, 2007; Hurley, 2014). Other studies have focused on students with disabilities in general and are not specific to how self-advocacy unfolds for students with ASD in higher education (Getzel & Thoma, 2008; Atkinson, 2014). While the current study does not address how self-advocacy develops within the general institution, it does provide insight into how self-advocacy develops within a mentorship program in a higher education institution. To this effect, the current study explains how a mentorship program helped to develop the self-advocacy of students with ASD within the mentorship, by giving a rich description of the experiences of both the mentees and the mentors in AMI.

Mentors recognized the capability of mentees to advocate for themselves. The mentees in the Jones and Goble (2012) study emphasized the fact that their learning

difference was not considered incompetence. The mentors in their study discussed that finding the right balance between providing support and fostering independence was a necessary task (Jones & Goble, 2012). As one mentor said, “Knowing when to fade supports is pretty key, because you don’t want that individual to be less independent” (Jones & Goble, 2012, p.274). In AMI, when the mentee began to take a more active approach in working with his/her mentor the mentor began to “sit back and listen” and became less of a “forceful guide” and more of a “on the sidelines guide” (Michelle, mentor). Hence, an intriguing finding from the current study was the development of the self-advocating mentee, as one who developed agency to express what he/she needed as a university student and as an individual.

#### **5.2.4. Summary of Relationship of Findings to Existing Literature**

Previous literature has recognized the need for developing self-advocacy in college and university for students with ASD (Freedman, 2010; Hurley, 2014; Heck-Sorter, 2012). However, no study, to date, has provided an in-depth investigation as to how the development of self-advocacy for the mentee unfolds from involvement in a mentorship program. A Mentee-centered Approach has been thoroughly described in this study, providing a conceptual framework for how a mentorship program can support the development self-advocacy in university students with ASD. There is implication that self-advocacy skills are essential for supporting the transition and persistence of students with ASD in higher education (Heck-Sorter, 2012). In this study, mentoring relationships progressed and developed and, therefore, became an important platform for mentees to express and address their own goals at university. To this end, the current study, in particular, has shown how having open and comfortable mentoring relationships create self-advocacy in students with ASD. Overall, this study provides unique description of how self-advocacy developed in students with ASD during their time spent in a mentoring program at university. No study, until now, has offered a thorough investigation into how a mentoring relationship promotes the development of self-advocacy for students with ASD.

### 5.3. Limitations and Future Directions

By describing the experiences of AMI participants, this study contributes new knowledge to the literature and expands our understanding of how a mentorship program for university students with ASD unfolds in higher education. However, there are several limitations worth noting that are particular to this study. First, participants with autism tended to provide thin responses to interview questions. While there was much effort and varied technique provided for the interview structure in order to encourage further elaboration from mentees, about half of the mentees had difficulty with expressing their ideas enough to gain the same richness as was seen with the mentors. This was not surprising seeing that students with ASD, including those at the post-secondary level who are high-functioning, have social communication difficulties (Landa, Klin, & Volkmar, 2000; Adreon & Durocher, 2007). However, this became a limitation to the current study because, while I tried my best to give voice to the mentees (i.e., using both typed-written and verbal responses), the mentee discussions were sparser and less elaborate than the discussions that came from the mentors. Therefore, the mentors became my main source for data collection from participants, with mentees providing some insight into the mentorship process.

As mentioned in the Methodology section, I conducted initial interviews with the mentees at the start of the mentorship to gain a sense of their level of responding and how well they could articulate their ideas to questions that were semi-structured. I felt this was a necessary step to determining the types of interview questions and methods that I would employ in future interviews with the mentees. To this end, in order to keep the mentorship program more about the program and less about the research, I had to limit the number of interviews that I conducted with the mentees. I also employed more vigorous verification strategies *within* the interviews (i.e., asking more questions and requiring more clarification) than I did with mentors so that the mentees would not be expected to do member checks. Therefore, in-depth interviews were conducted with mentees at only one point in time and member checks were not administered to the mentees. This limited the amount of verification that I was able to receive through member checking. Perhaps future studies could investigate the experiences of mentees at multiple time frames throughout

the mentorship or find ways to get the mentees to express and elaborate more on their experiences.

Finally, a limitation to this study is that I had no access as to how the mentors were selected for their roles in the mentorship. Mentors were hired into AMI through the recruitment and interview process that was done by the AMI supervisors and program coordinator. Mentors were chosen based upon their experience in having either worked with individuals with ASD in the past or in having mentoring experience, or both. The personality of the mentors within the interviews was also a component that played into their hiring process. While these were some of the components involved in the selection of mentors for AMI, when it came time to selectively sample the AMI participants for the current study, the mentors were already hired and started training for their mentorship roles in AMI.

## **Implications**

The current findings add to a very small literature base on mentoring students with ASD in university settings. While limited, some tentative recommendations can be made. First, self-advocacy can and should be fostered in university students with ASD. The components identified by my study that help promote self-advocacy, involve building an open and comfortable relationship between mentee and mentor; and having a mentor who is supportive and flexible in his/her approach as someone who can accommodate the mentee within the mentoring meetings and encourage the active role of the mentee when working on his/her goals.

The findings of this study also illustrate the challenges that come with trying to achieve a Mentee-centered Approach with a population who struggles with academic, social, and self-advocacy difficulties. First off, both partners must be personally invested within the mentorship. Other challenges, as was seen in the negative cases, can be overcome if the mentee and mentor are able to incorporate a good balance of comradery and authority into their relationship so that it can openly and comfortably progress throughout the mentorship. An open comfortable relationship and a commitment to one another lay the foundation for a Mentee-centered Approach to emerge. Furthermore, both

mentee and mentor must respect one another's roles and involvement in the mentoring process. Therefore, for future mentorship programs for students with ASD in higher education, it may be important for them to encourage the development of positive relationships that allow for openness of the mentee, while at the same time, maintain boundaries to clarify the mentor and mentee roles in the mentorship.

Finally, both social and academic goals should be emphasized. The most notable challenges that were identified in the York study on AMP were based around social interactions and communication (Ames et al., 2015). The current study, on the other hand, identified academic goals as primary. Thus, a possible conclusion is that mentoring programs for students with ASD should provide both academic and social support. For instance, mentees in AMI described that having a mentor helped to alleviate the stress and anxiety around both the academic and social demands of university, supporting them through various aspects of university life, such as course registration and selection, learning about graduation requirements, and in understanding more about "the new academic and social way of life [that university] brings" (David, mentee).

Within ASD, many individuals face academic challenges in post secondary settings due to their social and executive functioning deficits. These deficits can have a great impact on learning, yet are not supported in more general disability supports, such as support services offered to students with other disabilities. It is hoped from this research that policy administrators implement more individually-tailored support programs for students with ASD in higher education. In order to best address the specific needs of each student with ASD, one-on-one support from a person familiar with the university campus who has the time to develop a relationship and get to know the mentee as an individual deems most beneficial for providing support.

## **Chapter 6. Conclusion**

This study provided the first in-depth understanding of the experiences of participants in a university mentorship program using a grounded theory approach. The overall core theme that emerged from the experiences of the AMI participants was that of a Mentee-centered Approach, a mentorship framework that helped students with ASD to develop self-advocacy. Importantly, individuals with ASD often receive much support through the K-12 school years and are often dependent upon others to speak and act on their behalf. Thus, in most cases students with ASD are not equipped with the self-advocacy skills they need to succeed in post-secondary contexts, where one-on-one supports drop off dramatically. The mentees in AMI learned how to better express themselves and work on their goals through the support of their mentors. A major finding from this study was the importance of building an open and comfortable relationship in order to achieve a Mentee-centered Approach, in which the mentee advocated for his/her own needs. In the end, a Mentee-centered Approach provided a mentorship framework for which students with ASD could develop self-advocacy skills through building social connections within a university mentoring program.



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## **Appendix A.**

### **Interview Protocol for Mentees and Mentors**

#### **AMI Interview: Part 1**

For this interview, you will be using a computer to type your responses to the questions in the boxes provided on the screen. When you are finished, let me know and I will read your responses to the questions.

During this time, you may take a break, go on computer, etc.

Once I have finished reading your responses to the interview questions we will discuss them to clarify your answers and aid our discussion. I will ask you later for permission to audio record this discussion.

Do you have any questions?

#### **AMI Interview: Part 2**

Interviews with Audio Recording:

The researcher would like to involve the audio recording of your discussion together, for which she will be asking your permission. Neither your name nor any other identifying information will be associated with the audio recording or the transcripts. Only the research team will be able to listen to the recordings. As with all the data from this project, the recordings and transcripts will be stored until approximately 2025 and will be securely stored in a locked file cabinet at Simon Fraser University.

The recordings will be transcribed by the researcher. Only the research team will be able to read these responses. Transcripts of your interview may be reproduced in whole or in part for use in presentations or written products that result from this study. Neither your name nor any other identifying information (such as your voice) will be used in presentations or in written products resulting from this study.

Following the interviews, you will be given the opportunity to have the recordings erased if you wish to withdraw your consent to audio recording. Please remember that your participation in this research is voluntary and you may withdraw at any point in time.

Do you have any questions?



# Appendix B

## Mentee Informed Consent

### Autism Mentorship Initiative

Principal Investigator: Dr. Elina Birmingham, Assistant Professor, Faculty of Education, Simon Fraser University, Phone: XXX, Email: XXX

Co-Investigators:

Dr. Grace Iarocci, Associate Professor, Department of Psychology, Simon Fraser University, Phone: XXX, Email: XXX

Dr. Mitchell Stoddard, Director, Centre for Students with Disabilities, Phone: XXX Email: XXX

Suzanne Leach, Learning Specialist, Centre for Students with Disabilities, Phone: XXX, Email: XXX

Nicole Roberts, Graduate Student, Faculty of Education, Simon Fraser University, Phone: XXX, Email: XXX

#### Introduction and Purpose

The overall goal of this study is to evaluate a pilot mentorship program, entitled the Autism Mentorship Initiative (AMI), and to inform our understandings of how to support students with special needs in postsecondary contexts.

#### Study Procedures

If you choose to participate in this study, you will complete a number of different questionnaires and interviews with one of our staff or volunteers. You will be asked to answer questions about your daily life and your experiences at university. In addition, you will be asked about your perceptions of the AMI program and your progress over the course of the program. We will also ask you for a copy of a valid clinical report confirming your ASD diagnosis (for our records) and for your university transcripts to track academic progress. Your total time commitment for these measures, should you choose to participate will be approximately 15 hours over the course of 1 year.

This study may involve audio recording during interviews to ensure that we accurately capture what has been expressed. Should you consent to being audio recorded, neither your name nor any other identifying information will be associated with the audio recording or the transcriptions of the interview. Only the principal investigator and o-investigators will have access to the recordings. As with all the data from this project, the recordings will be securely stored in a locked file cabinet at Simon Fraser University. The recordings will be stored until December 2025. Transcripts of the interviews may be reproduced in whole or in part for use in presentations or written products that result from this study. Neither your name nor any other identifying information (such as your voice) will be used in

presentations or in written products resulting from this study. Immediately following the interviews, you will be given the opportunity to have the recordings erased if you wish to withdraw your consent to audio recording or participation in this study.

Information about your performance on questionnaires cannot be provided to you, as they are for research purposes only. However, if you wish a summary of the overall findings from this project can be sent to you. For a summary of our findings please contact Elina Birmingham (email: XXX; phone: XXX).

### **Confidentiality**

If you choose to participate, confidentiality will be assured. Testing will take place at SFU. All data will be maintained in locked filing cabinets at the Centre for Students with Disabilities (CSD). The data will be coded by a numeric system and analyzed as group data. Data will be stored until 2020. Your privacy will be protected in any scientific publication or presentation resulting from this study and individual participants will not be identified.

There are no known risks involved in participating in this study. Benefits of participating in this study include receiving one-on-one mentorship through the AMI program. Permission to conduct this study has been obtained from CSD and from the SFU Research Ethics Board.

### **Contact for information about the study**

If you have any questions about this study or would like more information, please contact Elina Birmingham, Phone: XXX, Email: XXX or Grace Iarocci, Phone: XXX, Email: XXX

### **Contact for complaints**

If you have any concerns about your rights as a research participant and/or your experiences while participating in this study, you may contact Dr. Jeffrey Toward, Director, Office of Research Ethics at XXX or XXX.

### **Consent**

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. If at any point you wish to withdraw from the study, before or after agreeing to participate, there will be no penalty and there will be no adverse effects on your grades or membership in the AMI program.

Please feel free to ask the researcher any additional questions you may have about the study. Your signature below indicates that you have received a copy of this consent form for your own records.

Do we have your permission to use an audio recording device during your interview?

YES  NO

Sometimes we will contact participants after they have participated in order to clarify information (e.g. if there is a part of the data that is missing or unclear such as a missed item on a questionnaire). Do we have your permission to contact you in future if such an instance arises?  YES  NO

Do we have your permission to contact you in future about our findings or upcoming research projects in our lab (sometimes in the form of a lab newsletter)?  YES  NO

PHONE NUMBER AND EMAIL ADDRESS (should you consent to be contacted):

Phone: \_\_\_\_\_ Email: \_\_\_\_\_

Your signature indicates that you consent to participate in this study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Your signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date (dd/mm/yyyy)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name

# Appendix C

## Goal Setting

### AMI Goal Setting

During the first term, you and your mentor will mainly focus on a personalized, comprehensive orientation to the University and the expectations of you as a new university student. This may include reviewing such topics as how to effectively use Canvas and Connect, how to hand in assignments independently, how to access activities and resources, etc.

You will also have opportunity to explore your learning strengths and weaknesses and use this information to establish meaningful strategies for school. This may involve completing a questionnaire and reviewing the results with the Program Coordinator and your mentor.

In addition to the above, there may be other areas or issues that are important or necessary for you to be successful at University (e.g., communication skills). These could also be included as goals in your work with your mentor.

To further assist with this, please review the following list and rate each according to the level of importance it currently has for you. We recognize that these may change over time and this can be revisited again as needed.

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Please circle your responses using the scale provided:

1. Meeting People/Socializing (e.g., how to join a club, how to interact in a group project, how to talk to other students)

1	2	3	4	5
Very Important	Somewhat Important	Important	Minimally Important	Not at all important

2. Communication Skills (e.g., how to write a suitable e-mail to your TA or Professor, how to book an in-person meeting with your advisor)

1	2	3	4	5
---	---	---	---	---

Very Important	Somewhat Important	Important	Minimally Important	Not at all important
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3. Managing Anxiety, Stress and Change (e.g., how to recognize anxiety and what to do about it, how to cope with unexpected changes to your routine)

1	2	3	4	5
Very Important	Somewhat Important	Important	Minimally Important	Not at all important

4. Organization and Planning (e.g., how to organize your study time, how to manage multi-tasking)

1	2	3	4	5
Very Important	Somewhat Important	Important	Minimally Important	Not at all important

5. Wellness and Self-Care (e.g., how to stay healthy so that you do well in university)

1	2	3	4	5
Very Important	Somewhat Important	Important	Minimally Important	Not at all important

6. Other (any topic not covered above). Please describe the topic: \_\_\_\_\_

1	2	3	4	5
Very Important	Somewhat Important	Important	Minimally Important	Not at all important

# Appendix D

## Mentor Consent Form

### Consent Form for Mentors

#### Autism Mentorship Initiative

Principal Investigator: Dr. Elina Birmingham, Assistant Professor, Faculty of Education, Simon Fraser University, Phone: XXX, Email: XXX

Co-Investigators: Dr. Grace Iarocci, Associate Professor, Department of Psychology, Simon Fraser University, Phone: XXX, Email: XXX

Dr. Mitchell Stoddard, Director, Centre for Students with Disabilities, Phone: XXX, Email: XXX

Suzanne Leach, Learning Specialist, Centre for Students with Disabilities Phone: XXX, Email: XXX

Nicole Roberts, Graduate Student, Faculty of Education, Simon Fraser University, Phone: XXX, Email: XXX

#### Introduction and Purpose

The overall goal of this study is to evaluate a pilot mentorship program, entitled the Autism Mentorship Initiative (AMI), and to inform our understandings of how to support students with special needs in postsecondary contexts.

#### Study Procedures

If you choose to participate in this study, you will complete a number of different questionnaires and interviews with one of our staff or volunteers. You will be asked to keep progress notes on your mentor meetings with your mentee. Your total time commitment for these measures, should you choose to participate will be approximately 30 hours over the course of 1 year.

This study may involve audio recording during interviews to ensure that we accurately capture what has been expressed. Should you consent to being audio recorded, neither your name nor any other identifying information will be associated with the audio recording or the transcriptions of the interview. Only the principal investigator and co-investigators will have access to the recordings. As with all the data from this project, the recordings will be securely stored in a locked file cabinet at Simon Fraser University. The recordings will be stored until December 2025. Transcripts of the interviews may be reproduced in whole or in part for use in presentations or written products that result from this study. Neither your name nor any other identifying information (such as your voice) will be used in presentations or in written products resulting from this study. Immediately following the

interviews, you will be given the opportunity to have the recordings erased if you wish to withdraw your consent to audio recording or participation in this study.

Information about your performance on questionnaires cannot be provided to you, as they are for research purposes only. However, if you wish a summary of the overall findings from this project can be sent to you. For a summary of our findings please contact Elina Birmingham (email: XXX; phone: XXX).

### **Confidentiality**

If you choose to participate, confidentiality will be assured. Testing will take place at SFU. All data will be maintained in locked filing cabinets at the Centre for Students with Disabilities (CSD). The data will be coded by a numeric system and analyzed as group data. Data will be stored until 2020. Your privacy will be protected in any scientific publication or presentation resulting from this study and individual participants will not be identified.

There are no known risks involved in participating in this study. Benefits of participating in this study include obtaining training on research methods. Permission to conduct this study has been obtained from CSD and from the SFU Research Ethics Board.

### **Contact for information about the study**

If you have any questions about this study or would like more information, please contact Elina Birmingham, Phone: XXX Email: XXX or Grace Iarocci, Phone: XXX, Email: XXX.

### **Contact for complaints**

If you have any concerns about your rights as a research participant and/or your experiences while participating in this study, you may contact Dr. Jeffrey Toward, Director, Office of Research Ethics at XXX or XXX.

### **Consent**

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. If at any point you wish to withdraw from the study, before or after agreeing to participate, there will be no adverse effects on your employment in the AMI program.

Please feel free to ask the researcher any additional questions you may have about the study. Your signature below indicates that you have received a copy of this consent form for your own records.

Do we have your permission to use an audio recording device during your interview?

YES  NO

Sometimes we will contact participants after they have participated in order to clarify information (e.g. if there is a part of the data that is missing or unclear such as a missed

item on a questionnaire). Do we have your permission to contact you in future if such an instance arises?

YES  NO

Do we have your permission to contact you in future about our findings or upcoming research projects in our lab (sometimes in the form of a lab newsletter)?  YES  NO

PHONE NUMBER AND EMAIL ADDRESS (should you consent to be contacted):

Phone: \_\_\_\_\_ Email: \_\_\_\_\_

Your signature indicates that you consent to participate in this study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Your signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date (dd/mm/yyyy)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name



# Appendix E

## Mentorship Agreement Contract

### Mentor-Mentee Terms of Agreement

#### 1. Conduct:

The mentor-mentee relationship is a unique working relationship. A friendly and comfortable rapport can make the experience effective and socializing is expected but generally there should be a purpose to the meetings. Mentors and mentees should maintain a caring and respectful relationship. Sexual, racial and/or physical harassment by either party will not be tolerated.

#### 2. Commitment:

The mentors are asked to commit to at least two terms while working with any particular mentee. If a circumstance occurs which requires termination of involvement in the AMI, then as much advance notice as possible is requested from either party.

#### 3. Scheduling and cancelling appointments:

A person's time and effort are to be respected and valued, by and for, both parties. The mentor and mentee will arrange a weekly schedule; however, if an appointment must be cancelled, at least a 24-hour notice to the other party is required. Also, mentors and mentees are instructed to wait at least fifteen minutes for the other party before considering the meeting cancelled.

If a mentee does not respond to the mentor's contact within two weeks of the match being made or if more than three consecutive appointments are missed, the mentoring service may be cancelled. The mentor is asked to please notify either the Program Assistant or the Program Coordinator of the AMI if this occurs.

#### 4. Role of the mentor:

The mentor cannot interact with the mentee's professor/instructor on his or her behalf. If the mentor happens to be the mentee's teaching assistant, the course instructor should be informed to maintain transparency and adjustments may need to be considered regarding marking/grading of the mentee's course work.

It is not appropriate for the mentee to call upon the mentor, on a regular basis, to answer "quick questions" outside of scheduled meetings. To do so goes beyond the scope of the mentor's responsibilities and prevents effective implementation of the mentor program.

**5. Mentoring venues:**

Mentoring should be conducted in a safe, public area, typically at one of the SFU campuses. Other people should be in the general vicinity – a faculty building might be appropriate during the day, but after hours when no one is around, it is not. Possible locations include group study areas in libraries, empty classrooms with the door left open, and student lounges. Inappropriate locations include private residences and classrooms with closed doors. Off-site venues may be suitable and appropriate; however, please notify the Program Assistants or Coordinator of the location in advance of the meeting(s).

**6. Academic integrity and plagiarism:**

Mentors and mentees may be surprised by the range of activities officially considered plagiarism. To avoid any possibility of academic dishonesty, and to properly make use of the AMI, mentors and mentees should not work directly on assignments that will be submitted. Mentors and mentees are expected to abide by SFU's Code of Academic Integrity and Good Conduct, found at this link: <http://www.sfu.ca/policies/gazette/student/s10-01.html>.

**7. Mentee consent:**

Mentors are provided with supervision to facilitate program and professional development. I give permission to my mentor to share relevant information about our sessions during the mentor's supervision meetings. This information will be kept strictly confidential and will not be shared outside of the context of the AMI, except if required by law.  
Mentee initial: \_\_\_\_\_

If you have any questions about the above information please contact the AMI Program Coordinator at XXX.

I have read and agree to the terms above. I understand that violating any of these terms may result in a review of my participation in the AMI.

MENTEE: Print name \_\_\_\_\_  
Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

MENTOR: Print name \_\_\_\_\_  
Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

# Appendix F

## Mentee Intake Interview

### AMI Mentee Intake Interview

ID # \_\_\_\_\_

Date of Interview: \_\_\_\_\_

Name of Interviewer: \_\_\_\_\_

DATE participant left high school or previous post-secondary institution:

High School: \_\_\_\_\_

Previous Institution: \_\_\_\_\_

Notes:

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Intro: "I will be asking you about your background in high school and some of the programs, activities, and social groups you have been involved with. I will also ask you about the support you have had from different people (e.g. such as with school). Lastly, we will talk about some of the things you like to do for fun."

1. (a) What social activities have you been a part of throughout high school/previous institution (e.g. soccer team, badminton club, math team, chess club, drama club, video game club, music club)?

(b) Are you still involved in any of these?

(c) Are you currently involved in any structured group activities or programs (such as membership in clubs, sports teams, hiking groups, etc.)?

2. (a) Have you had any support in the last 5 years from a professional such as a tutor, psychologist, therapist or support worker?

(b) If so, do you currently have this support?

(c) What personal supports have you had over the last five years, such as friends and family (i.e. to help you with school, to be a support when you needed help, to help you meet your needs/goals)?

(d) Do you currently have these supports/these people to help you when you need support (e.g. with school)?

3. (a) Did your high school teach you, or talk to you, about university or college? Did your high school help to prepare you for university or college?

(b) If so, how?

(c) If not, what did you do to prepare yourself for university (e.g. take a summer program to teach you about university, attend an orientation, etc.)?

5. What are some of your interests/things you like to do for fun?

6. (a) Are you part of a social group, network (small or large) that share the same interests (such as a group of friends who like computer games, jogging, vintage cars, electronics, etc.)?

(b) If so, tell me about them.

## Appendix G

### Interview with Mentors: Term One

#### Interview for AMI Mentors

Participant Number: \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher: Nicole Roberts

Read Aloud: "This study seeks permission to audio record your interview with myself, the researcher. Neither your name nor any other identifying information will be associated with the recording or the transcript. Only the research team will be able to listen to the recordings. The recordings will be kept for approximately one year and will be securely stored at the Center for Students with Disabilities at Simon Fraser University. The recordings will be transcribed by the researcher and erased once the transcriptions are checked for accuracy. Transcripts of your interviews may be reproduced in whole or in part for use in presentations or written products that result from this study. Neither your name nor any other identifying information (such as your voice) will be used in presentations or in written products resulting from the study. Please remember that your participation in this research is voluntary (including the audiotaping) and you may withdraw at any point in time. Do you verbally consent to having your interview audio recorded?"

1. How is the program going for you so far?
2. How do you feel the program is going for your mentee?
3. What is your understanding of the aims of the program?
4. Based on your experience, how well do you think the program is achieving those aims?
5. In your view, is the program meeting a need?
6. What was your motivation for joining the program? What do you hope to gain?
7. How is this program helping you to achieve these gains? Do you feel supported?
8. Describe a meeting with your mentee.

9. How do you work on goals with your mentee?
10. How is communication between you and your mentee?
11. What do you do to try to “connect” with your mentee?
12. What do you see as the programs greatest strength(s)? What about weaknesses?
13. Has being part of the program met your expectations?
14. What suggestions do you have for improving the program?

# Appendix H

## Interview with Mentees: Term Two

### AMI Interview with Mentees

Participant Number: \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher/Interviewer: Nicole Roberts

Please read the questions below and carefully answer them in the boxes provided below. The boxes will expand as you type your answers in these spaces. Here is an example:

This is an example of the response box for which you will be typing your responses.

Please feel free to ask questions during this interview process and to take breaks as needed throughout the interview. **Try to be as detailed and informative as possible in your responses to aid in our understanding of your experience.** Do you have any questions before we begin?

1. Why did you join the AMI program? What do you hope to gain from AMI?

2. What do you think is the purpose of AMI? Please explain.

3. (a) What are your goals in AMI?

(b) Is your mentor helping you to work on your goals?

(c) If so, how does your mentor help you?

(d) If not, how could your mentor help you better?

4. What do you do when you meet with your mentor? Describe the step-by-step process of your meetings with your mentor.

5. Do you think you and your mentor are a good match? Please explain.

6. Has anything changed between you and your mentor since the start of the program? For example, have your strategies in your meetings changed? Has your relationship changed? Please explain.

7. Is there anything that you wish you and your mentor could do together (that you are not currently doing together)? Please explain.

8. (a) What is the role of a mentor in AMI? What are the responsibilities of an AMI mentor?

(b) Describe what your mentor is to you. For example, is your mentor like a friend, a teacher, a peer, a tutor, a facilitator, etc.? Please explain.

9. What is the importance of having a mentor who is also an SFU student? Please explain.



10. Have you attended any of the AMI social events?

(a) If yes, what do you enjoy about these events? What do you not enjoy about these events?

(b) If you have not attended, why not? Do you think you will attend one?

11. What do you like best about AMI?

12. What do you like least about AMI?

13. Have you learned more about yourself from being in AMI?

(a) If yes, then what have you learned (such as strengths and/or weaknesses)? If not, please move onto question #14.

14. Do you have any suggestions for how AMI could improve? If so, please describe.

# Appendix I

## Interview with Mentors: Term Two

### AMI Interview with Mentors

Participant Number: \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher/Interviewer: Nicole Roberts

Please read the questions below and carefully answer them in the boxes provided below. The boxes will expand as you type your answers in these spaces. Here is an example:

This is an example of the response box for which you will be typing your responses.

Please feel free to ask questions during this interview process and to take breaks as needed throughout the interview. **Try to be as detailed and informative as possible in your responses to aid in our understanding of your experience.** Do you have any questions before we begin?

1. How is the program currently going for you? Please explain.

2. In your opinion, is this program beneficial? Please explain.

3. What are your mentees' goals? What sorts of goals do you feel your mentee should work on? Explain how achieving these goals will help your mentee. (Provide separate responses if you have more than one mentee)

4. Describe what a meeting looks like lately with your mentee. Has this process changed since the beginning of the program? How so? Think back to your earliest meetings together. (Provide separate responses if you have more than one mentee).

5. What resources and materials do you use in your meetings? How are these useful? Please Give examples.

6. What motivates you as a mentor in this program?

7. Do you feel you and your mentee are a good match? Why or why not? (Provide separate responses if you have more than one mentee)

8. Has your relationship changed since the start of the program. Please explain. (Provide separate responses if you have more than one mentee)

9. What is your understanding of the role of a mentor in AMI? Has this changed since the program started (think as far back as training day)? Please explain.

10. Can you share a positive experience that you have had in AMI? Please discuss and describe this experience.

11. Can you share a challenge or negative experience you have had to face in AMI? Please discuss and describe this experience.

12. What are the program's greatest strengths and/or weaknesses and why? Do you have any suggestions that could help improve the program?

## Appendix J

### Program Evaluation Survey for Mentees

#### AMI Mentee Evaluation Form

##### Title Page

Please provide constructive feedback regarding your mentorship program experience. We would like to have your opinion of the mentorship program so that we may evaluate and strengthen the program for the future. Please complete the questions below. The time required to complete this form is 30-60 minutes. This form will remain confidential and be reviewed only by the evaluation team.

##### Q1 . Full Name

First  
Name  
and  
Last  
Name  
:

\*

##### Q2 . Date

##### AMI

Please provide answers for the questions below regarding AMI. Questions will require either a written response, a rating on a scale provided, or a multiple-choice answer. Please read each question carefully.

##### Q3 . Once you were matched with your mentor, approximately how frequently did you meet with your mentor? (e.g. Once a week; 2 times per month)

Answer :

\*

##### Q4 . How often do you wish you had met with your mentor? (e.g. Once a week; 2 times per month; I would not change our meeting frequency)

Answer :

\*

##### Q5 . During your time with AMI, what was the approximate duration of each meeting?

- Less than 30 mins
- 30 mins
- 45 mins
- 1 hour

- 1 hour, 30 mins
- 1 hour, 45 mins
- 2 hours
- More than 2 hours

**Q6 . I wish that meetings with my mentor were:**

- Less than 30 mins
- 30 mins
- 45 mins
- 1 hour
- 1 hour, 30 mins
- 1 hour, 45 mins
- 2 hours
- More than 2 hours

**Q7 . What aspects of this mentorship program did you find challenging?**

\*

**Q8 . What aspects of the program were most enjoyable and rewarding?**

\*

**Q9 . Please check which goals you and your mentor work on have worked on together.**

- Meeting People and Socializing (e.g. how to join a club, how to meet people on campus)
- Communication Skills (e.g. how to write a suitable e-mail to your TA or professor, how to book an in-person meeting with an advisor, how to interact in a group project)
- Managing Anxiety and/or Stress (e.g. how to recognize anxiety and what to do about it, how to cope with unexpected changes to your routine)
- Organization and Planning (e.g. how to organize your study and free time, how to manage multi-tasking, how to manage your time for deadlines for your assignments and projects)
- Wellness and Self-care (e.g. how to stay healthy so that you do well in university, how to manage a healthy lifestyle through nutrition and/or personal care)

- Career/Job Exploration (e.g. learning more about various undergraduate and graduate programs at SFU, how to find a summer job or volunteer work, how to do an interview )
- Other

**Q10 . If you selected "other" in the previous question, please state and describe these "other" goals:**

**Q11 . Which of these goals are most important to you? Please explain.**

\*

**Q12 . Who decides which goals to work on (you, your mentor, or both of you)? Please explain.**

\*

**Q13 . How helpful, overall, was your mentor to you when working on your goals?**

- Very Helpful
- Helpful
- Moderately Helpful
- Not Very Helpful
- Not Helpful

**Q14 . Please select one answer per question that best applies to you, using the scale provided below.**

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I am pleased with my decision to attend university :	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Having a mentor has helped me to navigate the school better :	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

This mentorship program helped me to socialize more with other students :

**Q15 . How committed were you to meeting with your mentor?**

- Very Committed
- Committed
- Moderately Committed
- Somewhat Committed
- Not Committed

**Q16 . Please select one answer per question that best applies to you, using the scale provided below.**

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I am better able to meet deadlines for assignments and projects at university because of the support I have received from my mentor :	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I did not feel comfortable talking to my mentor about my experiences at university :	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
This mentorship program has helped me to meet new people :	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The AMI resources on Canvas were useful to me :	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**Q17 . What does "university adjustment" mean to you? Please describe.**

**Q18 . How important do you feel mentoring was to your overall adjustment to university throughout the Fall and Spring semesters?**

- Very Important
- Important
- Moderately Important
- Of Little Importance
- Unimportant

**Q19 . Please select the answer that best applies to you, using the scale provided below.**

- I feel well adjusted to university.

- I feel somewhat adjusted to university.
- I feel neutral.
- I am not yet adjusted to university but feel I am making progress and becoming adjusted.
- I do not feel adjusted to university at all.

**Q20 . According to Baker & Siryk (1999), "university adjustment" refers to a student's success in coping with the academic, social, and emotional demands inherent to the college experience, as well as his/her attachment to the particular institution he/she attends. According to this definition, how important was mentoring to your overall adjustment to university throughout the Fall and Spring semesters?**

- Very Important
- Important
- Moderately Important
- Of Little Importance
- Unimportant

**Q21 . According to Baker & Siryk's (1999) definition of "university adjustment", please select the answer that best applies to you:**

- I feel well adjusted to university.
- I feel somewhat adjusted to university.
- I feel neutral.
- I am not yet adjusted to university but feel I am making progress and becoming adjusted.
- I do not feel adjusted to university at all.

**Q22 . Please select one answer per question that best applies to you, using the scale provided below.**

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I am satisfied with my academic performance this year :	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I feel my mentor and I were a good match :	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I feel I am more self-aware of my needs and goals since I started university :	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I feel I can express my goals better to my mentor now than when I first started AMI :	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I feel more competent in addressing my own goals since I started university :	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>



**Q23 . Please select one answer per question that best applies to you, using the scale provided below.**

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
My mentor taught me how to better plan for assignments :	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
AMI has helped me to improve my time management skills :	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
AMI increased my awareness of campus resources :	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My mentor did not help me to improve my study skills :	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
AMI has taught me how to better communicate with professors and teacher assistants :	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My mentor has helped me to improve my social skills :	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I feel that my mentor and I have a good connection :	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Having a mentor hasn't really improved my university experience :	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
AMI has taught me how to better communicate with my peers at university :	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**Q24 . Please select which events or activities you would like to attend in AMI:**

- Social Events (e.g. pizza, movies, games, etc.)
- Off-campus Activities (e.g. go kart racing, bowling, exploring downtown, etc.)
- Outdoor Activities (hiking, play a sport, beach trip, etc.)
- Job Learning Seminars (e.g. resume-building, co-op presentation, how to find job or volunteer opportunities, etc.)
- Health and Wellness Presentations (e.g. learning about nutrition, learning how to manage your health, etc.)
- Academic Learning Seminars (e.g. study strategies, how to plan and organize school work, etc.)
- Social Learning Seminars (e.g. how to improve soft skills such as interacting with others personally and professionally, how to contribute to group projects, how to meet others on campus, etc.)
- Meeting with Other Mentor-Mentee Pairs Throughout the Year (e.g. two mentees and two mentors meet for coffee or attend an on-campus event together, etc.)
- None of the above
- Other

**Q25 . If you selected "other" suggested events or activities, what are your suggestions for events or activities that you would like to attend in AMI?**

**Q26 . Do you feel like you and your mentor work well together? Please explain.**

\*

**Q27 . Please select the descriptions that best describe your relationship with your mentor towards the end of the Spring semester.**

Very Supportive   Supportive   Fairly Supportive   Slightly Supportive   Unsupportive

Level of Support :

**Q28 . Please select the descriptions that best describe your relationship with your mentor towards the end of the Spring semester.**

Very Comfortable   Comfortable   Fairly Comfortable   Slightly Comfortable   Uncomfortable

Level of Comfort :

**Q29 . Please select the descriptions that best describe your relationship with your mentor towards the end of the Spring semester.**

Very Fun   Fun   Fairly Fun   Slightly Fun   Boring

Level of Fun :

**Q30 . Please select the descriptions that best describe your relationship with your mentor towards the end of the Spring semester.**

Very Friendly   Friendly   Fairly Friendly   Slightly Friendly   Unfriendly

Level of Friendliness :

**Q31 . Please select the descriptions that best describe your relationship with your mentor towards the end of the Spring semester.**

Very Trusting   Trusting   Fairly Trusting   Slightly Trusting   Untrusting

Level of Trust :

**Q32 . Please select the descriptions that best describe your relationship with your mentor towards the end of the Spring semester.**

	Very Formal	Formal	Fairly Formal	Slightly Formal	Informal
Level of Formality :	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**Q33 . Please select the descriptions that best describe your relationship with your mentor towards the end of the Spring semester.**

	Very Enjoyable	Enjoyable	Neutral	Frustrating	Very Frustrating
Level of Enjoyment :	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**Q34 . Please select the descriptions that best describe your relationship with your mentor towards the end of the Spring semester.**

	Very Structured	Structured	Neutral	Unstructured	Very Unstructured
Level of Structure :	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**Q35 . Please select the descriptions that best describe your relationship with your mentor towards the end of the Spring semester.**

	Very Caring	Caring	Fairly Caring	Slightly Caring	Uncaring
Level of Care :	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**Q36 . If you feel there is a better word (or words) to describe your relationship with your mentor, please give your description in the box provided below.**

**Q37 . My meetings with my mentor tended to be:**

- Very formal and structured
- Somewhat formal and structured
- Somewhat casual and informal
- Very casual and informal

**Q38 . The structure of my meetings with my mentor:**

- has become more casual and less formal over time
- has become less casual and more formal over time
- has not changed over time/has stayed the same

**Q39 . Please select one answer per question that best applies to you, using the scale provided below.**

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
This mentorship program has encouraged me to keep up with my studies at university. :	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I enjoyed spending time with my mentor. :	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I feel that I fit in well at university. :	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My mentor encouraged me to try new things. :	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My year at SFU was more productive because I had a mentor to help and support me. :	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
This mentorship program provided me with opportunities to get involved in events on campus. :	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I felt comfortable asking my mentor for help. :	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My mentor taught me ways to ask for help when I need it. :	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I am pleased with my decision in joining this mentorship program. :	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**Q40 . During the interview with the research coordinator, Nicole, which method did you prefer for interviewing:**

- Writing my answers on computer
- Verbally discussing the questions in conversation
- I don't have a preference (between writing or verbally discussing my answers in the interview)

**Q41 . Please explain why you prefer this method (or state why you do not have a preference).**

\*

**Q42 . Do you like the title "Autism Mentorship Initiative" ?**

- Yes
- No

**Q43 . Do you have any suggestions for a different title? Please provide suggestions below.**

\*

**Q44 . Do you wish to continue participating in AMI? Why or why not?**

\*

**Q45 . For any additional comments, provide feedback here:**

**Please click on the "Submit" button and then click "OK" to confirm submission when you have finished completing this survey. Thank you.**

# Appendix K

## Program Evaluation Survey for Mentors

### AMI Mentee Evaluation Form

#### Title Page

Please provide constructive feedback regarding your mentorship program experience. We would like to have your opinion of the mentorship program so that we may evaluate and strengthen the program for the future. Please complete the questions below. The time required to complete this form is 30-60 minutes. This form will remain confidential and be reviewed only by the evaluation team.

#### Q1 . Full Name

First  
Name  
and  
Last  
Name  
:

\*

#### Q2 . Date

#### AMI

Please provide answers for the questions below regarding AMI. Questions will require either a written response, a rating on a scale provided, or a multiple-choice answer. Please read each question carefully.

#### Q3 . Once you were matched with your mentor, approximately how frequently did you meet with your mentor? (e.g. Once a week; 2 times per month)

Answer  
r :

\*

#### Q4 . How often do you wish you had met with your mentor? (e.g. Once a week; 2 times per month; I would not change our meeting frequency)

Answer  
r :

\*

#### Q5 . During your time with AMI, what was the approximate duration of each meeting?

- Less than 30 mins
- 30 mins
- 45 mins
- 1 hour

- 1 hour, 30 mins
- 1 hour, 45 mins
- 2 hours
- More than 2 hours

**Q6 . I wish that meetings with my mentor were:**

- Less than 30 mins
- 30 mins
- 45 mins
- 1 hour
- 1 hour, 30 mins
- 1 hour, 45 mins
- 2 hours
- More than 2 hours

**Q7 . What aspects of this mentorship program did you find challenging?**

\*

**Q8 . What aspects of the program were most enjoyable and rewarding?**

\*

**Q9 . Please check which goals you and your mentor work on have worked on together.**

- Meeting People and Socializing (e.g. how to join a club, how to meet people on campus)
- Communication Skills (e.g. how to write a suitable e-mail to your TA or professor, how to book an in-person meeting with an advisor, how to interact in a group project)
- Managing Anxiety and/or Stress (e.g. how to recognize anxiety and what to do about it, how to cope with unexpected changes to your routine)
- Organization and Planning (e.g. how to organize your study and free time, how to manage multi-tasking, how to manage your time for deadlines for your assignments and projects)
- Wellness and Self-care (e.g. how to stay healthy so that you do well in university, how to manage a healthy lifestyle through nutrition and/or personal care)

Career/Job Exploration (e.g. learning more about various undergraduate and graduate programs at SFU, how to find a summer job or volunteer work, how to do an interview )

Other

**Q10 . If you selected "other" in the previous question, please state and describe these "other" goals:**

**Q11 . Which of these goals are most important to you? Please explain.**

\*

**Q12 . Who decides which goals to work on (you, your mentor, or both of you)? Please explain.**

\*

**Q13 . How helpful, overall, was your mentor to you when working on your goals?**

- Very Helpful
- Helpful
- Moderately Helpful
- Not Very Helpful
- Not Helpful

**Q14 . Please select one answer per question that best applies to you, using the scale provided below.**

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I am pleased with my decision to attend university :	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Having a mentor has helped me to navigate the school better :	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>



This mentorship program helped me to socialize more with other students :

**Q15 . How committed were you to meeting with your mentor?**

- Very Committed
- Committed
- Moderately Committed
- Somewhat Committed
- Not Committed

**Q16 . Please select one answer per question that best applies to you, using the scale provided below.**

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I am better able to meet deadlines for assignments and projects at university because of the support I have received from my mentor :	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I did not feel comfortable talking to my mentor about my experiences at university :	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
This mentorship program has helped me to meet new people :	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The AMI resources on Canvas were useful to me :	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**Q17 . What does "university adjustment" mean to you? Please describe.**

\*

**Q18 . How important do you feel mentoring was to your overall adjustment to university throughout the Fall and Spring semesters?**

- Very Important
- Important
- Moderately Important
- Of Little Importance
- Unimportant

**Q19 . Please select the answer that best applies to you, using the scale provided below.**

- I feel well adjusted to university.

- I feel somewhat adjusted to university.
- I feel neutral.
- I am not yet adjusted to university but feel I am making progress and becoming adjusted.
- I do not feel adjusted to university at all.

**Q20 . According to Baker & Siryk (1999), "university adjustment" refers to a student's success in coping with the academic, social, and emotional demands inherent to the college experience, as well as his/her attachment to the particular institution he/she attends. According to this definition, how important was mentoring to your overall adjustment to university throughout the Fall and Spring semesters?**

- Very Important
- Important
- Moderately Important
- Of Little Importance
- Unimportant

**Q21 . According to Baker & Siryk's (1999) definition of "university adjustment", please select the answer that best applies to you:**

- I feel well adjusted to university.
- I feel somewhat adjusted to university.
- I feel neutral.
- I am not yet adjusted to university but feel I am making progress and becoming adjusted.
- I do not feel adjusted to university at all.

**Q22 . Please select one answer per question that best applies to you, using the scale provided below.**

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I am satisfied with my academic performance this year :	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I feel my mentor and I were a good match :	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I feel I am more self-aware of my needs and goals since I started university :	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I feel I can express my goals better to my mentor now than when I first started AMI :	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I feel more competent in addressing my own goals since I started university :	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**Q23 . Please select one answer per question that best applies to you, using the scale provided below.**

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
My mentor taught me how to better plan for assignments :	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
AMI has helped me to improve my time management skills :	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
AMI increased my awareness of campus resources :	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My mentor did not help me to improve my study skills :	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
AMI has taught me how to better communicate with professors and teacher assistants :	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My mentor has helped me to improve my social skills :	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I feel that my mentor and I have a good connection :	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Having a mentor hasn't really improved my university experience :	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
AMI has taught me how to better communicate with my peers at university :	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**Q24 . Please select which events or activities you would like to attend in AMI:**

- Social Events (e.g. pizza, movies, games, etc.)
- Off-campus Activities (e.g. go kart racing, bowling, exploring downtown, etc.)
- Outdoor Activities (hiking, play a sport, beach trip, etc.)
- Job Learning Seminars (e.g. resume-building, co-op presentation, how to find job or volunteer opportunities, etc.)
- Health and Wellness Presentations (e.g. learning about nutrition, learning how to manage your health, etc.)
- Academic Learning Seminars (e.g. study strategies, how to plan and organize school work, etc.)
- Social Learning Seminars (e.g. how to improve soft skills such as interacting with others personally and professionally, how to contribute to group projects, how to meet others on campus, etc.)
- Meeting with Other Mentor-Mentee Pairs Throughout the Year (e.g. two mentees and two mentors meet for coffee or attend an on-campus event together, etc.)
- None of the above
- Other

**Q25 . If you selected "other" suggested events or activities, what are your suggestions for events or activities that you would like to attend in AMI?**

**Q26 . Do you feel like you and your mentor work well together? Please explain.**

\*

**Q27 . Please select the descriptions that best describe your relationship with your mentor towards the end of the Spring semester.**

Very Supportive   Supportive   Fairly Supportive   Slightly Supportive   Unsupportive

Level of Support :

**Q28 . Please select the descriptions that best describe your relationship with your mentor towards the end of the Spring semester.**

Very Comfortable   Comfortable   Fairly Comfortable   Slightly Comfortable   Uncomfortable

Level of Comfort :

**Q29 . Please select the descriptions that best describe your relationship with your mentor towards the end of the Spring semester.**

Very Fun   Fun   Fairly Fun   Slightly Fun   Boring

Level of Fun :

**Q30 . Please select the descriptions that best describe your relationship with your mentor towards the end of the Spring semester.**

Very Friendly   Friendly   Fairly Friendly   Slightly Friendly   Unfriendly

Level of Friendliness :

**Q31 . Please select the descriptions that best describe your relationship with your mentor towards the end of the Spring semester.**

Very Trusting   Trusting   Fairly Trusting   Slightly Trusting   Untrusting

Level of Trust :

**Q32 . Please select the descriptions that best describe your relationship with your mentor towards the end of the Spring semester.**

	Very Formal	Formal	Fairly Formal	Slightly Formal	Informal
Level of Formality :	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**Q33 . Please select the descriptions that best describe your relationship with your mentor towards the end of the Spring semester.**

	Very Enjoyable	Enjoyable	Neutral	Frustrating	Very Frustrating
Level of Enjoyment :	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**Q34 . Please select the descriptions that best describe your relationship with your mentor towards the end of the Spring semester.**

	Very Structured	Structured	Neutral	Unstructured	Very Unstructured
Level of Structure :	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**Q35 . Please select the descriptions that best describe your relationship with your mentor towards the end of the Spring semester.**

	Very Caring	Caring	Fairly Caring	Slightly Caring	Uncaring
Level of Care :	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**Q36 . If you feel there is a better word (or words) to describe your relationship with your mentor, please give your description in the box provided below.**

**Q37 . My meetings with my mentor tended to be:**

- Very formal and structured
- Somewhat formal and structured
- Somewhat casual and informal
- Very casual and informal

**Q38 . The structure of my meetings with my mentor:**

- has become more casual and less formal over time
- has become less casual and more formal over time
- has not changed over time/has stayed the same

**Q39 . Please select one answer per question that best applies to you, using the scale provided below.**

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
This mentorship program has encouraged me to keep up with my studies at university. :	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I enjoyed spending time with my mentor. :	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I feel that I fit in well at university. :	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My mentor encouraged me to try new things. :	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My year at SFU was more productive because I had a mentor to help and support me. :	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
This mentorship program provided me with opportunities to get involved in events on campus. :	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I felt comfortable asking my mentor for help. :	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My mentor taught me ways to ask for help when I need it. :	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I am pleased with my decision in joining this mentorship program. :	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**Q40 . During the interview with the research coordinator, Nicole, which method did you prefer for interviewing:**

- Writing my answers on computer
- Verbally discussing the questions in conversation
- I don't have a preference (between writing or verbally discussing my answers in the interview)

**Q41 . Please explain why you prefer this method (or state why you do not have a preference).**

\*

**Q42 . Do you like the title "Autism Mentorship Initiative" ?**

- Yes
- No

**Q43 . Do you have any suggestions for a different title? Please provide suggestions below.**

\*

**Q44 . Do you wish to continue participating in AMI? Why or why not?**

\*

**Q45 . For any additional comments, provide feedback here:**

**Please click on the "Submit" button and then click "OK" to confirm submission when you have finished completing this survey. Thank you.**

## **Appendix L**

### **Email Instructions for Member Checking**

Hello Mentors,

I have completed the analysis part of the research that came from the interviews that you have all participated in over the Fall and Winter terms (see document attached). I want to thank you again for helping to support the research, which supports the AMI program. I have attached a document that summarizes what your interview (and others' combined) has contributed to the analyses to explain how AMI was experienced by the mentors and mentees. If you have the time, could you please clarify if the analyses fit the meanings and intentions of what you wanted to convey in the interviews? You can add suggestions by writing the answers to the questions provided at the end (and then attach and email back to me). I want to represent your descriptions and descriptions to the best of my ability, therefore, in doing so your verification of these findings will help.

Again, thank you all for the support and contributions to the research. Your feedback has been invaluable throughout the program.

Thank you,

Nicole

AMI Research Coordinator

Simon Fraser University



# Appendix M

## Mentor Member Check Questions

### Conceptualizing a Mentorship Program for University Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder

Please read the following brief description of the findings taken from the AMI interviews and answer the questions below. Thank you for taking the time to help verify the final analyses.

Main theme from the interviews: A Mentee-centered Approach

#### **Your Mentoring Relationship and Experience Described Here:**

XXX

#### **Questions to Verify this Analysis:**

1. Is this final summary an accurate account of your experience in AMI? Please explain.
2. Is there anything that has been misunderstood? Please explain.
3. Is there anything you would like to add to this analysis? Please explain.
3. Is there anything you think should not be included within this analysis? Please explain.
4. Do you have any further questions or comments?