

Mentoring: A Safety-Net for Retention and Tenure for Faculty in Institutions of Higher Education

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With approximately a seven percent attrition rate reported for all full-time faculty in institutions of higher education in 2003 (Nevill & Bradburn, 2006 October), a more focused mentoring process may be appropriate for senior faculty (Amey, 1996). In the public schools, the mentoring process is considered necessary and part of the required professional development provided new faculty (Cunningham, 2001; Ornstein, Lasley, & Mindes, 2005). In institutions of higher education, faculty perceptions regarding collegial relationships, supportive environments, and mentoring have been given as reasons for leaving the institution (Barnes, Agago, & Coombs, 1998; Cropsey, Barrett, Klein, & Hampton, 2004). Further, lack of mentoring and isolation have been cited by women and faculty of color for unsuccessful tenure attainment (Trower, 2008 September). The purpose of this study was to examine non-tenured faculty perceptions of the mentoring process in institutions of higher education.

Mentoring Defined

Definitions, as well as multiple discussions about mentoring, were found throughout the literature. Mentoring dates back to *The Odyssey*, the ancient Greek poem by Homer (St. Clair, 1994; Luna & Cullen, 1995; Sands, Parson, & Duane, 1991). More recently, the concept of mentoring developed in the 1970s and centered in the areas of business, adult development, and academia (St. Clair, 1994). Sorcinelli and Yun (2007) noted the traditional definition of mentoring as "...top-down, one-to-one relationship in which an experienced faculty member guides and supports the career development of a new or early-career faculty member..." (p. 58).

Several characteristics about mentoring have been addressed in the literature. Mentoring is not evaluative. Beach and Reinhartz (2000) described mentoring as interactions between a mentor and mentee to transmit the lessons of experience which involved support, assistance, and guidance but not evaluation. Glickman, Gordon, and Ross-Gordon (2004) described mentoring as an ongoing relationship based on trust. Faculty mentoring should be a long-term relationship and include classroom/educational processes in the beginning, as well as tenure and promotion, professional development, and management of the expectations to be active in research and scholarly activities (Boswell, 2004).

Review of Literature

Mentoring literature has been categorized into four areas: the need for mentoring, benefits of mentoring, successful mentoring characteristics, and mentoring in academia.

Need for Mentoring

Ambrose, Huston, and Norman (2005) noted that challenges and added responsibilities faced new faculty in education. A tenure-track contract poses considerable investment in human resources and if new faculty members are not nurtured through mentoring activities, the probability of retention may be diminished. Conversely, if new faculty members received access to knowledge and resources for career development through mentoring, the institution benefits through retention of valuable resources. Leslie, Lingard, and Whyte (2005) noted mentoring is a necessary skill for a successful academic career.

As America ages, so did faculty members who were considering retirement (Boswell, 2004). As inexperienced faculties were brought into academia to replace senior faculty members, mentoring became

even more important. In 2004, Gazza noted the importance of mentoring higher education faculty as support of development and stated, “Establishing a culture supportive of educator development is imperative for the future of higher education” (p. 47).

A traditional mentoring model highlighted the apprentice learning from a master. Mentoring supported much of what was currently known about how individuals learned including the importance of experiential, situated learning experiences (Kerka, 1997). Kerka (1998) found through mentoring, individuals strove to develop a capacity to learn from and to assist the learning of others. This finding supported the caring relationship and reciprocity of the leadership role described by Fullan and Ballew (2004).

Benefits of Mentoring

There are many benefits of mentoring in higher education, not only to the mentee, but to the mentor and university as well. Pololi and Knight (2005) stated, “Everyone can benefit from mentoring in important ways, regardless of status, position, or level of expertise” (p. 868). According to Brightman (2006) and Fuller, Maniscalco-Feichtl and Droege (2008) mentoring was important for three reasons:

1. Retention of junior-level faculty.
2. Assists senior faculty with “burnout.”
3. Improving teaching and thereby student learning.

Mentees were the major benefactors of mentoring in many ways. Mentoring assisted the mentee in the areas of scholarly publication, teaching, and service (Borisoff, 1998). The true benefit of mentoring was not just during the non-tenured years, but by influencing the mentee to become professionally committed and intrinsically motivated in the areas of research, service, and teaching. Ultimately, mentoring assisted mentees in finding solutions to difficult and complicated problems (Luna & Cullen, 1995)

Perna and Lerner (1995) found faculty mentees benefited from mentoring on indicators of career success and satisfaction. Empirical research data supported promotions of job performance, as well as career development, job satisfaction, and supportive work environments. Faculty members with a mentor reported more career success and socio-emotional support than faculty members without one (Sorcinelli & Yun, 2007). Wasserstein, Quistberg, and Shea (2007) found mentoring to be strongly related to overall job satisfaction of the mentee while mentees reported less expectation of leaving the institution within the next few years. Melicher (2000) found mentors had a positive impact on satisfaction in salary, as well as tenure and promotion.

Mentors benefited from mentoring in the areas of career development, quality research, and improved leadership skills (Luna & Cullen, 1995). Through mentoring relationships, senior faculty may develop new areas for research and scholarship (Gazza, 2004). Mentoring may assist experienced faculty in creating relationships within academia, in developing individually, and in their professional development.

Universities were the ultimate beneficiary of mentoring showing improvement in the organization (Luna & Cullen, 1995). Luna and Cullen (1995) suggested maintenance of an institution’s culture was another benefit of mentoring. Recruitment and retention of faculty was a major benefit for universities (Gazza, 2004; Pololi & Knight, 2005). Cunningham (1999) noted mentoring has been popular in the business community for many years. This author studied faculty mentoring relationships by obtaining quantitative and descriptive data. The results of Cunningham’s study indicated mentoring enhanced mentor and mentee personal and professional growth, as well as ultimately the institution.

Successful Mentoring Characteristics

Successful mentoring relationships were characterized by “mutual respect, caring, accessibility of the mentor, compatibility, and support” (Goodwin, Stevens, & Belamy, 1998, p. 341). Mentoring relationships shared common goals, compatible personalities, and luck (Wasburn, 2007). According to Stanley and Lincoln (2005), successful mentoring relationship characteristics were “trust, honesty, a willingness to learn about self and others, and the ability to share power and privilege” (p. 45). These authors noted other additional characteristics including an ability to recognize a mentee’s strengths and weaknesses, development of independence, and growth.

According to Leslie, et al. (2005), good mentors were described as “trustworthy, nonjudgmental, accessible, and reliable” (p. 695). Gibson (2004) reported five major themes in the mentoring experience

of women. These included having someone who truly cared and acted in one's best interest, a feeling of connection, being affirmed of one's worth, not being alone, and politics became part of one's experience.

Mentoring in Academia

Faculty mentoring in universities is not new. Beans (1999) suggested that junior faculty found assistance and support from mentoring programs that paired them with senior faculty outside their own departments because it lessened the risk of revealing feelings of inadequacy to peers. Angelique, Kyle, and Taylor (2002) noted mixed success in academic mentoring programs, although interest in implementing mentoring programs has increased over the last 30+ years with great variability in the types, goals, and assumptions of these programs.

Goodwin, et al. (1998) reflected that mentoring in academia was "perceived as a relationship between individuals perpetuating traditional academic norms and values" (p. 334). The focus was on research, scholarship, teaching, and professional socialization. In 2005, Hopkins interviewed 23 mentees from nine community colleges who had participated in a mentoring relationship for at least one year. These interviews revealed that an informal program structure with strong institutional support was the ideal mentoring situation; however, respondents consistently required regular meetings. Informal structure did not include required activities or top-down authority.

Mullen and Forbes (2000) reported their survey research of personal reflections of 60 untenured faculties working in US, Canada, and Australia. The predominant theme from questionnaires included the political culture of the university. Mentoring assisted experienced faculty who were new to a particular institution, as well as new faculty, in gaining knowledge of the current political culture (Gazza, 2004).

Methods

This section includes the following topics: design of the study and research question, instrument, sample selection, data collection, and limitations.

Research Design and Question

This design utilized survey research methods, although the questions were open-ended. The research questions addressed what were the participants' perceptions of the mentoring process at their institution regarding research/publication, teaching, service, and collegiality.

Instrument, Sample Selection, and Data Collection

A survey instrument was designed based upon best practices for mentors found in the literature. There were six parts to the survey: demographics, research/publication/grant writing and presentations, service, teaching, and collegiality. A panel of experts consisting of education professors established face validity of the instrument. Examples of open-ended questions include:

How are mentors assigned and who makes the first contact?

How did you find out about 'informal norms' within the department and university?

Who is it 'safe' to talk with?

Sample selection was purposive. Higher education counseling education faculty and other new faculty were contacted online. The online survey was submitted via SurveyMonkey.com to two list serves, CESNET and New Faculty Interest Network (NFIN). CESNET is an unmoderated list serve concerning counselor education and supervision and has a membership of approximately 1,100. NFIN is list serve for new faculty and has a membership of approximately 200. Thirteen hundred surveys were sent out via these two list serves and 86 completed surveys were received, yielding about a six percent return.

Limitations

The limitations associated with this study are consistent with online survey research methods. The sample was purposive and non-random. The response rate was extremely low and the respondents may not necessarily represent the general population of non-tenured faculty.

Results of the Study

Sample Characteristics

Descriptive statistics were utilized to characterize the sample in terms of percentages. The majority of the sample may be described as being employed in counseling, education, psychology, or human services (n = 78, 91%), female (n = 60, 70%), 31-40 years of age (n = 36, 42%), Caucasian (n = 69, 80%) with 3-4 years of teaching in higher education (n = 20, 34%).

Qualitative Analysis

Responses were analyzed using qualitative data reduction methods. Four areas of mentoring emerged as research, service, teaching, and collegiality.

Research

The area of research covered presentations, publication, and grant writing. Over half reported making presentations or co-authoring manuscripts for publication with a mentor, their dissertation chairperson, or another trusted colleague. Selected comments from some individuals follow:

“The College of Education has a formal mentoring program – the mentors get paid with the expectation they will help junior faculty publish an article or submit a grant.”

“There was always a faculty member available for assistance in editing, reading, and rewriting manuscripts. This has been available throughout my five years as an assistant professor and know that it would still be available in the future if the need arose.”

“I worked collaboratively with a full professor with whom I have worked in various settings for many years. We wrote proposals and grants, co-authored articles, etc. We work in a way such that either of us could rightfully be “first authors” and tend to trade back and forth. I do not have lesser responsibilities in creating material for publication than she has.”

In contrast, about half of the respondents reported dissatisfaction with the lack of mentoring or support in the area of research. Considerable frustration appeared to be expressed in this area. Two examples follow:

“Very, very little. I had one colleague who recommended I change my agenda so that I could get funding. He also mentored me a bit regarding some of the politics of research and academia, and commiserated with me over rejections, so this was the only support I received. Overall, I felt extremely unsupported in my new position, in regards to publishing, and very isolated, and am still, in my third year, attempting to blindly make it on my own. My department chair does not understand why I must work in “teams” with my research and asks that I only publish alone (this is her field – they publish mostly alone), so she is very unsupportive of my research style. On the other hand, we were lucky enough to get a few graduate students paid to help us. I was eternally grateful for that.”

“One colleague recommended a few journals and described the citation index. As I respond to all these questions, I find myself frustrated that I did not learn much of this in my doctoral program. I believe many of my colleagues from other counselor education doctoral programs also did not learn these things (so I learn as I talked to them). We do not learn enough about research in general, and do not do enough with our faculty mentors. Hence, it makes it extremely hard to do it alone, isolated, and once one is in the “the real world”. Nobody who is well-published wants to work with a new person who has less to offer because mentoring seems to be a time drain and my colleagues who are true researchers in the field seem impossible to pair up with. I would love a venue to get connected. As new faculty, I would do any kind of “grunt work” just to learn the ins and outs of research!”

Service

In the area of service, the respondents perceived mentoring was helpful in their obtaining leadership or avoiding political pitfalls. Selected responses follow:

“The faculty at my university is very concerned in this aspect and has moved me toward nomination and securing service at the department, school, and university levels.”

“Senior faculty designates all committee assignments to junior faculty so that juniors can pay their dues. My first year found me serving on eight committees.”

“My chair has been very honest and supportive regarding advice in this area – telling us what looks best for tenure purposes, what’s a “waste of time”, and what might hurt tenure chances (e.g., community service that might go against the culture of the university). She recommended certain committees.”

Teaching

About 80% of the respondents reported that they received some assistance in the teaching area. Two examples depicting specific help, as well as faculty concerns, follow:

“Several different faculty have assisted me with these aspects of teaching – most typically in an informal way. Each course I’ve taught, I have obtained the syllabus from the former faculty, and making my own modifications. I have gotten tips and advice about grading and student issues (poor work, tardies, absences, etc.) from many different faculty throughout my teaching experience. In fact, it seems that we “conspire” easily about student issues and how to resolve them. I have felt like seasoned faculty are very eager to share their experiences and advice with me about teaching – it is a common ground we all have, no matter what the subject area is.”

“Various faculty members and my chair – but I had to reach out to them mostly, so it’s good to remember to ask (delicately, without seeming ‘incompetent’ – a difficult balance). People have been very forthcoming when I ask, and it’s been very helpful. We also have a department here that helps us improve our teaching with regular seminars that I’ve attended teaching us all the above, so that’s also been helpful. One area of difficulty is the politics of student scoring – e.g., pleasing students so that they score you well, so that you earn tenure. I perceive this system as lacking objectivity – that I can work hard at teaching, but the student scores often reflect whether or not they thought I was nice (e.g., talked to them about their pets at home, etc.). I learned the most from some of my most professional and renowned (e.g., not personable) professors; however, I feel it has now become a popularity contest. I have been informed by multiple colleagues (and have read articles regarding this) to make my courses easy, grade more easily, do not hold them to strict standards regarding attendance, performance, and academic quality, bring in food, chat with them before and after class, share my personal life, joke a lot, but not too much, as a woman, as they already take women less seriously and score us lower, etc. – all in the name of upping my student scores. This leaves me full of high anxiety. I actually do not sleep well nights if I feel my students do not ‘like me’ and therefore will rate me lower. And this has nothing to do with my sense of competency to transmit knowledge! All non-tenured colleagues that I speak with at my university bemoan this student rating phenomenon. What I hear stated is, “I can’t wait to get tenure so I can teach with high standards and hold them accountable.” I wonder about the quality of our universities in general with an increasing number of adjunct faculty who MUST get good scores from students to maintain their jobs—.”

Collegiality

Thirty-nine percent of the respondents reported that they did not have a mentor. About 22% perceived that they must assume independent responsibility from the beginning while a few (7%) reported they learned through “trial and error”. Over half of the respondents perceived that it was “safe” to talk with colleagues inside and outside their department, with the department chair person, and the dean. One individual submitted the following reflection:

“Good question. It depends on the topic. I feel very safe talking to anyone in my current department regarding issues pertaining to all professional responsibilities and also with personal support. I am very, very fortunate with my current colleagues. As far as talking about long-term professional development (that may or may not include moving to another institution), I talk to 2-3 colleagues (former doctoral peers and professional colleagues at other institutions) who I trust to give me good objective

advice without disclosing what I have shared. It's a small world out there! I think I could talk to my current colleagues safely; however, I am very happy at my current position and do not want anyone to think I am having 'second thoughts'."

In contrast, some respondents commented:

"I generally feel safest talking to 'outsiders', people I know from my doctoral program."

"I've learned, no one. I am cautious no matter who I talk with. I've learned to talk with certain people regarding certain things, only (but I believe this is true in any job). I think anything revealed to the wrong person could affect my tenure."

"I did not have mentoring; I was envious of colleagues at other universities that did have mentors."

Conclusions

Results of this study support the findings of other researchers showing that a mentoring process in higher education would be beneficial for the retention of non-tenured faculty (Barnes, et al, 1998; Cropsey, et al., 2004). A majority of the participants in this study agreed that the awareness of the role, responsibilities of a mentor, and the ability to develop and maintain trusting relationships impacted the success of mentors of new faculty.

Research and publication appeared to be areas of major concern for new faculty who had little training or experience in these areas and did not feel supported by their colleagues or the institution. Faculty perceived more support in the areas of service and teaching where it appeared the department chairperson and colleagues were more comfortable in providing assistance.

Based upon the findings of this study, these authors suggest further study to better understand the magnitude and intricacies of mentoring new faculty in the area of research. Senior faculty may require release time or monetary incentives to commit the additional time and knowledge to assist new faculty with writing for publication and in conducting research studies.

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