Mentoring for Success

AND FOR

INCLUSIONARY INSTITUTIONAL CULTURES

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As Communication scholars who research and teach about careers, we have noticed that faculty and students seem unaware of the mentoring that goes on every day, of the roles they play in constituting mentorship experiences, and of the variety of mentoring possibilities that are open to them and others. These mentoring possibilities can both foster career success and also create inclusionary classrooms, departments, and institutional cultures.

Some of the reasons for this lack of awareness can be traced to conventional understandings about mentoring and the attention paid to formal and informal mentoring systems. In this article, we discuss these understandings and systems, then turn our attention to other mentoring perspectives that might better fulfill mentoring needs in academe and cultivate diversity and inclusion in higher education institutions. As we discuss different mentoring systems and perspectives, we draw primarily from our empirical findings based on in-depth interviews and surveys of mentoring experiences of engineering faculty members at a large Midwestern U.S. university, as well as from career research and executive education conducted by Patrice Buzanell.

CONVENTIONAL UNDERSTANDINGS OF MENTORING

Conventional understandings about mentoring are based on the well-supported finding that, across different types of organizations in business, educational, governmental, and not-for-profit sectors, mentoring is associated with personal and career success. Mentoring correlates with higher pay, advancement, organizational identification, work satisfaction, perceived well-being, and other objective and perceptual outcomes. Studies show that individuals often consider mentoring to align with the prototypical relationship between an older, successful, and presumably wiser individual (mentor) and a relatively “unseasoned” organizational neophyte (protégé, mentee) who shows promise in one desirable dimension or possesses an array of qualities deemed advantageous and worth nurturing. In these cases, mentoring seems like a magical process by which two people find each other and embark on mutually beneficial and sustained interactions that produce outcomes that neither could fully accomplish on his or her own.

This idealized image of mentoring is so firmly engrained in the popular imagination that individuals in executive education and undergraduate classrooms tend to respond on surveys that they have not had mentors,
unless they have experienced this kind of individualized career development and social support arrangement. Higher education leaders who adopt this idealized image of mentoring tend to assume that an established, generic mentoring system can work its own magic and neglect to consider that individuals' mentoring experiences can also be highly ambivalent, tension-filled, unfulfilled, and/or damaging personally and professionally.

In our empirical research on the mentoring experiences of engineering faculty members, study participants report that they feel they have missed out on key experiences and wonder what they might have and could still achieve if they had enjoyed this kind of romanticized mentoring relationship. After discussion, our participants realize that they have, in fact, participated in both formal and relatively short-term informal mentoring arrangements, as both mentor and mentee. We discuss the formal and informal arrangements below.

**FORMAL AND INFORMAL MENTORING SYSTEMS**

Formal mentoring systems in higher education vary, but typically are established to help faculty and student become socialized to the institution, clarify goals and expectations, and assess progress and performance. These systems are part of strategic initiatives for recruitment, retention, and promotion to maximize investments in personnel, particularly tenure-track assistant professors. They often are linked to annual review processes for faculty and may be coupled with other programs such as faculty orientations, college networking luncheons, and teaching workshops.

Some of our engineering faculty research participants express appreciation for the attention that their formal mentors provide. These faculty appreciate mentoring about the format and content of their college-specific promotion CVs; management of postdocs and graduate research assistants; contacts for research lab equipment, set up, and expenditures; and the balancing of teaching, service, grant writing, and other day-to-day activities. Other engineering faculty participants have reported that their formal mentoring is geared only toward objective measures of success. They express disappointment about such narrow parameters for formal mentoring and the procedures for mentor and mentee assignment. Moreover, as faculty are promoted and tenured, some feel that they are left on their own to figure out how to advance to full professorship or to weigh other options.
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such as administration. As one of our faculty participants shared, she had to become more proactive in seeking mentoring after she was promoted because she felt that little structured mentoring was available to her:

Once I became an associate professor, I became interested in...the requirements for the next step, and they are...fuzzy, less clear. So, by going to the [college] meetings, I kept asking around..."How did you do this?" or "What do you think I should focus on?" more than in my own department, much more.

Formal mentoring systems are part of higher education social responsibility efforts. They need not be structured like the system geared around annual reviews that we just described. They can be clustered, collaborative, and specialized (e.g., formal mentoring for global and service-learning assignments) experiences, in which contractual arrangements specify the roles, responsibilities, and timeframes for multiple mentorship parties and project or assignment completion. Of importance is that they signal efforts toward equality by attempting to ensure that no one falls between the cracks. Despite the good intentions to establish equal playing fields and to avoid inadvertently neglecting individuals and members of particular groups who might seem dissimilar from mentors, formal mentoring systems cannot fulfill all mentoring needs for mentors or mentees or guarantee the inclusion and empowerment of faculty and students to achieve their aspirational selves.

Because formal programs and systems are necessary but insufficient, they often are supplemented with informal mentoring relationships that are chosen and designed by the parties involved. Informal mentoring has popular appeal because of its potential for long-term relationships geared to mentoring needs. Our faculty, executive education, and student research participants often ask how they can find these kinds of mentors and what they can do to attract the attention of highly regarded and successful executives or faculty.

Although informal mentoring can take many forms, our participants believe that if they do not develop special one-on-one relationships, they won’t accrue the benefits associated with mentoring. Moreover, informal
mentoring has been found to align with similarity. Our research with engineering faculty confirms previous findings regarding gendered mentoring dynamics. Mentees sometimes prefer men as mentors or believe that outcomes will be better with male mentors, who tend to occupy leadership positions in the institution. Thus, informal mentoring relationships may perpetuate traditional mentoring models that are driven by instrumental benefits (e.g., advancement, external recognitions) that contribute to gendered inequities in academic institutions.

**ALTERNATIVE PERSPECTIVES TO MENTORING**

While formal and informal mentoring is needed, our scholarship has delved into the added value that episodic, intersectional, and network mentoring perspectives offer in higher education. We note that these systems are used not only for career development and psychosocial support, but also for role modeling and enhancing diversity and inclusion efforts.

**Episodic Perspective**

Regarding episodic mentoring, our faculty participants note with pleasure the commitment they believe that other faculty in their departments have toward their development when these faculty engage in mentoring moments. Their colleagues stop by their offices or send them quick emails congratulating them on accomplishments, informing them about conferences, providing suggestions for improvement of manuscripts and funding applications, sharing syllabi and course assignments, and directing their attention toward potentially helpful or enjoyable university workshops or local attractions.

These everyday interactions do not require heavy investments in time or energy. They are not contractual. They simply require mindfulness about how much we all appreciate and benefit from such spontaneous mentoring episodes. One of our assistant professor research participants said that she receives mentoring during everyday “natural interactions” with colleagues who are willing and ready to offer advice and assistance. For her, episodic mentoring happens during brief conversations in the hallway, at departmental events, and over lunches where colleagues have provided teaching, institutional, and community insights including information about “classes, even just social/personal things, like... churches in the area... upcoming events.”

Our work suggests that faculty who belong to underrepresented groups in particular institutional contexts need to be more proactive in seeking mentoring and sustaining meaningful mentoring relationships. Relying on the faculty themselves to be proactive adds an extra burden that we can, in part, lessen by encouraging episodic mentoring. By promoting ethics of care, openness, and collaboration, and by encouraging spontaneous forms of mentoring, we can cultivate mentoring systems that are based on the routinization of these small acts of mentoring to help develop inclusionary cultures in higher education.

**Intersectional Perspective**

The transformative potential of everyday mentoring can also be explored from an intersectional mentoring perspective. From this perspective, interactions that capitalize on difference, such as gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, culture, and so on, are taken into consideration as a whole when exploring individuals’ experiences and organizational structures of mentoring. The intersectional perspective draws attention to the politicized nature of mentoring. As a full professor in engineering remarked, individuals who are involved in traditional mentorship obtain continuous, non-visible support that eases their career paths. He added that these individuals fail to recognize both their privileged position in receiving informal and spontaneous mentoring and the extent to which they are groomed for advancement. In his words:

> If you are close to the standard model in traditional ways, you don’t really think about those ways that you get informal support and advocacy and mentoring, because it’s so obvious and it’s so continuous. It’s kind of like the fish will be the last to study water, because you don’t think about it.

And, in fact, I do remember having a conversation with a colleague—and I really appreciate him as a colleague and a professional friend—and he was [asking about] the difference and... the mentorship or support need. He happened to be Catholic, and so I said, “Imagine going to a university where there is no Catholic church and no other community of Catholics,” and he instantly stopped and said, “There isn’t such a thing.” He couldn’t imagine. And in fact that’s probably true. It would be exceptionally hard to find a campus in any town [of] more than a couple thousand people that had no parish whatsoever. And so that was when he realized how different the experience could be... [and] started to understand the burden and barrier of being the only one.
The intersectional perspective uncovers the tacit ways by which privilege and marginalization are produced and reproduced through mentoring. Insights gained from this perspective can be utilized in designing empowering mentoring structures that enable individuals to access mentoring and mobilize their agency to satisfy their own mentoring needs.

Network Perspective
Finally, our network perspective on faculty mentoring acknowledges that there are numerous human and non-human mentors and mentees with which individuals interact over the course of their careers. As the diagram above shows, the female faculty member in the middle of the network receives mentoring (formal, informal, and spontaneous) from various sources. These sources include assigned formal mentors within the department, women colleagues within and outside of the department, lunch groups with colleagues from other disciplines, college faculty development programs, as well as nonhuman mentors such as online support groups and self-help books. The faculty member relies on all for helping her achieve career and life success.

It is important to understanding that networks and mentoring needs change over the course of careers and lifetimes. Our research has suggested patterns of external and internal institutional mentoring based on professorial rank. We observed that engineering faculty mentoring networks shifted from mentee to mentor roles after tenure and/or promotion, and reported mentoring networks seemed to become more focused and smaller as faculty moved on in their careers. Additionally, we found that women engineering faculty had more diverse nodes in their mentoring networks than men did, and tended to strategically expand and diversify their mentoring networks to harness social capital in predominantly male-dominated academic institutions.
CONCLUSION

Mentoring systems and processes have the potential not only to facilitate individual career success and well-being, but also to cultivate inclusionary cultures and communities in the classroom, department, and institution. When the traditional mentoring imagery and power dynamics are disrupted, we recognize the numerous ways in which mentoring is constituted, and where individuals have agency to develop inclusive mentoring systems to meet institutional and personal needs.

The lessons from our research are that faculty and students likely have had multiple mentoring relationships in a variety of different forms, for numerous and specialized functions, for brief episodes or over the course of their lifetimes, and with mentors/mentees whose names they might not even know. Mentoring experiences might be conducted online, in reverse mentoring patterns (with newcomers sharing expertise with distinguished professors), and in hybrid forms of formalized contractual arrangements as well as unanticipated interactions. Proposing episodic, intersectional, and networked perspectives to mentoring, we call for Communication scholars and teachers to embrace various forms of mentoring, create a culture that enables mentoring interactions, and tap into mentoring’s empowering and transformational potential.

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