

Mutual Mentoring for Early-Career and Underrepresented Faculty: Model, Research, and Practice

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Abstract In the beginning, “Mutual Mentoring” was little more than an idea, a hopeful vision of the future in which a new model of mentoring could serve as a medium to better support early-career and underrepresented faculty. Over time, Mutual Mentoring evolved from an innovative idea to an ambitious pilot program to a fully operational, campus-wide initiative. This article describes the conceptualization, design, implementation, and evaluation of a Mutual Mentoring initiative from 2006 to 2014. Findings indicate that faculty members who participated in this initiative were more likely to regard mentoring as a career-enhancing

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activity as well as to develop mutually beneficial mentoring relationships than were their non-participating peers.

Keywords Mentoring · New faculty · Faculty of color · Women · Faculty development

Colleges and universities live in a world of changing expectations and new challenges. The three primary forces of change that directly affect faculty members' abilities to carry out their teaching, research, and service include a changing professoriate; a changing student body; and the changing nature of teaching, learning, and scholarship (Sorcinelli and Austin 2013). The population of full-time, tenure track faculty at four-year colleges and universities is shrinking, and these faculty members increasingly struggle to prioritize multiple responsibilities and take on new and different roles. Students are more diverse than in the past (in race, ethnicity, class, age, sexual orientation, preparation, and prior academic performance), requiring instructors to provide additional supports in and outside of the classroom. As well, a changing paradigm for teaching, learning, and scholarly pursuits calls for the development of new knowledge and skills not only in evidence-based teaching practices, instructional technology, and assessment of student learning, but also in arenas such as professional networking, interdisciplinary collaboration, research and grant production, and career advancement.

We know that mentoring can address a number of the potential roadblocks to faculty success, offering an effective method for promoting socialization, productivity, and satisfaction, especially for early-career and underrepresented faculty. The potential of the mutual benefits of mentoring is one of its most appealing features. It has been shown to further career development through increased research productivity, more effective teaching, more dynamic networks, and improved tenure and promotion prospects. It also fosters social connections and relationships with colleagues who can provide collegial support, encouragement, and guidance, thus reducing the isolation often reported by early-career faculty (Johnson 2007; Ragins and Kram 2007; Trower 2012).

Despite these potential benefits, not all early-career faculty members receive adequate mentoring. We discovered this a decade ago, when the provost's office charged our faculty development center, a campus-wide unit in a large, public, research-extensive university, with creating a mentoring program for new, early-career, and underrepresented faculty. At the time, the state of faculty mentoring at our university varied greatly from one department to another. Some chairs offered excellent formal mentoring programs for their new hires, while others did not. Some senior faculty initiated informal but useful mentoring relationships with their junior colleagues, while others had few positive memories of or associations with mentoring; and some junior faculty members proactively sought out support from their colleagues, while others waited for support that never arrived.

As a result, isolated pockets of mentoring occurred across the campus, but such activities were inconsistent at best, and ineffective or inequitable at worst. Further complicating matters was the lack of a clear institutional message about the importance of faculty mentoring and the requisite guidance and resources to encourage the adoption of good practices across departments and schools/colleges. Given this environment, our challenge was to design a campus-wide mentoring initiative for new, early-career, and underrepresented faculty that would succeed within the unique context of our institution, which, at the time this work began in 2006, was comprised of eight schools/colleges, eighty-five academic departments and programs, and over 1,200 full-time faculty, of whom approximately 23 % were pretenure.

Working in collaboration with the Provost, deans, department chairs, and other academic leaders, we initiated what we called the “Mutual Mentoring Initiative.”

When we first began our work on this initiative, mentoring was already considered one of the few common characteristics of a successful faculty career, particularly for women and faculty of color (Blake-Beard 1999; Ragins 1999; Stanley and Lincoln 2005). Yet the form of mentoring most frequently cited in the literature was the “traditional model,” a top-down, one-on-one relationship in which an experienced faculty member guided and supported the career development of a junior faculty member. Formal mentoring programs at many colleges and universities, including ours, had attempted to duplicate this traditional model, with mixed success (Gibson 2006).

Based on a comprehensive needs assessment of our faculty, including surveys, interviews, and focus groups conducted over a six-month period, we determined that a traditional, one-on-one mentoring model was not sufficiently flexible enough for our faculty members, who reported a wide range of professional and psychosocial mentoring needs that were unlikely to be addressed by a single mentor. As a result, we turned to newer literature that documented emerging forms of mentoring in which new and early-career faculty worked with “multiple mentors” (de Janasz and Sullivan 2004), “constellations” of mentors (van Emmerik 2004), “networks” of mentors (Girves et al. 2005), “developmental networks” (Dobrow et al. 2012), or a “portfolio” of mentors who address a variety of career competencies (Higgins and Kram 2001). While theories and empirical research on this kind of mentoring were helpful, we were unable to find any examples of how to operationalize networked mentoring, especially in a formal mentoring program.

Our contribution to the mentoring literature is the translation of the theory and research on network-based mentoring to a formal mentoring program for new, early-career, and underrepresented faculty. We describe the Mutual Mentoring model, outline the design and development of the initiative, offer exemplars from faculty members who built their own innovative networks of mentors, and present compelling evaluation data on the positive outcomes of this approach to mentoring and professional networking.

Mutual Mentoring Conceptualization and Design

The Mutual Mentoring model and program design was informed by an extensive review of research on new and early-career faculty and mentoring. The elements most critical to early-career faculty satisfaction and success include: understanding the expectations for performance, especially the tenure process; finding support for teaching and research; developing substantive mentoring relationships; and balancing work and home life (Fink 1984; Menges 1999; Rice et al. 2000; Sorcinelli 1994; Trotman and Brown 2005; Trower 2012). We learned that mentoring, both formal and informal, is seen as perhaps the most effective method for socializing and supporting new faculty in all these aspects of their career (Johnson 2007; Ragins and Kram 2007). We also found remarkable congruence in findings across disciplines, research approaches, and some three decades of scholarship (Austin et al. 2007). Based on these findings and our own qualitative and quantitative needs assessment data (Sorcinelli and Yun 2007, 2009), we developed a flexible, network-based model of support called “Mutual Mentoring,” in which faculty work with multiple mentors who provide support in their respective area(s) of expertise, rather than a single mentor who is less likely to be able to

address the wide variety of opportunities and challenges faced by diverse scholars in a modern academic career. The model's five key characteristics (Yun and Sorcinelli 2009) are as follows:

- Mentoring partnerships with a wide variety of individuals, including peers, near peers, tenured faculty, chairs, administrators, librarians, and students;
- Mentoring approaches that accommodate the partners' personal, cultural, and professional preferences for contact (e.g., one-on-one, small group, group, and/or online);
- Partnerships that focus on specific areas of experience and expertise (e.g., teaching) rather than generalized, "one-size-fits-all" knowledge;
- Benefits to not only the person traditionally known as the "protégé" or "mentee," but also the person traditionally known as the "mentor;" and
- A sense of empowerment in which new, early-career, and underrepresented faculty are not seen or treated solely as the recipients of mentoring, but as proactive, intentional agents of their own career development.

A key challenge in implementing the model was to give faculty members a sense of agency and freedom to develop their own context-sensitive mentoring relationships and activities, but within a campus-wide programmatic structure that promised equitable access to resources and support. We chose grants as the medium to encourage individuals to develop their own Mutual Mentoring networks. Incentives such as grants are an important way for faculty development centers to attract faculty, especially at research universities where writing grant proposals is a fundamental part of the academic culture.

On an annual basis, up to ten Team Grants (maximum of \$10,000) were available for networks of four or more individuals, while up to fifteen Micro Grants (maximum of \$1,200 each) supported smaller networks of two to three individuals. We want to note that a grant from a private foundation enabled our Institute to create its Team and Micro Grant Programs; however, we have worked with our institution and some 25 other colleges and universities to apply the Mutual Mentoring model to internal resources for faculty, such as professional development funds and start-up funds.)

Each grant year began with a call for proposals in the spring semester and several drop-in informational sessions during which we guided potential applicants through the process of developing a successful proposal. These sessions included an overview of the Mutual Mentoring model and research on networked mentoring, a guidebook of best practices for working with mentors and mentees (Sorcinelli and Yun 2011), and instructions on building a budget. The sessions also addressed the university's five priority mentoring areas for both Team and Micro Grants, which were organized around the themes identified from needs assessment data as most important to the satisfaction and success of early-career faculty. Grant proposals were required to address one or more of the following priority mentoring areas.

Getting to know the institution. Understanding the academic culture of departments, schools/colleges, and the institution; identifying resources to support teaching and research; and creating a trusted network of junior and senior colleagues.

Excelling at teaching and research. Finding support for teaching such as developing new courses, pedagogical methods, technologies, and interdisciplinary curricula and/or finding support for research, identifying sources of internal and external funding, and soliciting feedback on manuscripts and grant proposals.

Understanding tenure and evaluation. Learning more about the criteria for evaluating performance; understanding the specific steps of the tenure process; developing the tenure dossier; soliciting substantive feedback on the annual faculty review.

Developing professional networks. Establishing substantive, career-enhancing relationships with faculty members on- and off-campus who share similar interests in teaching and/or scholarship.

Creating work-life balance. Prioritizing/balancing teaching, research, and service; finding support for goal setting; developing time management skills; attending to quality of life issues such as dual careers and childcare.

Proposals were reviewed by a faculty committee. After the first year of the initiative, the committee was composed of former Mutual Mentoring Grant recipients. The committee evaluated each proposal based on the following criteria:

- Does the project build upon the Mutual Mentoring model to address one or more of the University’s five priority mentoring areas?
- Does the project apply the concept of mentoring networks in a fresh, innovative way to address faculty needs? (This did not preclude replicating other successful projects.)
- Does the project include a plan of action that is realistic, practical, and fiscally responsible?
- Does the project bring faculty members together in a way that respects, promotes, and encourages dialogue about diversity and inclusion?
- Can the project be replicated and serve as a model for mentoring in other individual, departmental, school/college, and interdisciplinary scenarios?

Faculty Customization and Implementation of Mutual Mentoring

Tenure-system faculty members at all career stages worked within the Team and Micro Grant guidelines to create a diverse range of projects that were custom-designed by and for the primary benefit of the early-career participants. In some instances, participants chose to focus on building mentoring partnerships between peers and near peers, while others dedicated themselves to strengthening connections between early-career and senior faculty. Some teams planned their efforts around developing disciplinary or interdisciplinary on-campus mentoring networks, while others sought out off-campus expertise. Some teams formed what we call “affinity groups,” focused on a shared research, teaching, career stage, or identity interest. Notably, women and faculty of color were most likely to form affinity groups, such as “Blacklist: A Women of Color Faculty Group,” “Supporting Faculty of Color through Tenure and Beyond,” “The Women’s Interdisciplinary Writing and Publishing Network,” and “Life Sciences Women Faculty.” The flexibility of the Mutual Mentoring model empowered grant recipients to make informed choices about the types of mentors and mentoring activities they need most. As a result, every network looked different. Below are exemplars of both Team and Micro Grants.

Exemplars of Mutual Mentoring Team Grants

The Team Grant Program provided support to departmental, school/college, interdisciplinary, and affinity teams for a Mutual Mentoring project of their own design. The following offers one example of each of these kinds of mentoring networks.

Mentoring Teaching in the Physics Department. The Department of Physics established a peer- and near-peer mentoring network focused on promoting teaching excellence across the department's wide range of course offerings. As part of the grant, the team convened weekly to discuss individual teaching projects; created a blog to archive and build upon their in-person discussions; hosted regular meetings to discuss broader teaching techniques and issues, such as identifying diverse learning styles, adopting new technology, assessing student preparation, using grading rubrics, and making effective use of teaching assistants; and brought nationally-renowned experts on physics education to speak at department colloquia.

College-Level Mentoring in Social and Behavioral Sciences. This team implemented a "cross-departmental interdisciplinary mentoring initiative" in which all new pre-tenure hires selected a mid-career mentoring partner from their home department. In addition, all of the new pre-tenure hires met in monthly interdisciplinary group discussions over the course of the academic year. There was an opening Mutual Mentoring mini-conference to introduce the new faculty to the mentoring program, a January retreat for the new pre-tenure hires and their mentoring partners, and a reception in the spring. All participants received a modest stipend for meals to facilitate regular one-on-one or small group discussions on teaching and research topics of their choice throughout the year.

Interdisciplinary Seminar on the New Meanings of Race. This team gathered female and male faculty, tenure-track and tenured faculty, and white faculty and faculty of color from the Afro-American Studies and English Departments to focus on the emergent challenges of scholarship and teaching about race in the 21st century. The group met regularly to discuss pedagogical strategies for facilitating "difficult dialogues in the classroom;" the changing scholarship of race; professionalization strategies centering on networking, publications, and web presence; and individual faculty teaching and research projects. The seminar also hosted talks by prominent scholars.

Mother Wit (We are in this together). Designed as an affinity group, Mother Wit was comprised of academic mothers in several education and social science departments who shared a motivation to excel in their careers while balancing the care and well-being of their young families. As part of the grant, assistant professors paired up with associate professors for one-on-one mentoring, gathered for regular writing sessions to discuss manuscripts and the writing process, hosted speakers on parenting and mothering, discussed possible formal recommendations to influence institutional policy on supporting families and work/life balance, and supported participation at its various meetings by providing team members with child care. The group also launched a website to track participants' writing progress.

Exemplars of Micro-Grants

Micro Grants encouraged early-career faculty to self-identify areas for growth and to develop the necessary mentoring relationships to make that growth possible. Faculty members identified a wide range of goals and innovative mentoring relationships, and below are some exemplars of these smaller networks involving two or three individuals.

A female assistant professor in the Department of Art and Art History set a goal *to better integrate her life as a teacher and artist*. To foster these two sides of her career, she used her Micro Grant to build upon her fledging mentoring partnership with an internationally

acclaimed artist, critic, curator, and professor at another research university. The assistant professor brought him to campus, where he met with her and her colleagues, provided studio critiques to her students, and gave a talk on studio teaching and career development. His versatility as a teacher, scholar, and artist made him an ideal mentor for both students and faculty. The mentoring relationship continued beyond his visit. The mentor attended her painting exhibition, communicated regularly with her about teaching and arts funding opportunities, and met with her at their professional conference.

A female assistant professor in the Department of Biology applied for a Micro Grant *to learn new research skills and mentor her students*. She used her grant to reach out to a renowned senior professor—someone she didn't even know—at a research university in Texas. The assistant professor asked to visit the laboratory of her external mentoring partner to learn more about lab techniques for a future field study. While visiting her “just-in-time” mentoring partner, she also developed connections between their two departments. Upon returning to campus, the assistant professor trained her graduate students in the same techniques, thus extending mentoring relationships in and beyond her department.

A male assistant professor in Engineering who had jump-started an impressive research program chose to focus his grant on increasing his limited experience in teaching. His goal was *to strengthen his pedagogical skills and build a network of support from senior faculty*. In doing so, he discovered that many of his most productive mentoring relationships were close to home. As part of his grant, the assistant professor asked his department chair to co-teach an undergraduate course with him, followed by one-on-one mentoring on teaching practices after each class. He also arranged regular pedagogical meetings with his chair and two other noted teachers in his college. Finally, he attended a career development pre-conference institute at his professional association's annual conference. There, he met a small cohort of early-career faculty in his disciplinary area with whom to share syllabi, teaching activities, assignments, and assessments.

The goal of two female assistant professors in the Classics and English Departments was *to build more accountability and support for their scholarly writing*. Their grant proposal demonstrated that mentors don't need to be senior faculty members. They established a peer writing and mentoring partnership to support each other as they worked on their respective book manuscripts and book proposals. They met every other week to track their writing progress and dedicated most of their funds to working with a professional writing coach and editor over the course of the year. They also applied many of their newly-acquired strategies for writing into their courses on business and technical writing, web design, advanced composition, and Greek drama and voices.

Evaluation of the Impact of Mutual Mentoring

Without data, institutions can only speculate on whether or not their mentoring program is effective. In order to understand if these grant programs actually increased faculty learning, agency, and capacity for building substantive relationships, as well as contributed to a culture of mentoring and professional development support, we developed an assessment plan to regularly collect multiple sources of qualitative and quantitative data over a seven-year period.

On an annual basis, we collected data from three sources: a one-on-one *intake meeting with all Team Grant leaders and Micro Grant recipients prior to the release of grant funds* to discuss their proposed activities and determine if any new opportunities or challenges had developed since writing their proposals; a one-on-one or team *formative assessment conducted*

midway through the grant year to determine if the proposed activities were progressing as planned or if any changes were needed to ensure the quality and quantity of mentoring activities before the grant concluded; and *a standardized summative assessment at the end of the grant year*, using a 14-point online survey that we administered to all Team and Micro Grant recipients from 2006 to 2014.

In addition to these annual sources of data, working in cooperation with our assessment office, we developed and launched an *all-faculty survey* in the spring of 2014 about faculty experiences with and attitudes about mentoring. This survey compared the responses of faculty who had participated in Mutual Mentoring activities against non-participants to understand the longer term effects of Mutual Mentoring on faculty careers.

Records of how many faculty members elected to participate in the Mutual Mentoring initiative provides a good starting point for examining the program's success. From 2006 to 2014, our Institute awarded 69 Team Grants and 73 Micro Grants to faculty members from all eight schools and colleges and 50 departments at the university. During this time period, 518 unique faculty members, approximately 40 % of all full-time instructional faculty on our campus, elected to participate in the Mutual Mentoring Initiative. (Percentages are approximate because of normal faculty population shifts from year to year.) In our needs assessments, women and faculty of color were insistent that the program not be a "special" program for underrepresented faculty but be open to all faculty. It is particularly compelling then, that of the 518 unique faculty participants, 290 were women and 151 were African, Latino, Asian, and Native American ("ALANA") faculty.

Responses to online surveys at the end of each grant year also indicate a high level of satisfaction with Mutual Mentoring activities. For example, when we asked participants, "Overall, how would you rate your Mutual Mentoring Experience," (on a 5-point scale from poor to excellent), an average of 81 % of all Team Grant participants and 93 % of all Micro-Grant recipients from 2006 to 2014 rated their experience as "Excellent" or "Very Good." Responses to the survey also suggested a long term sustainability of Mutual Mentoring relationships. When asked "Are these new mentoring relationships likely to continue after the grant period has ended?", an average of 91 % of all Team Grant recipients and 97 % of Micro Grant recipients expected their mentoring relationships to continue.

Finally, in the spring of 2014, we conducted a large-scale survey to compare the reported outcomes of participants in the Mutual Mentoring initiative (43 % response rate) with non-participants (31 % response rate). We worked with our assessment office to develop and launch a survey of the entire University faculty to assess attitudes toward and experiences with mentoring. Research suggests that effective mentoring programs address two equally important facets of mentoring: (1) career development in order to foster work productivity and (2) relationship development in order to foster work satisfaction (Bland et al. 2009). Our findings indicate that the faculty members who participated in the Mutual Mentoring Initiative were more likely than non-participants to report concrete, visible outcomes of their mentoring relationships, such as the publication of an article or book, presentation of a paper, submission of a grant, and/or other meaningful professional achievements. In addition, Mutual Mentoring participants differed from non-participants in the following statistically significant ways:

- Being involved in current mentoring activities (91.3 % for Team and Micro Grant participants compared to 77.7 % for non-participants).
- Agreeing with the statement that "mentoring resulted in the development of career-enhancing relationships with other faculty" (74.2 % for Team and Micro Grant participants compared to 59.8 % for non-participants).

- “Having current mentoring relationships in which each participant benefited mutually” (71.9 % for Team and Micro Grant participants compared to 52.2 % of non-participants).

As we neared the conclusion of seven years of external grant funding, we sought out internal sources of support in order to institutionalize the Team and Micro Grant Programs, an effort that was greatly aided by our ability to share data on the programs’ effectiveness and impact. Today, the Mutual Mentoring Initiative continues on our campus with a few notable changes. We continue to offer up to ten Team Grants per year, but we have lowered the maximum award to \$6,000 based on faculty feedback about how challenging it can be to spend down larger amounts within a single academic year. We have also expanded the pool of eligible beneficiaries to include full-time lecturers and post-tenure faculty, an acknowledgement of the need for mentoring at all ranks and stages of the faculty career. In our most recent grant cycle—the first using institutional funds—we received a record number of proposals for both programs, and the selection committee awarded ten Micro Grants and nine Team Grants. As in years’ past, these teams include many early-career and underrepresented faculty, but they also include exciting new teams comprised of Associate Professors working together to support each other toward promotion, female faculty members exploring transitions into institutional leadership roles, and lecturers within a college creating a network of support responsive to the needs of full-time contract faculty.

Beyond our own campus, we are also deeply gratified by the growing number of research universities, comprehensive universities, and liberal arts colleges in the U.S. and internationally that have adopted or adapted the Mutual Mentoring model and/or one or both of our Mutual Mentoring grant programs on their own campuses.

Conclusion

On reflection, we believe there are a number of reasons for the Mutual Mentoring Initiative’s successful and sustainable impact on our faculty and institution. First, the program was open to all tenure-system faculty versus targeted groups. Women and faculty of color were over-represented in the initiative because the Mutual Mentoring model provided the type of non-hierarchical, relational and reciprocal mentoring structure desired by these populations. Broadening the definition of mentoring to include a network of multiple, diverse mentors, they reported, facilitated their building mentoring partnerships. Studies suggest that of greatest significance to women faculty and faculty of color in determining their satisfaction and capacity to succeed is the kind of climate and collegiality they experience on campus, including opportunities to collaborate with colleagues and to experience professional and personal interactions that are more flexible and less intense than the traditional one mentor and one mentee mentoring model (Wasburn 2007; Trower 2009).

Second, the model expanded the traditional mentoring model, respecting the important role of a senior faculty mentor but also making it clear that the faculty role is increasingly complex and that no single person or mentor holds all the knowledge and skills needed to be successful. As our faculty members participated in mentoring networks with peers, near-peers, and senior colleagues, all of whom brought different types of valuable expertise and experience to the table, they reported that knowledge became more distributed than concentrated. In this way, all members of the academic community had something to teach and learn from each other. As one senior faculty member noted in our large-scale survey, Mutual Mentoring “provides a great mechanism to learn from junior colleagues, who are more up to date on many of the latest advances in technology.” Another participant provided further detail:

Although as a senior faculty member I appear to have more to give than to receive, I find that this is not true at all. Indeed, the Mellon opportunity has alerted me to how much I can learn from younger colleagues. They have helped me sharpen my sense of [my] field ... as it is emerging in the work of young scholars today, and they have helped me see the importance and value of social media.

The self-initiated nature of Mutual Mentoring may also have contributed to the level of senior mentor participation; when faculty identify and articulate their own mentoring needs, they provide clearer goals that can lead to more defined, targeted mentoring commitments. Simply put, it is more appealing to commit to a mentoring relationship when the expectations are specific and clear.

The initiative also offered customized, faculty-driven projects versus generic mentoring imposed from above. This empowered early-career and underrepresented faculty to initiate mentoring relationships that addressed their individual professional development needs, cultures, schedules, and preferences for contact. It also avoided the “cloning phenomenon” in which the mentoring relationship primarily promotes the mentor’s personal and professional agenda (Johnson 2007). Instead, the Mutual Mentoring model reinforced the notion that we live in an era of networks, not hierarchies.

Fourth, the program invested in faculty through grants, with principal investigators. As noted, grants are the coin of the realm in many colleges and universities and faculty members are eager for opportunities to apply for them, even if the funds are relatively modest. In addition, these seed grants often assisted participants in later achieving significant, career-altering milestones such as major research grants, book awards, and grants for the development of innovative curricula, all of which participants attributed to their work with internal and external mentoring partners.

Finally, the Mutual Mentoring Initiative made mentoring more intentional, purposeful and empowering. It inspired faculty members to initiate mentoring relationships that addressed their context-sensitive professional development needs, accelerated the process of developing professional networks that otherwise could have taken years to establish, and lowered the barriers for collaboration by giving faculty members a reason to make connections with colleagues. It also encouraged them to address a broad range of professional and career issues, integrating teaching, research, mentoring and career advancement in ways often difficult to achieve in traditional mentoring programs (Foote and Solem 2009). Perhaps most importantly, the Mutual Mentoring Initiative enabled new, early-career, and underrepresented faculty to experience, through productive and lasting relationships with individuals across career stages, disciplines, and institutional boundaries, the collegiality that is the essence of an academic community.

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