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Peer Mentoring Among Junior Faculty and Implications for Culture Change

Eli Karam, Sharon Bowland, Noell Rowan, Karla Washington, Armon R. Perry, Crystal Collins-Camargo and Adrian Archuleta

Introduction

A group of seven new junior faculty members was hired into a school of social work over a short time period. They became interested in developing a peer mentoring group due to the stress and socialization issues inherent in tenure track positions and given the time constraints of the tenured faculty at their university. During the formation of the group, they examined literature on traditional and peer mentoring models. There is extensive literature on mentoring in higher education. However, much recent research is dedicated to mentoring students (Driscoll, Parkes, Tilley-Lubbs, Brill, & Bannister, 2009; Hall & Burns, 2009; Harwood & McCormack, 2008) or the experiences of underrepresented groups including women (Greene, Stockard, Lewis, & Richmond, 2010; Simon, Roff, & Perry, 2008; Storrs, Putsche, & Taylor, 2008), racial and ethnic minorities (Alexander & Moore, 2008; Daniel, 2009; Thompson, 2008), and immigrants (Collins, 2008).

Previous research indicates that academic units are increasingly formalizing mentoring programs. Such programs generally entail the provision of both career and psychosocial support to assistant professors (Kram, 1985). Recent research determined that informal support by peers and tenured faculty may actually yield more benefits than formal support (Allen, Eby, Poteet, Lentz, & Lima, 2004). Some of these benefits will be discussed in this paper. They include improving scholarship skills, developing critical thinking, establishing peer review, navigating technological challenges, developing safe relationships, and providing psychosocial support.

The current cohort of junior faculty envisioned peer mentoring as a way to promote an atmosphere of peer learning and support in an academic environment where independent scholarship was the norm. This paper will explore the literature related to peer mentoring in academic environments and will describe the process of creating a peer mentoring group with resulting implications for positive departmental and university change.

Traditional Mentoring

Academic career development is still largely viewed as progress in the areas of research, teaching, and service (and, in research-intensive universities, usually in that order), in spite of intensified efforts to broaden the definitions of scholarship (Boyer, 1990; Diamond & Adam, 1995). In addition to responsibilities related to achieving success in the areas of research, teaching, and service, new tenure track faculty members must also orient themselves to the university and community, manage the uncertainty of a frequently unfathomable tenure process, develop professional networks, and strike a balance between their professional and personal lives (Sorcinelli, 2007). Recognition of these challenges has resulted in efforts to formally mentor junior faculty members (Perna, Lerner, & Yura, 1995). Nevertheless, pairing senior faculty members with junior faculty often appears to fail. Lack of attention to mentoring processes in busy academic environments may leave newcomers with the sense that they are on their own.

While a review indicated that the specific

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goals of junior faculty mentoring initiatives varied across studies, nearly all aimed to promote career development and socialization (Smith, Whitman, Grant, Stanutz, Russett, & Rankin, 2001). Mentoring, according to Kram (1985), serves two functions: support for career development and psychosocial support to develop a sense of competency and self-efficacy. Further, emerging scholars from demographic groups underrepresented in academia, such as minorities and women, frequently cited effective mentorship (or lack thereof) as a significant contributor to professional outcomes (Bova, 2000; Tillman, 2001; Washburn, 2007). In contrast to these views, others expressed concern that such initiatives often have unintended consequences, including transmission of paternalistic messages that new faculty members are incapable of achieving independent success (Selby & Calhoun, 1998).

Overall, research on mentoring between faculty and their protégés suggests a positive effect; however, results of a recent meta-analysis stated that, for objective career outcomes, the measurable impact of traditional mentorship was modest. Specifically, Allen, Eby, Poteet, Lentz, and Lima (2004) found that mentoring may be more helpful for the subjective experiences of career and job satisfaction than for instrumental career development. Objective career outcomes such as compensation and promotion are undoubtedly important for new faculty, as are the rate of publication in peer-reviewed journals, funded research dollars, teaching evaluations, and other discipline or institution-specific indicators of success. However, subjective career outcomes such as friendships, acceptance, validation, and counseling may have more salience than salary and status to individuals who choose to forgo corporate life for the academy (Allen et al., 2004).

With regard to the process of mentorship and socialization, Tierney (1997) compared and contrasted modernist and post-modern perspectives. In the modernist framework, socialization is viewed as a process where new faculty members learn what is required to succeed within the existing organizational culture and develop their capacity to do so. In some instances, this has been reduced to what is required for tenure and promotion – the written and unwritten "rules" – and falling in line appropriately. From a traditional point of view, successful socialization has been equated with successful assimilation. Tierney's understanding of post-modern mentoring will be described below in linking peer mentoring with the potential for organizational change.

Peer Mentoring

Mullen and Forbes (2000) found that the untenured faculty in their study saw value in developing camaraderie with their peers through sharing problems they were facing, offering direct feedback, and navigating the politics of the academy. Lawrence (2000) proposed that cohort groups that engage intentionally in activities (such as collaborating on a task or project) may develop a sense of respect and trust and grow into learning communities. Being together over time promoted new faculty members' comfort level with risk-taking and self-disclosure. Dialogue evolved as participants employed critical thinking to evaluate their scholarship and took the risk to share personal stories (Lawrence, 2002).

Research has shown that naturally occurring, informal mentoring relationships were more effective than institutionalized programs (Ragins & Cotton, 1999). From qualitative interviews, Eby and McManus (2002) determined that the opportunity for assignments stretching professional capacities, feedback about strengths and weaknesses, support to develop networks in the community, creation of horizontal and multi-purpose relationships, and discussions about the process of building a career were particularly helpful to protégés. Thus, it appears that working on professional and personal relationships through peer mentoring could provide a potent pathway to accomplishing career development (Owenby, 2002).

Linking Peer Mentoring & Organizational Change

Social cognitive theorists determined that people are both "products and producers of their environment" (Wood & Bandura, 1989, p. 361). This means that they often have the self-efficacy

to change the systems of which they are part. Challenging faculty socialization as a process where faculty merely come to understand the system they are working in, Tierney (1997) suggested that socialization is a process where members' own personal histories and the contexts in which their schools exist become central. In his discussion of postmodern approaches he wrote, "People are not all alike, and their joining together in an organization suggests that they are involved in the creation – not the discovery, not the duplication – of culture" (p. 14). Thus, peer mentoring has implications for positive organizational culture change.

Schmidtlein (1999) asserted that groups pursuing their own interests through the direct exchange of resources and rewards provide an important alternative approach to top-down organizational goal-seeking. Furthermore, transformations in organizational culture may occur when organizations value culture change and diverse perspectives (Hanlin, Reidy & Stewart, 1997). Gould's (2000) qualitative study using a grounded theory approach identified a) teamwork, b) evaluative inquiry, and c) epistemologies that prize the perspective of practitioners as necessary for healthy organizations. All of these authors articulated the importance of creating learning environments where collegiality, trust, continuity, and critical feedback go hand in hand and see them as hallmarks of a healthy organization.

Developing a Peer Mentoring Group

Based on furthering a climate of mutual support and encouragement, our group of new junior faculty members, with different teaching areas and research specialties (mental health, gerontology, child welfare, social welfare policy, family therapy, drug and alcohol abuse), and from diverse training backgrounds (Social Work and Marriage and Family Therapy) began meeting together. After conducting a literature review we concluded that an alternative to traditional academic mentoring, peer mentoring, could provide a fertile ground for a) instrumental socialization, b) psychosocial support to develop satisfying and meaningful work, and c) culture change within the school of social work at our university. As social workers we valued a strengths-based perspective (Saleebey, 1996) that sought to empower each other, nurture both professional and personal relationships, minimize hierarchical power relationships, value diverse viewpoints, and influence our organizational culture. Over the course of one year, peer mentoring goals for junior faculty socialization and development were identified. In the next section, we will describe the process of developing goals for peer support and suggest how others might follow this path.

Developing Instrumental Support

Academic Support

One of the strengths of our peer mentoring group was that we came from a variety of doctoral programs. Given that several of the programs promoted peer review and critical analysis, this culture was already familiar to many in the group. We discussed a commitment to bring specific writing and teaching-related projects before the group for feedback. We wanted to create a collaborative culture where sending out concept papers or grant proposals for critique was commonplace. We were striving for an environment where group members could actively seek feedback from colleagues that provided challenges to hone skills in teaching and research. Colleagues who wanted feedback submitted materials in advance so that other group members could prepare feedback prior to meetings.

Giving feedback on scholarly writing was particularly important for this group since we were all approaching tenure. We initiated reading *Writing Journal Articles in 12 Weeks* (Belcher, 2009) to discuss common struggles for new faculty, including setting aside time to write, investigating journal selection, handling publication rejection, planning lectures, and developing new curricula. We also developed the goal of writing this article. As we built solidarity, it seemed important to have a project in common that would promote a sense of "we are all in this together." Having a project that was mutually beneficial seemed to be

one important way of anchoring the group to this goal.

The reciprocal nature of the academic feedback process also promotes collegiality among those with different leadership and expertise areas. Over time, our group members hope to become familiar with each other's areas of interest. This academic feedback process and associated dialogue will increase the likelihood of establishing a counterbalance to the lone ranger view of academic life.

Technological Support

While new faculty orientation meetings are designed to provide an introduction to specific resources and protocols, this overview may end up as information overload to a new faculty member. Another function of peer mentoring was to share knowledge about the technical, logistic, and bureaucratic elements of academic life. For instance, the group assisted one another in dealing with annual paperwork and other department-specific procedures that were routine to tenured veterans, but ambiguous to neophyte assistant professors. Meetings also centered on ways to maximize current technology like Blackboard and other web-based applications. The effect was that what may have seemed overwhelming appeared more manageable when shared by a group of faculty members at similar points in the socialization process.

Developing Psychosocial Support

The psychosocial support goal of the group involved emotional encouragement. Whether we were interacting with a difficult student or feeling overwhelmed by new responsibilities, sharing these "growing pains" in the context of the group both normalized the concerns ('I'm not the only one') and provided insight on how to deal effectively with the situation. As we moved beyond the first year, the group facilitated the orientation of one new faculty member, even before he arrived on campus. This included organizing a welcoming dinner. The group was also helpful in the transition process by offering information about resources in the community. Finally, the group made a commitment to spend some social time with each other. Taking time to meet for dinner and other periodic social activities helped the members to know each other as people and not just in their professional roles.

At a junior faculty potluck at one member's home, we celebrated the success of three members in securing accreditation for a new undergraduate program developed within the department. Sharing some relaxed time together and celebrating accomplishments appears to support our professional relationships during the challenging days of our work life. This same comfort and honesty may not be possible with a group of senior faculty at this stage of the socialization process, as they have an evaluative role in their interactions with us.

Develop Critical Thinking

Our meetings afforded us the opportunity for deeper discussions regarding issues faced in our department that faculty meetings and other administrative committees did not accommodate due to time constraints and pressing priorities. Kinney (1980) suggested that grappling with questions that do not have immediate solutions is the hallmark of critical thinking. Tsui (2000) indicated that part of creating a flourishing academic culture involves exploration and debate of multiple worldviews, intellectual perspectives, and life experiences. In short, it involves critical thinking. We saw the opportunity for our school's established emphasis on teaching critical thinking to be enacted in a parallel process in our mentoring group, with reciprocal benefits for the school as a whole.

In the process of our group's development, we also determined that we were striving for honest communication within our group. Could we state our preferences about the direction of our peer mentoring group? Was it safe to acknowledge our different philosophical viewpoints about socialization, critical thinking, and goals for the group? How would we handle hurt feelings? Where could we find common ground? We recognized that camaraderie is one of the toughest challenges

for academicians; to be self-directed often results in being less open to influence from others. Given our training in hierarchical institutions, it is no small feat to embrace a more collaborative process. Our group sought to value honesty, to learn from the expression of different points of view, and to encourage multiple ideas and positions. We determined that feeling energized by our collaborations would be one marker of our success.

In addition, we enhanced our ability to apply critical thinking skills through critiquing each others' work. Developing positive connections with each other may enable us to maintain our working relationships as we assume positions of leadership within the school and university. Over time we hope to create a history of transparency in our dealings with one another and continue a sense of trust. Furthermore, we assert that it is through dialogue and commitment to engagement with each other as faculty that our school will improve its modeling of critical thinking for our students. We strive to provide a creative counterpoint to the "you leave me alone, and I'll leave you alone" philosophy characterizing relationships between faculty and students in many universities (Tsai, 2000, p. 8). A stronger commitment to critical thinking among faculty may enhance a commitment to critical thinking among students.

Implementation Challenges

Given the multiple responsibilities and commitments of new faculty, a peer mentoring group must be efficient in its meeting schedule. If the time requirement is too great, engagement may be limited. With this in mind, we found that it was most beneficial to conduct monthly meetings lasting 1-2 hours each. Usually, this meeting preceded the school-wide faculty meeting. This was a convenient time and location, as junior faculty members are required to attend the larger meeting. Finally, we gathered as a junior faculty for social time once each semester. While not everyone was able to attend both events, the commitment to socialize together was viewed as essential to maintaining a viable group.

Discussion

The competitive nature of the tenure process inherent in many academic cultures is at odds with the generative, peer mentoring goals described here. Many research-intensive universities hire junior faculty members concurrently with the expectation that they will be competing against each other for a limited number of tenured positions. Academic cultures tend to place great value on independent scholarship and research at the expense of collaboration and partnership among junior faculty (Bergquist, 1992). This type of atmosphere stands in contrast to the team-building goals of this cohort. We assert the value of our goals as an alternative to traditional academic culture, which often unwittingly fosters silos where colleagues are isolated from one another. Fortunately, we are in a school that takes a collaborative approach, and our recent mid-tenure review process underlined the value that tenured faculty place on our work, including our attempts to support each other as junior faculty.

We believe the establishment of a peer mentoring group is particularly timely in an era when there is much focus on building interdisciplinary departments (as is in the case of this cohort), including both undergraduate and graduate studies, housed within universities where faculty are encouraged to pursue interdisciplinary research. Perhaps, however, some disciplines are better suited for this type of support than others. For example, this cohort was comprised of social workers and marriage and family therapists, professionals known for providing emotional support and guidance to others. Mental health and other helping professions may be more open to such collaboration and interdependence than more analytic disciplines like math or science.

Not only must this type of peer mentoring fit the culture and environment of the educational institution, but also senior faculty must be supportive of such an endeavor. Transparency and routine updates to the rest of the faculty may be essential to avoid negative perceptions of junior faculty members' efforts and to be clear that peer support is provided in addition to, rather than

instead of, support from more experienced professors. It was important to have this group's meetings on the listing of committee meetings for the school so our process was in the open. When interviewing candidates, this group was mentioned as a component of the overall support and socialization system in the school. While regularly having a senior faculty member attend junior faculty meetings might constrain the free expression and open discussion that occurs best among peers, it has also been helpful to invite selected tenured faculty to offer additional information about the tenure process. This addresses the career development aspect of the process without taking away from the psychosocial aspects we also value.

Conclusion

In The *Tyranny of Dead Ideas*, Miller (2009) wrote that more change in American society will occur over the next thirty years than in the previous three hundred. The academy is an old system in the midst of unprecedented change. Miller (2009) advocates reaching out for new ways of thinking. Thus, we need new models for faculty engagement and development to navigate these challenges. Although junior faculty peer mentoring programs may informally exist in other colleges and universities, no existing body of research outlines or analyzes the effectiveness of these programs. Innovative programs that have worked well at one educational institution should be readily available to those interested in how establishing peer mentoring can support junior faculty development. Faculty interested in mentoring research need to identify programs that have been successful and examine why they are beneficial. More research needs to be conducted on the specific benefits of peer mentoring programs for junior faculty members at both colleges and universities.

There is a growing discussion of the value of learning communities in developing sustainable organizations (Gebo, Boyes-Watson & Pinto-Wilson, 2010; Wilkinson, Rushmer & Davies, 2004). Social work, however, lags behind. Gould (2000) noted the absence of the concept of the learning organization in social work research. The value of creating mentoring communities seems of particular interest for departments, schools, and universities in our global society, where faculty come from various racial/ethnic and cultural backgrounds and have diverse academic interests. Increased emphasis on collaboration, critical thinking, and psychosocial support that are endemic to learning communities could be seen as vital for renewing the potency of academic culture. As Miller (2009) suggested, readiness to change and our capacity to adapt to new demands and opportunities will necessitate that we develop new models of engagement in academia.

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