

# Senior Academic Staff Mentoring: Dealing with a Challenging Concept

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## **Abstract**

This article theorizes mentoring in higher education, particularly considering the gap that senior academic staff notice in terms of support after being granted tenure. Following discussions of the various definitions of the concept as well as the identification of its features and several operational models as found in the literature, the authors propose a model for mentoring of experienced college professors. The model in question capitalizes on parameters that characterize effective mentoring, while comparing the pre- and post-tenure experiences of senior academic staff. The focus of a prospective professional development program relying on mentoring should take into account contextual parameters that motivate seasoned college instructors as contributors to their institution's knowledge base and positive culture.

**Keywords:** Senior Academic Staff; Mentoring; Professional Development

## **Introduction**

“Being mentored” is an item of interest to doctoral students and new academic staff who would like to know more about the opportunities to have someone “older and wiser” guide them through the world of a higher learning institution. Participants at an Instructional Design and Technology (IDT) conference in the U.S. expressed a similar interest. The conversation involved mid-career and veteran higher education instructors who offered their advice and perspectives to the novice college professors. It soon became apparent that a piece of the “mentoring puzzle” was missing - experienced and veteran instructors shared a variety of unique concerns related to mentoring or guiding of tenured fellow academic staff members.

While it is traditionally expected of junior college instructors to need formal or informal guidance in the form of mentoring, recent research shows that their senior counterparts also need support related to assuming the role of a mentor. A follow-up session at the same IDT conference brought to light such specific issues and needs that tenured academic staff seem to have. For example, many experienced academic staff asked to serve as mentors expressed concern having little or no experience with the role. Further, they described their own personal mentored experience as a poor example of how the role should materialize. Moreover, they expressed a desire to have some form of guidance and mentor relationship beyond their induction into the higher education setting.

The need to explore mentoring stems from researching its definitions as well as descriptions of various roles and responsibilities. While often described and defined for elementary, middle, and high school settings, little material is available related to mentoring in higher education institutions. To further complicate the issue, qualitative research has been conducted insufficiently on the mentoring process in any educational setting.

Mentoring in higher education has long been viewed as a way for senior academic staff to induct new colleagues into the academic environment (Cox, 1997). The responsibilities of the former have not been clearly defined over time. Boice (1992) found that mentoring took on a pattern of arbitrary pairings with a requirement to work together frequently. Some pairings are focused on narrow interests such as helping the younger college instructor achieve tenure and promotion, while other pairings focus on specific research activities or outcomes. Neither type of pairing opportunity seems to provide a long-term benefit to either member of the pair. In particular, benefits of the relationship for the mentor are rarely mentioned.

When examining mentoring models it becomes apparent that the mentoring pairs continually rely on the concept that the “older and wiser” person serves to teach the “younger and less wise” person how to function as a professional within the institution (Cox, 1997). This pairing concept is built upon the idea that experienced academic staff have little or no interest in continuing their advancement within the system in terms of scholarship and teaching (Karpiak, 1997). The role of mentor is typically assigned, often without concern for the needs of either mentoring pair member. The idea is to provide professional support to the new higher education instructor without regard to the nature and types of mentoring practices that might benefit both parties. Current practice indicates that mentoring is not considered necessary beyond the tenure period. Therefore, most mentoring pairs dissolve once the junior member of the dyad has been tenured into the system.

## **A closer look at mentoring**

As we look more closely at the mentoring process, several important elements emerge. Mentoring is considered by administrators an obligation of the institution. At the same time, it provides opportunities to reduce the sense of isolation among new members of academic staff. However, the essence of mentoring is often viewed as collegial supervision by experienced

college instructors (Davis, 2001). Within institutional culture, mentoring should provide more proactive direction for the beginner university professor and take better advantage of the strengths and experiences of their veteran colleagues assigned as mentors.

A limited number of studies have examined the roles of those participating in mentoring relationships and their need to fulfil their own personal goals. Much of the literature has focused on the success of the person being mentored as an indicator of effectiveness in dealing with the varying degree of pressure placed on junior academic staff (Ortlieb, Biddix, and Doepker, 2010). As far as the mentor is concerned, the expectation is that he/she knows how to function in the role based on an assumed prior mentoring relationship. Few mentor programs provide the mentor with any assistance in understanding his/her role, what the goals of the relationship are, or how to proceed. One of the reasons for this deficiency relies on the impression that mentors are individuals who seem to have been forgotten within this process.

Cox (1997) describes a mentoring approach focused on improving the teaching of beginner college instructors. As part of a program entitled the “Teaching Scholars”, new higher education professors in their second through fifth years in tenure track positions are offered professional development opportunities to improve their teaching through seminars, retreats, conferences, and opportunities to work with experienced peers. An interesting characteristic of this program is that the new academic staff members select their mentors rather than being assigned a mentor. The mentors receive some training for their roles through discussion groups and training sessions. Overall, the program is considered successful, with much to boast about in terms of the tenure achievement rates among mentees. An important program feature relies heavily on professional development as an essential component to its success. Without this type of services and support, the program would not have the resources – both financial and human – to achieve any significant results. The commitment of the institution and the relative importance of mentoring within the institutional culture are clear in the “Teaching Scholars” program. However, the focus is solely on new college instructors, without regard for the mentoring needs of senior fellow teachers.

Based on an analysis of the views of mid-career academic staff related to their participation in mentoring relationships, Karpiak (1997) finds that there is a need to have a more human quality to this type of professional relationships, as opposed to the supervisory quality typical of many mentoring relationships. Participating higher education instructors identify this quality in terms of developing meaning for activities in these working relationships. Mentors suggest they feel the need to foster a sense of meaning in their protégés. Without it, their extension of themselves may be unfulfilled in the end. Furthermore, mentors express a desire to have their efforts acknowledged and appreciated by their junior colleagues as having made a difference to them. Karpiak concludes with the notion that mentors demonstrate an attitude of caring and concern which they expect to permeate the nurtured development of their fellow professors. However, the focus is on the development of the junior member of the mentoring pair.

The idea that mentors can make a positive impact on those being mentored is crucial to successful mentoring relationships. Characteristics of good mentors include strong communication and listening skills (Galbraith, 2001). Academic staff working collaboratively to enhance their teaching while building peer networks represents the core of professional learning communities (Cox, 2001). The same author also stresses the need for university instructors to communicate effectively as well as provide time for collaboration and cross-disciplinary interests in order to ensure quality community development. These examples focus on strategies for successful mentoring relationships within and across department pairing. All of these mentoring models rely on the concept that the experienced

higher education instructor has something to offer to their new colleagues, yet few suggest that these relationships might be mutually beneficial.

### **A model for mentoring senior academic staff**

The mystery of how to mentor experienced academic staff remains. On the one hand, it still is unclear how senior university professors could benefit from a mentoring model designed to meet their needs. On the other hand, it is equally important to investigate how the impact of mentoring relationships between senior and junior higher education instructors could enhance professional opportunities for both. The determination of appropriate ways by which senior academic staff could find continued support within the academic community is of particular interest.

In his book, *Bowling Alone*, Putnam (2000) describes three types of “capital” essential for a community. While he is speaking to the larger social order, these three types of capital are essential to our proposed mentoring model. Putnam talks about Physical and Human Capital as elements that we each possess. The former refers to those items or properties that can be accessed by individuals to be successful in their respective professional environment. The human element is that which the individual possesses within him/herself. The focus of his book, however, is on Social Capital represented by those relationships among and between people within a social group. It is this particular framework of social capital that could support the potential of mentoring processes to be mutually beneficial to all parties involved.

Putnam (2000) also elaborates on the interrelationships that exist within a social group and how those relationships benefit all the members of a particular group. He identifies dependency on social reciprocity as a way to enhance the assurance of mutual benefit. The thesis Putnam presents is that when one facilitates the success of an individual within the social group, the “favor” is returned. This raises the question of whether or not this reciprocity should be an expectation of mentoring relationships. In other words, a reciprocity model could meet the expectation of senior academic staff to be “repaid” for the support of their junior colleagues following a mentoring experience. All along, it is important to build into the mentoring experience a mechanism to evaluate the degree to which both parties feel a sense of reward. Consequently, the responsibilities of mentoring within an academic institution could be developed within the larger social order of Putnam’s social capital concept.

In this light, a first step toward reconceptualizing senior academic staff mentoring is to revise the mentor model so that it responds to the dynamics of the quality of life within the institution itself (Atkins, Brinko, Butts, Claxton, and Hubbard, 2001). In their analysis of university instructors’ professional life, Atkins and her colleagues may have actually identified the key elements necessary to provide experienced teaching staff with a model for growth and professional development. When describing the elements needed to enhance professional vitality, Atkins and her colleagues identify the following critical factors for fostering a mentor relationship between and among college instructors, both junior and senior.

The first and most important element is the “centrality of relationships” (Atkins et al., 2001). Academic staff emphasizes their relationships with students and colleagues as essential to a feeling of satisfaction in all professional activities. At the same time, they deem relationships with colleagues as either “deeply rewarding or profoundly hurtful” (p. 327). This need for positive relationships in the academic setting is crucial to creating an environment in which individuals can grow and strive for new levels of achievement. The sense of community with a culture of mutual respect and collegial dialog is important for new and veteran instructors alike.

The second element presented by Atkins and her colleagues (2001) is a commitment to student learning. University teachers express a desire to make a difference in students' lives by providing them with meaningful learning experiences. Because they desire to impact students positively and hope to influence them to become life-long learners, senior teaching staff often feels compelled to foster their own professional development to achieve these goals. Challenged to "keep up" with contemporary innovations and to ensure a quality education for their students, these professionals are focused on improving themselves.

Satisfaction with academic life is the third element tackled by Atkins et al. (2001). Most college instructors have a deep commitment to doing a good job and feel a sense of satisfaction in their professional efforts. They take great delight in sharing their own personal joy of learning with students. The sense of satisfaction is also found in initiatives representing recognition and support provided from colleagues and their respective institution of higher education.

Personal sacrifice and hard work are identified as the fourth element of professional vitality. Most teaching staff would agree that the professoriate is complicated by multiple responsibilities. Instructors must learn to balance their responsibilities of teaching, scholarship, and service. They must also be able to leverage professional activities across multiple areas of responsibility. In addition, they should find a balance between their academic and personal lives. This latter issue becomes an even greater challenge for veteran academic staff, especially in light of the fact that they are often called upon to do more "committee work" and service to protect their junior colleagues' time to be able to achieve tenure.

Institutional honesty was identified as the fifth element in the quality of professional life in colleges and universities (Atkins et al., 2001). Instructors are concerned with the integrity of the institution, especially when its mission does not necessarily match the actions of administration. For example, if the institution suggests in its mission statement that it prizes quality teaching, while teaching is actually given a secondary status to scholarship for promotion purposes, there seems to be an incongruity that fosters mistrust and concern. This lack of continuity can edge academic staff away from satisfaction into a state of malaise that is counterproductive to meeting their professional needs. These authors hypothesize that this element of satisfaction is much more important to veteran teaching staff than to their new fellow teachers.

We could use these elements to structure a mentoring model that facilitates relationships which benefit both the junior and senior instructional staff. Bringing these elements together to foster collaboration and a sense of accomplishment among university professors, irrespective of their level of academic achievement and experience, can be the framework for a successful mentoring relationship. Matching these elements with particular types of social capital of relationships as well as with institutional commitment can potentially meet the needs of both junior and senior academic staff for a robust mentoring experience.

### **Fostering mentoring relationships**

By representing the network of relationships built within an institution of higher education as the most important element of mentoring, teaching staff could gain a sense of satisfaction in their mentoring partnerships. In this light, it is the responsibility of each college instructor to ensure that they participate in types of mentoring situations that foster their own professional growth and success. These professionals can achieve satisfaction in a mentoring relationship if they focus on establishing collegiality. The sense of equality that comes with collaboration can instill senior university professors with a feeling of accomplishment and value that they seek.

The mutual exchange of ideas related to scholarship, teaching, and service can bring satisfaction to mentoring pairs by fostering personal goals. By recognizing that a mentoring relationship should benefit both parties, junior academic staff needs guidance in terms of how to provide these types of exchanges. At the same time, their senior colleagues need to feel secure that the institution is, in fact, supporting the mentoring pair's endeavors to facilitate growth in both partners by identifying responsibilities and expectations of satisfaction for both parties.

At the point, the question of senior teaching staff expectations from a mentoring relationship gains prominence, especially in terms of opportunities for their own professional development. Current mentoring practices do not seem to provide sufficient information for the types of professional growth and improvement that only senior professors can determine.

The literature on mentoring indicates that the types of pairings must be supported by the academic institution. It appears quite often that colleges and universities expect the mentoring pairs to provide beginner instructors with the support they need to be successful in higher education. At the same time, it is unclear to what degree the same institutions support mentoring relationships designed to provide a similar level of support and development for those professors who have achieved tenure. There are many directions for inquiry into how to provide for successful mentoring experiences both as mentor and mentee. As stated earlier, there are several areas of interest in understanding the dynamics of any given mentor-mentee relationships as a way to maximize these "learning relationships" (Zellers, Howard, and Barcic, 2008, p. 557). The mentor can provide one or more of the following: a) example (of professionalism/expertise); b) guidance (in terms of either research initiatives or professional development – grant writing, technology implementation, etc.); c) communication; and d) advocacy/support (Hurst and Reding, 2002). The two authors also mention the fact that support for the mentee is implied in all of the aforementioned possible roles that the mentor can assume.

In this light, a few considerations may impact the quality of the mentoring relationship being developed. *Time* is an important factor that weighs substantially in terms of planning for instruction, doing research, engaging in community service, etc. *Accepting/offering criticism constructively* and *fairness* also shape up a beneficial mentoring relationship. Keeping in mind the different roles the mentor can play, the skills needed to ensure a quality professional relationship in any mentor-pairs include several levels, such as academic, interpersonal, and intrapersonal.

A possible critical minimum set of pre-requisites for a good mentoring relationship could include any of the elements listed above. Under these circumstances, a few considerations should be kept in mind during a planning phase, as mentioned by Hurst and Reding (2002): a) mentoring relationship assignments; b) volunteerism as a mentoring assignment strategy; c) mentees being able to select their mentors; d) group mentoring as a potential approach to the need for maximization of time and effort invested in establishing the partnership; e) determining whether or not planning of mentoring activities should be prescribed or identified/selected based on institution-specific needs; and f) identifying appropriate ways in which the institution of higher education could match the needs of the mentee with the skills of the mentor and the different types of mentoring – situational or topical; needs-based; formal or informal; cross-cultural; cross-curriculum/inter-departmental. At the same time, academic staff could consider the following as possible catalysts of a mutually beneficial mentoring relationship – teaching, research, and/or service. More generically, on a more epistemological level, they would have to determine whether they want to become change agents or keepers of the status quo.

Existing mentoring programs at various universities in the U.S. emphasize different aspects of effectiveness. For instance, research on the mentoring program at the University of Wisconsin - Oshkosh reveals the following attributes of a good mentor:

- Being a role model
- Committed to the mentoring process
- Responsive to varying circumstances, thus demonstrating flexibility
- Supportive and motivating/encouraging
- Knowledgeable
- Effective communicator

Consequently, there are important benefits that recognize the mentor's contribution to the development of the institution, as follows:

- Experience increased respect and recognition from colleagues based on having supported colleagues in a variety of ways
- Include other professionals in the emerging mentoring network
- Demonstrate gains in terms of professional and personal improvement
- Contribute to the development of a positive workplace by encouraging the mentee to self-identify as a valid contributor to the culture of the institution of higher learning
- Expand the mentee's skill set beyond the current job requirements
- Use the mentoring partnership to promote the mentor's creativity.

(Available at [www.uwosh.edu/mentoring/faculty/benefits.html](http://www.uwosh.edu/mentoring/faculty/benefits.html))

As research shows, there is a substantial gap in terms of the involvement of senior teaching staff in mentoring activities whose focus would be on themselves and not on new colleagues. In other words, once a college professor becomes tenured, there are few opportunities for them to participate in mentoring activities that would extend their knowledge and interests. Instead, their expertise is perceived as reference for new colleagues. Under these circumstances, engaging experienced academic staff in comparing and contrasting their experiences in terms of mentoring as opposed to being mentored (with a particular focus on achieving tenure as a distinguishing point in their professional career) would provide a meaningful representation of what mentoring could be for these senior university professors.

Given the fact that the impact of organizational culture on formal mentoring programs needs further analysis (Zellers, Howard, and Barcic, 2008), we have created the following interview protocol questions by adapting some of the items representing the in-depth interview instrument used by Martin (2002) to determine the effectiveness of a specific mentoring program:

*Before getting tenured:*

- a) How would you describe the mentoring process prior to getting tenured?
- b) What was your most significant gain from that experience?
- c) Do you think you mentor gained anything from the experience? If so, what would their benefit be?
- d) What were the main areas of interest to you during the mentoring process prior to getting tenured?
- e) How supportive was the institution of higher education of your efforts in the mentoring process?
- f) What were the university's expectations of you as a result of the mentoring process?
- g) What type of relationships did you have with your mentor?
- h) Do you think you changed (either professionally or personally or both) as a result of the mentoring process? If so, what do you think caused you to change?
- i) What is the overall assessment of the mentoring process prior to getting tenured?

- j) What would your definition of mentoring be for a college instructor seeking tenure?  
*After getting tenured:*
- a) How would you describe the mentoring process once you got tenured?
  - b) What was your most significant gain from that experience?
  - c) Do you think you mentor gained anything from the experience? If so, what would their benefit be?
  - d) What were the main areas of interest to you during the mentoring process after you were granted tenure?
  - e) How supportive was the institution of higher education of your post-tenure efforts in the mentoring process?
  - f) What were the university's expectations of you as a result of the mentoring process?
  - g) What type of relationships did you have with your mentor?
  - h) Do you think you changed (either professionally or personally or both) as a result of the mentoring process? If so, what do you think caused you to change?
  - i) What is the overall assessment of the mentoring process involving you as a mentee who is a tenured college instructor?
  - j) What would your definition of mentoring be for tenured academic staff?
  - k) Based on your experiences, what do you think is the most important difference between the mentoring process before and after getting tenured?
  - l) Why would you recommend any senior/tenured colleague to get involved in a mentoring process as a mentee? What should they be aware of in doing so?
  - m) What recommendations would you make to improve the structure of the mentoring process in place at your university?

These questions support a pre-/post-facto attempt to tap into the changes experienced by instructional staff during the process of seeking tenure. Such changes could range from re-focusing on scholarship that does not have the finality of promotion to a gradually decrease in motivation to stay informed professionally. Though these may be two extremes of the spectrum of possibilities, it is quite likely that most university professors fall somewhere in between, depending to some extent to the culture of the higher education institution within which they function.

Any interpretation of the qualitative data based on this proposed set of in-depth interviews should keep in mind the following recurrent concepts that Martin (2002) found in her data: *benefit, change, closeness, comfort, communication, confidence, empowerment, feedback, gifts/strengths, intimacy, openness/encouragement, reciprocity, and risk*. One possible way to incorporate these concepts into the analysis and interpretation of data would be to create categories to assist in making meaning of the input provided by interviewees.

## Conclusions

The questions mentioned above were presented to a small audience of Instructional Design professors at a national conference in the U.S. soon after they had been developed. The following input collected from the conference participants could represent categories that support the analysis and interpretation of the in-depth interviews data.

One of the main points agreed upon by a few conference participants focused on the identification of the *kinds of environment* that experienced university instructors would like to be part of along the continued process of learning. Whereas such an issue may seem a lot more significant in terms of support for new academic staff seeking tenure, senior members of the teaching staff have to set *motivational goals* for themselves outside of a structure comparable to the tenure and promotion process.



Another important aspect of mentorship that should be investigated deals with the actual identification of a *need for such structured, professional, and institutional support of seasoned college teachers*. While such support would obviously have to be flexible, conference participants recommended that mentorship for such professionals be both *needs-based* as well as *discipline-focused*. The latter category would imply establishing an interdisciplinary support group responsible for promoting a special set of professional development activities, such as a circuit of lectures or guest speakers. One tenured university professor in the audience mentioned the fact that an *interdisciplinary support group* would possibly work better provided a *discipline-specific focus or status compatibility* was ensured. The reason behind this suggestion could be connected to the perception of senior teaching staff as masters sharing their experience or expertise, both in terms of factual and procedural knowledge. In this light, these professionals playing the role of mentor and coach need to refocus and rekindle enthusiasm.

As a contributor to the institutionalized knowledge and culture, tenured college instructors have to be provided the proper context within which to recharge or redefine “the centrality of relationships”, their “commitment to student learning”, their “academic satisfaction”, as well as their “personal sacrifice and hard work” (Atkins et al., 2001). At the same time, mentoring these individuals would also allow them to avoid “burnout”, while improving teaching and, consequently, student learning and retention (Brightman, 2006). Mentoring supports high level collaboration among professional peers, which is beneficial to academic staff, students, and administrative/support staff as well (Darwin and Palmer, 2009). Continuing to grow professionally and personally in the workplace is bound to enhance the quality of institutions of higher education in today’s rapidly changing world. Living in an increasingly complex global environment, encouraging self-reflection is supportive of the process of continuous improvement designed to ensure greater retention of qualified professionals.

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