Faculty Perception of Relationship Effectiveness and Diversity in a Mentoring Program for New Faculty in the Applied Sciences

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Abstract: This naturalistic research study focused on the perceptions of faculty participants in a formal mentoring program designed to support and assist new tenure track faculty in their enculturation to the university and their progress toward tenure and promotion at a college of applied sciences at a major research university. Six themes identified during in-depth interviews were Expectations, Altruism, Commonality & Integration, Communication, and Diversity. Issues of mentoring effectiveness and perceptions of diversity in mentoring relationships were explored within mentoring dyads. Mentoring effectiveness was described primarily in terms of progress toward promotion and tenure, while diversity in terms of nationality, gender and age were reported as non-issues, but demonstrated in other ways.

Introduction

New faculty mentoring has become a prevalent form of new faculty recruitment and orientation in many colleges and universities across the country. With a greater focus in higher education on economy in recruitment, hiring, and training of junior faculty as well as retention of current experienced faculty, mentoring programs have gained more attention as an effective means of increasing faculty satisfaction (Bland, Taylor, Shollen, Weber-Main, & Mulcahy, 2007). However, even with the large amount of existing research on mentoring only minimal attention has been given to the range of diversity in mentoring of faculty. This study focuses on perceptions of mentoring effectiveness and awareness of the range of diversity in a college of applied science and arts from the perspective of a diverse faculty group involved in the process of mentoring new faculty members.

Mentoring has been defined by numerous researchers as a dynamic, reciprocal relationship in a work environment between a more advanced (mentor) and a less experienced (protégé) aimed at enhancing career and psychosocial development for both individuals (Healy & Welchert, 1990; Kram, 1985). Information on mentoring effectiveness and participant satisfaction with mentoring programs is needed for not only continuous improvement but also for increasing awareness of issues. However, many organizations do not have the time, resources or inclination to provide effective program evaluation for mentoring programs. Much of the existing research in diversity in mentoring focuses on gender and racial, ethnic or cultural issues in mentoring relationships. However, less empirical research has been done in the areas of age and intergenerational issues in mentoring (Bland, et al., 2007). Little in-depth research exists in terms of how effective high-quality mentoring relationships are developed, as well.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study was to better understand the effective development of the mentoring relationship from both mentors’ and mentees’ views and to better comprehend how
faculty awareness was conceived in regards to different aspects of diversity including cultural, ethnic, gender, and age in mentoring.

**Theoretical Framework**

This study was largely based on the theoretical framework of mentoring and mentoring enactment theory (Kalbfleisch, 2002) which emerged from the study of communication and personal relationships. This theory suggested proactive communication strategies which were used by mentors and protégés to initiate, develop, maintain, and repair mentoring relationships. This theory was informed by mentoring research and by personal relationship research; mentoring enactment theory proposed proactive communication strategies to facilitate high-quality mentoring relationships.

**Research Questions**

1. What are participants’ perceptions and expectations of the mentoring relationship?
2. How do participants view diversity in the mentoring program?
3. How do participants regard mentoring effectiveness in the mentoring relationship?

**Methods**

Through in-depth interviews with volunteer mentors and mentees in a college of applied science and arts at a large Midwestern research institution, participants’ voices described their personal experiences of mentoring relationship development in this naturalistic study. Perceptions of mentor/mentee pairs involved in a formal mentoring program was elicited with interview questions generally focused on their personal philosophy and expectations of mentoring, their perspectives of positive components of mentoring relationships, and their perceptions of diversity in mentoring. Participants were also asked how they viewed the effectiveness of mentoring relationships.

An initial introduction of the researcher was facilitated at an end-of-the-year mentoring program activity, a luncheon, orchestrated by the interim associate dean of the college. Observations of mentors and mentees engaged in an informal culminating event were gathered. Field notes were taken and examined later for main concepts. All mentoring participants were sent an email invitation to participate in informal interviews for mentoring research purposes. Two participants responded and two more were contacted after their mentors volunteered to participate. The four participant interviews followed a semi-structured interview protocol, ranged from 45 to 60 minutes in duration, and occurred at a location of the participants’ choice, usually in their offices on campus. Data was gathered and recorded with participant permission and human subjects’ approval by audio recorder. Transcripts were then typed from the recordings and coded into emerging themes, and analyzed by this researcher. Transcripts of the interview were offered to all participants, but none responded to the email invitation to review transcripts. Interview data was triangulated with observation field notes and document analysis of the college handbook describing the formal mentoring program to derive the following findings of this study.
Findings

Six primary themes emerged from the triangulation of interview, observation and document analysis data. These themes have been encapsulated into the headings of Expectations, Altruism, Commonality & Integration, Communication, and Diversity and are further described next.

**Expectations**

Expectations refers to participants’ perceptions of the purpose of mentoring. All of the participants shared a common theme in that they believed the main purpose of mentoring was to support new tenure track faculty in their “enculturation” to the university by assisting them in learning university and college policies and procedures. Of primary importance was encouraging new faculty mentees in the development of a research agenda, and assisting in the process of tenure and promotion. One faculty mentor remembered the words of his mentor when he was so busy with his Ph.D. classes and instructing that he had not done any publishing. He reported his mentor telling him “I understand how busy you are, but if you don’t publish, you’ll be a Ph.D. without a job”. The faculty mentor said that his mentor’s words had stuck with him to that day because it was reality and it kept him focused on what he needed to do to be successful.

Other objectives discussed by participants had to do with assisting mentees in developing as teachers, improving teaching skills and techniques, and mentors were available to give feedback on and assistance with classroom teaching. Advocacy within their departments was noted by participants as another expectation or function of the mentor for the purpose of supporting the mentee when they felt “overwhelmed” by departmental requests.

**Altruism**

Altruism refers to the reasons a mentor felt it was important to mentor junior faculty. One participant stated that perhaps it was because of his military background that he felt “responsible to help bring the junior faculty up” to a place of readiness. Another participant spoke of being invited by his mentor to join him in a research project to get him started in the right direction even though the mentor’s chair questioned why he wanted to share his primary investigator status with junior faculty, thus reducing his pay. Senior faculty needs to be a “little more altruistic” around here, he stated. “Mentoring is just another facet of collegiality” said one mentor; mentoring is part of the job. Participants felt their job was to perpetuate education and share with colleagues. One mentee suggested that it felt really good to know that senior faculty cared enough to spend their time supporting new faculty and that he would like to do the same for others when the time came.

**Commonality & Integration**

Commonality suggests that for a mentoring relationship to reach high-quality status there needs to be some commonality between the participants. Common interests can jumpstart a relationship by providing a means for conversation based on similar interests. Participants suggested that commonality made the initiation of a relationship easier. Conversely, the college mentoring policy was to match faculty from different departments on the premise that they were all applied fields, so there would be some basis for commonality. The administrator in charge of the mentoring program fused the concepts of commonality with integration of the college by getting to know new faculty and attempting to match them with a cross-departmental mentor.
with some common interest. Interview participants found this often effective in that they learned more about other fields and became friends with individuals whom they would not normally spend time.

**Communication**

Much has been said about the value of communication in initiating and developing relationships. Communication style was emphasized by one participant when he shared that he was very outgoing and that helped him establish mentoring relationships with mentees who were “quieter” and did not know what to expect or “who to trust” in a new environment. After the initial meeting in the dean’s office, one mentor stated that he would call his mentee the next week and invite him to his office to get acquainted. Then, the next week he would ask the mentee out for coffee or check in by email to see how things were going. Another mentor suggested that keeping in touch with calls or emails if he could not stop by their office, was important in maintaining communication and establishing the relationship. A mentee reported that frequent contacts were “instrumental in his feeling more comfortable” with his mentor and being able to ask important questions. Another mentee stated that he did not need to be contacted on a regular basis, but liked feeling comfortable he could call his mentor whenever he needed something.

**Diversity**

Diversity refers to ethnicity, national origin, gender, and age differences among people. Ethnicity did not seem to be an obvious issue addressed by the participants in terms of mentoring. However, one mentor laughed when he said that he was matched with a new faculty member because they “were both Hispanic”, and the chair thought they could “speak the same language”. He spoke Mexican and the new faculty member spoke Portuguese. “We did have a few common words that helped break the ice a little” he said. A mentee observed at the mentoring program luncheon appeared very comfortable and talkative with his mentor, using the time to catch up on how things had been going with him, suggesting that ethnic differences did not seem to hinder their relationship.

Issues of gender were not seen as an issue in mentoring relationships by participants either. One mentor stated that he treated female faculty just like he did male faculty, then in the next sentence stated that he modified his language when women were around and he opened doors for them because that is how he grew up.

Age differences were not reported by participants to be an issue in their mentoring relationships and all seemed to be approximately the same or similar ages. However, one mentor commented that “new faculty may slam into a wall of older faculty” as they approach tenure and promotion because older faculty “do not want them to have as big a slice of the pie as they have”. This suggests that age may be a factor in mentoring relationships.

**Discussion**

Perceptions shared by both mentors and mentees in this study seemed to coincide, although mentors seemed to be somewhat more realistic in their views, perhaps because of their length of time in the system. All were very positive about the worth of mentoring relationships and were committed to maintaining their relationships after the year of formal mentoring. Participants shared a collective view of their *Expectations* of the mentoring relationship in terms of furthering new faculty in their pursuit of tenure and promotion.
An overall sense of genuine caring for each other permeated the interviews of both mentors and mentees. When asked why this mentoring program seemed to work, a dean responded “because we genuinely like each other”. That sense of protection and humanity seem to support the theme of *Altruism* displayed by the mentors and appreciated by the mentees.

Examples of interpersonal communication by participants seemed to support the mentoring enactment theory’s premise that mentoring relationships are close personal relationships when they reach the high-quality mentoring level. Input and feedback suggested between dyad members further supports this theory. Individual personal filters become evident as participants talked about their perceptions, past relationships, experiences, cultures, and professional and emotional needs that influence their mentoring relationships (Kalbfleisch, 2007).

The examples used in the theme of *Diversity* seem to contradict the participants’ verbalizations that diversity was a “non-issue” in terms of mentoring. The references to nationality, age, and gender would seem to suggest that diversity is very much an issue in mentoring, even if it is often unspoken. Both the female mentee and mentor in the program (not in the same dyad) were unavailable for the mentoring program luncheon activity and did not accept my invitation to be interviewed, so it was difficult to ascertain from a female faculty perspective what issues might be surrounding gender in mentoring. From a critical perspective it would be important to gather that information before any suppositions could be made regarding gender issues, however, this researchers’ perspective is that diversity issues continue to be discounted at the university setting. It would seem that the “ole boy system” is alive and well in academia today even as efforts are made to extinguish it.

The effectiveness of mentoring relationships appears to be evaluated in terms of both the success of new faculty’s pursuit of tenure and promotion and the on-going existence of mentoring relationships that were begun as a formal effort and continue as a personal relationship. Even cross-departmental mentoring which was seen by participants as less than convenient or comfortable to begin with, became appreciated as a means of “stretching beyond our own comfort zones” to broaden perspectives and promote commonality and integration of the college. The tipping point for these mentoring relationships seemed to have centered around an event where they realized they had become friends (Ragins & Kram, 2007).

**Recommendations**

Further research is needed in regards to mentoring relationship initiation, development, and maintenance particularly in areas of diversity. With budgetary issues at the forefront of not only higher education, but most other organizations in today’s struggling economy, mentoring has become a significant strategy for not only faculty attraction and retention, but also faculty satisfaction. Students are aware of the implications of turmoil, dissatisfaction, and issues of diversity within their programs. Increasing understanding and effectiveness of mentoring techniques will positively impact students as well as faculty. Faculty members are role models for a variety of community pursuits and need to be aware of and proponents of diversity. The findings from this study can add to the body of knowledge regarding mentoring, job satisfaction, diversity, and communication in education, human resources, and management.
References


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