

Cultivating allyship through casual mentoring to promote diversity

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Abstract

Recent societal upheavals have highlighted stark inequalities that affect the livelihood of marginalized individuals pursuing research careers. Established scientists have a unique role to play as casual mentors, or experienced scholars who are well-positioned to serve as allies to early career researchers by informally advising on academia's hidden curriculum.

Main Text

"...BTW, happy to chat if you need advice..."

The first author of this paper recently received this informal statement at the end of an email exchange with a senior researcher. This reflects an example of what we refer to as "casual mentorship" - the type of everyday exchange that many scholars take for granted as part of their participation in the broader academic community.

Those who undergo graduate-level training come into contact with formal mentoring at various career stages; mentoring that a faculty member provides for an undergraduate student completing a senior honors thesis; mentoring that a dissertation advisor provides for a graduate student; mentoring that a committee composed of tenured faculty provides to a pre-tenure faculty member. Yet, these formal mentoring contexts fail to account for all of the other mentoring that develops and supports the academy and its constituent scholars.

Casual mentorship of the type that happens impromptu and often unsolicited can be even more valuable, though less recognized. Yet, the informal nature of this mentoring, though common and influential, currently functions in ways that privilege those with the "inside scoop". That is, a privileged few already have access to senior, established leaders in the field by virtue

of working at the same institution or being part of the same committees, academic societies, and editorial boards. In particular, they have the advantage of benefitting from the casual mentoring that naturally occurs during informal interactions that can take place over coffees and dinners associated with these types of academic meetings when they occur in-person. We posit that casual mentoring has the potential to blossom outside of these networks of experienced scholars. In fact, the email at the opening of this paper signals that experienced scholars can and do provide advice outside of formal academic meetings. As such, they might also be willing to lend a hand to scholars outside of these privileged networks if provided with the means, opportunity, and encouragement to do so.

We are at an inflection point in academia where we need to reimagine mentoring in all its facets, with the goal of providing mentoring opportunities to those who we seek to include but have been largely marginalized and thus are underrepresented. The purpose of this commentary is to contribute ideas to facilitate advancing this important, timely conversation. We posit that in contemporary competitive academic environments, access to casual mentoring is an essential part of training that is increasingly necessary for young academics to receive in order to progress and thrive. Individual principal investigators have a primary role to play here, by ensuring equity in access among trainees to informal mentoring opportunities. These casual conversations that can be so important for career development must occur in inclusive settings that do not favor one group or another.

Much has been written about psychology's urgent need to dismantle racism (<https://www.apa.org/monitor/2021/04/cover-dismantle-racism>), and how minorities in academia face unique challenges that mentors should acknowledge and address [1]. The global pandemic has further exacerbated the effects of systemic racism on academic careers [2]. At the

institutional level, efforts to revise graduate admissions practices and evaluation metrics for faculty advancement have been put forth [3]. If adopted widely, over time, these practices can work to dismantle systems of privilege. Yet, these efforts are by no means a panacea. That is, these efforts facilitate opening doors for historically marginalized individuals to formal mentoring opportunities. They do not address issues regarding disparities in access to casual mentoring.

Over the past several years, scientific societies and academic institutions have redoubled their efforts to adopt diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) initiatives to begin to redress these issues, namely in the development of what we refer to as “casual mentoring communities”, or infrastructure for connecting individuals at different career stages to mentoring opportunities [4]. One example of this type of initiative is the annual online international mentoring program supported by the Organization for Human Brain Mapping Student and Postdoc Special Interest Group [5]. Another example comes from the National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke, which lists as one of its specific strategies for enhancing the diversity of neuroscience researchers an emphasis on mentorship and networking in all of their training programs [6]. Still other examples consist of annual meetings like the Future Directions Forum, which focuses on providing casual mentoring on academic tasks (e.g., publishing, grant writing, job searching) in group and one-on-one mentoring scenarios [7]. The types of diverse mentoring networks that programs like these provide are particularly crucial for supporting the careers of minority scientists [8].

Beyond these casual mentoring communities, individual scholars might also facilitate access to information and resources for minority scientists. A recent survey revealed that historically underrepresented neuroscientists (e.g., from Black and Hispanic backgrounds) are

more likely to have been the first person in their family to graduate from a 4-year college or university than well-represented (e.g., from White or Asian backgrounds) scientists. In this survey, underrepresented scientists reported feeling more support from faculty outside their institutions during their Ph.D. program than well-represented respondents [9]. These findings indicate that individual-focused casual mentoring factors prominently in the academic careers of minoritized individuals.

Senior (often White male) academics have a wealth of knowledge about the “hidden curricula” of academia: knowledge about essential academic tasks (e.g., job interviewing and starting a laboratory) about which instructors within formal pedagogical contexts (e.g., doctoral coursework) often dedicate little-to-no attention [10]. As the historical majority in most institutions of higher education, these scholars are in a position to provide one-on-one, personalized advice on sensitive topics that are not typically addressed in public or group settings. Having access to networks of senior academics who can peel back the curtain on the inner workings of academia is one direct means for early career researchers (ECRs) to gain valuable information that is critical for career advancement.

For example, it is well documented that there are gender and racial disparities in success of negotiation [11], which can come into play during high-stakes scenarios such as discussion of academic salary and startup packages. Multiple career development workshops exist on the topic; these training opportunities can provide excellent tips on negotiation strategies broadly. Still, what an ECR can often benefit the most from is information about what specifically, in a given field, are the norms surrounding key elements of these negotiations, namely salary and startup funds for research. Accurate, discipline-specific information is often difficult to come by. Thus, individuals often resort to informal queries when attempting to conduct research and

gather information on these topics. Indeed, it is most useful to know what type of salary and startup a senior academic *in your specific discipline* might expect, or at least think is reasonable. Similarly, there are “unwritten rules” about how to approach editors of journals with pre-submission inquiries prior to article submission, and how to build relationships and solicit feedback from program officers at funding agencies like the National Institute of Health and the National Science Foundation, the major funding agencies in the United States.

Senior established academics can make themselves more available to ECRs for the type of targeted, one-on-one mentorship we discuss here. These types of mentoring relationships need not be lifelong, or even continuous for them to be useful. There are certain career transitions, particularly during preparation for entering the academic job market or negotiating the terms of a faculty appointment, during which ECRs can benefit from one-off conversations and advice that an established researcher can easily provide with minimal “cost” (e.g., an hour of their time).

How can we increase opportunities for both parties to engage in this type of casual mentorship? The “bottom-up” approach would be to encourage young scientists to send unsolicited emails directly to individuals from whom they think they might receive relevant career advice. Indeed, effective self-management for ECRs involves actively creating a network of mentors at different career stages [12]. This “cold-calling approach” could potentially result, however, in unanswered emails and frustration. In this respect, “top-down” approaches like the casual mentoring communities we previously described provide a means by which senior academics can make known their interest in serving as casual mentors. In **Box 1**, we provide additional suggestions for how senior academics can advertise their willingness to participate in cross-institutional mentorship.

In our experience, those who have been in academia for many years and have enjoyed a successful career often comment that mentoring the next generation of scientists is one of the most rewarding aspects of the profession. Being more intentional, open, and inclusive in our mentoring practices by actively seeking out opportunities to engage in “casual mentorship”, in particular with minoritized scientists, is a concrete way in which senior academics can promote diversity in academia. A simple willingness to commit to responding to casual mentoring requests can be one potential means for addressing the “leaky pipeline” to retain and support underrepresented minorities in science [13].

Box 1. Ways to advertise openness to casual mentoring

Senior academics are often willing, able, and eager to provide casual mentoring to ECRs, particularly those who are underrepresented in academia. We suggest that senior researchers could post this intention to respond to mentoring requests explicitly on either a lab website or on social media. For example, allies and would-be sponsors might consider including the statement “Available for academic career advice” in their Twitter bio. One option would be for interested potential mentors to advertise “virtual office hours” publicly using scheduling tools such as <https://youcanbook.me/>. Such tools obviate the need for back-and-forth scheduling emails and lower the barrier (and intimidation factor) to contacting senior scientists for the first time. In addition, scheduling tools can help individuals to set boundaries so that casual mentoring does not reach the point of becoming burdensome. As virtual mentoring becomes more common [14], the opportunities for reaching broad, diverse pools of ECRs continue to increase.

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