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Mentoring: Perceptions of Three Junior Faculty

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Abstract: *Mentoring is recognized as an effective way to support the development of junior faculty in higher education. Engagement in an informal or formal mentoring program will support the development of junior faculty on the path to tenure. Because the needs of individual faculty vary, many institutions of higher education have implemented formal mentoring programs. This study explored the perceptions of three junior faculty participating in university-based mentoring programs using a moderate approach to autoethnography. Results of a qualitative analysis of personal narratives indicates that the participants were engaged in formal and informal mentoring programs. This article describes the specific mentoring experiences of three junior faculty which support the need for mentoring programs and provides suggestions for junior faculty seeking mentorship.*

Key Words: informal mentoring, formal mentoring, junior faculty, autoethnography

As junior faculty enter a career in higher education, there is an expectation to develop an academic trajectory that will lead to success in the areas of research, teaching, and service. In addition to the rigorous expectations of higher education, faculty are also experiencing an emotional transition to the academic and social culture of a new campus, town, or city (Eddy & Gaston-Gayles, 2008). Consequently, junior faculty often feel overwhelmed during the first few years of their academic careers and may seek mentors to navigate the cultural adjustments necessary to develop the skills to successfully advance their academic careers (Bottoms et al., 2013; Faurer, Sutton, & Worster, 2014; Gaskin, Lumpkin, & Tennant, 2003; Leslie, Lingard, & Whyte, 2005).

Although mentoring has become an expectation among new faculty, the engagement differs based on the specific needs, experience, and expectations of the new faculty and the institution (Bean, Lucas, & Hyers, 2014; Harvey, Ambler, & Cahir, 2016; June, 2008). To meet the needs of faculty, there is a national push to provide formalized mentoring as a successful tool to retain faculty (Rockquemore, 2011). Thus, some universities have developed new faculty mentoring programs specifically designed to support the development of successful mentoring relationships, as it is thought that engagement in a reciprocal mentoring program will likely contribute to the productivity and success of new faculty (Fountain & Newcomer, 2016; Franko et al., 2016; Gaskin et al., 2003; Kjeldsen, 2006).

Multiple mentoring formats are implemented across disciplines such as formal mentoring, alternative mentoring, small group mentoring, peer mentoring, mutual mentoring, and informal

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mentoring (Bottoms et al., 2013; Fountain & Newcomer, 2016; Franko et al., 2016; Yun, Baldi, & Sorcinelli, 2016). Most of these mentoring formats consist of various structured activities such as coaching, modeling, structured email communication, or engagement in daily or weekly check-in (Franko et al., 2016; Mijares, Baxley, & Bond, 2013). Other alternative mentoring formats are more flexible in nature consisting of less prescriptive supports based on the individual needs of the faculty (Bottoms et al., 2013). Supports such as informal meetings, interactions at conferences, feedback on ideas, and providing guidance and feedback through conversations may also contribute to the mentoring experience (Bottoms et al., 2013; Wall, 2016). Although the framework of mentoring programs may differ in terms of structure and expectations, a common definition of mentoring is described by Zellers, Howard, and Barcic (2008) as "a reciprocal learning relationship characterized by trust, respect, and commitment in which a mentor supports the professional and personal development of another (*the protege*) by sharing his or her life experiences, influence, and expertise" (p. 555).

Researchers examined the importance and benefits of informal and formal mentoring structures (Fox, Waldron, Bohnert, Hishinuma, & Nordquist, 1998; Haynes & Petrosko, 2009; Law et al., 2014; Leslie, Lingard, & Whyte, 2005). Both informal and formal mentoring programs offer a variety of options for engaging in reciprocal interactions. Mentor and protege interactions may occur through the use of scheduled meetings, virtual communication sessions, emails, phone conversations, and media platforms. Preference for a particular type of engagement will ultimately depend on the needs of the individual faculty (Franko et al., 2016). To determine the preferred format of mentoring support it is important to first understand the differences between commonly implemented mentoring structures. For the purpose of this article, the authors focus on the broad engagement in informal and formal mentoring programs.

INFORMAL MENTORING

Informal mentoring consists of less structured interactions between a mentor and mentee that foster a relationship over time (Bottoms et al., 2013; Leslie et al., 2005). The overarching goal of informal mentoring is for a mentor and a mentee to develop an organic relationship that focuses on the exchange of relevant tips, timely advice, and miscellaneous information without a mandated or structured schedule (Leslie et al., 2005; Pololi & Knight, 2005). Ultimately, an informal relationship requires a long-term time investment for the mentee and mentor to develop mutual trust and respect for one another (Bottoms et al., 2013; Gaskin et al., 2013; Mijares et al., 2013; Weber, 2017). The flexible structure of an informal mentoring relationship requires the mentee to recognize specific areas of need and seek guidance in particular areas. Specifically, informal mentoring provides an equitable structure encouraging ongoing collaboration between faculty (Bottoms et al., 2013). Researchers suggest that because informal mentoring is generally spontaneous and long lasting it may be more effective than formal mentoring (Law et al., 2014; Lumpkin, 2011; Ragins, Cotton, & Miller, 2000). However, Law et al. (2014) also recognized that many faculty mentors and mentees may be more comfortable with a formal program that provides both parties with goals and items to discuss regarding general expectations.

FORMAL MENTORING

The purpose of formal mentoring is to provide a structured arrangement in which mentors are paired with mentees (Gaskin et al., 2003; Lumpkin, 2011). Formal mentoring programs may or may not be voluntary and outline specific requirements for expectations of the mentee and mentor that likely vary across institutions (Allen, Eby, & Lentz, 2006; Law et al., 2014).

Requirements may consist of regularly scheduled meetings, university or college-wide induction activities, and specific topics that must be outlined and addressed over a specified period of time (Gaskin et al., 2003; Law et al., 2014). A formal structure communicates mentoring as a valued part of academia and the commitment of particular university to the development of junior faculty (Lumpkin, 2011). Researchers have identified increased job performance, enhanced confidence, improved job satisfaction, and reductions in faculty turnover as positive consequences of formal mentoring programs (Allen, Eby, & Lentz, 2006; Law et al., 2014), while a lack of mentoring opportunities has been connected with burnout, stress, and turnover (Law et al., 2014).

Overall, formal and informal mentoring programs provide support and guidance that many junior faculty are seeking in academia. Junior faculty often benefit from mentoring during the transition from graduate student to faculty as well as during the tenure process (Bottoms et al., 2013; Taylor, Richmond, & Was, 2015). Through the implementation of mentoring programs, junior faculty develop better interpersonal relationships that provide on-going support that fosters the development of knowledge and skills to be successful in the areas of research, teaching, and service (Gaskin et al., 2003). Although various mentoring programs have been implemented for some time, it is important to understand the needs and perceptions of current junior faulty.

PURPOSE

During a conference session for early career faculty at a regional research conference, the topic of mentoring emerged as a strategy to support junior faculty. A brief discussion was held regarding the different types of mentoring and reasons one may want to engage in mentoring. Following this session, three early career faculty continued the conversation regarding their personal views and experiences with mentoring. Through this conversation the three faculty recognized similarities and differences in their experiences which led to the decision to formally reflect on their mentoring experiences. Therefore, the purpose of this article is to explore the lived mentoring experiences of three junior faculty through a moderate autoethnographic process (Wall, 2016).

The specific research questions addressed were:

1. What has been your mentoring experience to this point in your academic career?
2. Based on these experiences, what are your recommendations for a successful transition to academia?

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

The participants in this study were three junior faculty. One participant was a first-year tenure-track assistant professor at a very high research activity university, with prior university experience. The second participant was a first-year faculty-in-residence at a community college who recently completed a doctoral program. The third participant was a fifth-year faculty in a tenure-track position at a research and teaching university.

To ensure the confidentially of the participants' narrative responses and to protect the potential vulnerability of conducting an autoethnography, the researchers selected a moderate approach to autoethnography and obtained approval by the institutional internal review board. (Wall, 2016). This approach to autoethnography provides the opportunity for researchers to confidentially reflect on personal, lived experiences through conducting an analysis of a narrative

response (Custer, 2014), to make connections between the social and cultural experiences of a person with a particular field or organization. For the purposes of this article, pseudonyms Sandy, Amanda, and Lisa are randomly assigned to the participants.

DATA COLLECTION

This autoethnography was conducted over two phases. During Phase One the participants held a meeting to discuss the overall goals of the project and to craft the first writing prompt (i.e., Research Question 1). Following this discussion, each participant independently responded to the question: What has been your mentoring experience to this point in your academic career? Participants had one month to respond to the prompt. Following the completion of the initial response, each participant reviewed all of the narrative responses and provided probing questions to other participants to further understand the context of the narratives. Then the participants edited the narratives based on the probing questions to further explain concepts and finalize their drafts. Once all narratives were completed, a qualitative analysis of each response was conducted.

To begin Phase Two of the study, the participants reviewed the analysis of the first prompt which led to the development of the second prompt (i.e., Research Question 2): Based on these experiences, what are your recommendations for a successful transition to academia? The participants completed the response, review, and analysis following the same format used in the first phase.

DATA ANALYSIS

The narrative responses from both phases of this study were analyzed using an inductive analysis approach (Thomas, 2006). This approach focuses on analyzing the narrative responses of each participant to identify common themes and connections in the data leading to the development of a framework (Thomas, 2006). Using this type of analysis provides a specific structure to the process of analyzing an autoethnography (Wall, 2016).

The first step in this process was to conduct an initial round of coding during Phase One for the first research question. During this round of coding, all participants read each narrative response multiple times to identify common themes in each narrative (Thomas, 2006). Once the independent analyses were completed and themes were identified, the participants met to discuss the themes identified by each author. An in-depth discussion led to the agreement of a framework with one main theme and three sub-themes. Following the discussion and determination of themes, the last step was to conduct interrater reliability of the data. An associate professor who specializes in qualitative analysis conducted an independent review of the data and independently identified themes. After some discussion with all participants, consensus was reached regarding the main theme and sub-themes. The last step of the analysis led to the development of the second research question. Analysis of the second question during Phase Two was conducted in the same format as Phase One.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Following are results from each phase of the study. Included with the results are a discussion of how these findings relate to current literature and professional practices of mentoring.

PHASE ONE

The first question posed to the participants was: What has been your mentoring experience to this point in your academic career? After independent responses were completed, data analysis of this question resulted in one theme and three subthemes. The main theme that emerged from the analysis across all responses was the type of mentoring engagement, whether informal or formal (see Figure 1). Each of the participants experienced a formal mentoring program consistent with the types of formal mentoring programs reflected in mentoring literature (Bean et al., 2014; Bottoms et al., 2013; Yun et al., 2016). However, the look and function of these programs differed across each of the participants' institutions. For example, Sandy was required to participate in a new faculty mentoring program. This program was conducted within the college but allowed the faculty "a level of flexibility to determine the preferred level of engagement." This allowed Sandy to independently seek out formal mentors for specified areas of perceived need.

Lisa also received the support of a formal mentoring program. This program provided an assigned mentor for guidance during the transition to a higher education faculty position. This mentoring program required "formal meetings, writing assignments, and teacher observations." The structure of a formal mentoring program for Amanda consisted of "being paired with a senior faculty prior to arrival on campus." This relationship provided the opportunity to engage in multiple conversations during the move and transition to a new city. Although this mentor was assigned, there was a "mutual respect developed over time" that proved beneficial as Amanda sought advice.

The importance of informal mentors consistently emerged throughout the responses in Phase One. These informal relationships were developed to support specific areas of individual need creating an "extra layer of support" as indicated by Sandy. Throughout the participant responses, informal mentors were mentioned specifically within the subthemes as indicated by Amanda, as "relationships that develop overtime and are built on experience and trust." These responses were consistent with the literature that informal mentors are built on a good fit between individuals (Bean et al., 2014). Following the analysis of formal and informal mentoring programs, further review of the narratives resulted in three sub-themes: (a) teaching, (b) research, and (c) politics (see Figure 1).

TEACHING. Within the area of teaching, the narrative responses focused on the idea of seeking mentorship to understand the expectations of the new teaching environment. Amanda indicated that informal mentoring relationships in this area "were developed by taking the time to get to know other faculty members." For example, when one faculty inquired as to how teaching was going, a perfect opportunity was presented to Sandy to "discuss how to manage time spent on grading, adjusting assignments, planning lectures, and developing course content." Sandy further explained the development of this relationship as "coffee conversations" that led to deeper conversations and guidance. Amanda stated that informal mentors who were identified as supporting the teaching needs of the participants were "typically found in the department or college" of the faculty member and were just a natural fit (Bean et al., 2014). However, for Lisa mentoring in the area of teaching was more formal, requiring participation. Through formal mentoring Lisa met with the mentor during "regularly scheduled meetings" and discussed similar topics as those discussed with the informal mentors. This type of formal mentoring was perceived as difficult and less beneficial due to the "lack of a real connection" with the mentor.

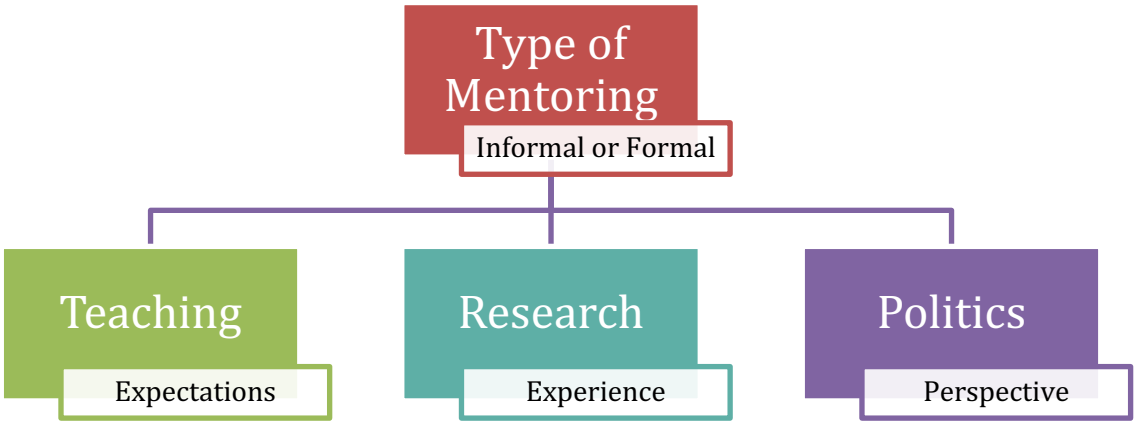

Figure 1. Qualitative results of Research Question 1: What has been your mentoring experience to this point in your academic career?

RESEARCH. The second theme that emerged from the analysis was the need for mentorship in the area of research and scholarly productivity. Specifically, Amanda noted that she was mentored to understand that "research matters more than any of the other categories." Within the area of research, Sandy, Amanda, and Lisa wrote about the process of seeking mentorship to assist in developing appropriate and realistic lines of inquiry that would provide the necessary publications to meet the expectations of the college and university.

Lisa consistently reiterated the importance of having informal mentors in this area. The first type of mentor was based on an informal relationship with a "former advisor" or doctoral chair from whom the faculty member could confidentially seek research advice and guidance. Amanda wrote about a second type of informal mentor being a prior or current colleague. She described this type of mentor as being potential collaborators who have the "ability and willingness to engage in new or ongoing research studies, writing groups, conference presentations, and other scholarly activities." The third type of mentor noted in this area by Sandy was an informal mentor who was a "current colleague of a higher rank." This was a full professor that Sandy respected as researcher. For this type of mentorship, Sandy emphasized that this relationship was first built on "respect for the faculty's history of scholarship and their publication record" and secondly on the trust developed over time.

POLITICS. The third theme that emerged across the participants' narratives was the need for support in campus and college policies (Bottoms et al., 2013). These policies were identified as the politics one must understand to be successful in academia. Amanda noted, "academia, like any other profession, has unwritten rules." As junior faculty it is important to understand the "hierarchy and function of the department, college, and university." She expanded the idea of having an informal mentor as one who will "help navigate this unmarked path" by providing guidance and advice. This mentor can provide a deeper understanding of the underlying expectations and metrics of a specific institution (Taylor, Richmond, & Was, 2015). Sandy reiterated this importance by stating that "understanding the underlying processes will provide

clarity in terms of the expectations and norms of the academic environment." Lisa also recognized mentorship in this area as being important and "beneficial to seek advice for committee work and other service commitments" that would be appropriate for career development. All three participants felt that having a mentor in the area of college-wide and campus logistics would provide support with the day-to-day tasks that take place during the tenure process.

PHASE TWO

The second question posed to the participants was: Based on these experiences, what are your recommendations for a successful transition to academia? The same procedures for writing a narrative response to the question and conducting the qualitative analysis were used during this phase. From this analysis, the main theme that emerged was the idea that the transition to academia is an ongoing cyclical process in which one must continually seek mentorship. Since mentoring needs may vary over time as faculty focus on broadened research and teaching responsibilities, it is important to reflect upon one's mentoring relationships and evaluate the need for new mentors or additional (Bean et al., 2014). Within this cycle there were four sub-themes (a) obtaining foundational learning, (b) seeking mentorship, (c) developing a network and (d) receiving support with teaching (see Figure 2).

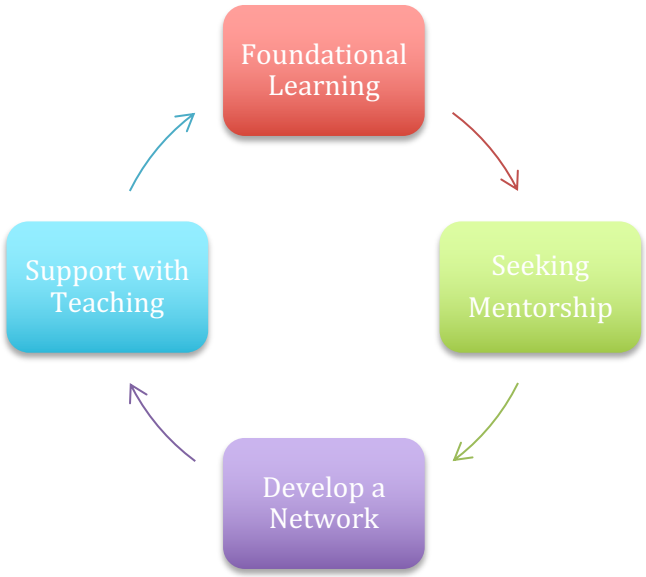

Figure 2. Qualitative analysis of Research Question 2: Based on these experiences, what are your recommendations for a successful transition to academia?

OBTAINING FOUNDATIONAL LEARNING. While all three of the participants mentioned that mentoring begins from the time you select your doctoral advisor, it was noted that mentors may be revisited as one's career progresses (Bean et al., 2014). Mentors come in different forms and will vary based on individual needs (Bean et al., 2014). Thus, faculty should be open to developing new mentoring relationships throughout their careers. Amanda highlighted that "an advisor becomes one of your most important mentors" by guiding the selection of relevant coursework based on areas of interest, modeling scholarly productivity, recognizing opportunities for personal development, and providing guidance through the job search process.

As a doctoral student, Amanda recalled having "a weekly meeting to discuss questions about academia" with her advisor. From these meetings, Amanda was provided opportunities to

"know what it would be like to be a faculty member." For example, Amanda had the opportunity to participate on a search committee. This experience allowed her to see "how the process worked from a hiring perspective" and ultimately helped her understand "the expectations of the job search process." Sandy recalled working on "scholarly activities with her advisor such as being a guest reviewer for a journal under the supervision of my advisor." From these experiences, Sandy was able to "understand and engage in activities that are not necessarily covered in coursework." Lisa also suggested that a true "mentorship develops and grows throughout a doctoral program." For Amanda, Lisa, and Sandy, this mentor continues to be one of the most respected individuals in the ongoing cycle of academia. However, there comes a time when the mentoring of an advisor begins to shift and other mentoring relationships are developed.

SEEKING MENTORSHIP. It is important to seek mentorship upon entering a new position. However, Lisa, Amanda, and Sandy noted the importance of seeking mentorship within the college, university, and outside of the university. Lisa said, it is "important to note that finding a mentor will take time" and one must focus on developing trusting reciprocal relationships (Bottoms et al., 2013). Mentors within the college will provide the guidance and inside knowledge a new faculty member may need. This mentor may also provide guidance through the nuances of the tenure process (Taylor et al., 2015). Additionally, a mentor from another area on the university campus "could provide support needed to understand institutional knowledge and the true underlying expectations of the campus community" as stated by Amanda. Lastly, Sandy pointed out that a mentor outside of one's home institution will allow "one to be vulnerable and honest regarding the pressures of academia." This type of mentor serves as a "sounding board when situations arise that are not easily solved." Because the needs of the individual will change as one navigates a career in academia, mentors may change as well.

DEVELOPING A NETWORK. Amanda discussed in detail the importance of developing a "professional learning network." The idea of this network is to develop a small unit of people that you "get along with, respect, and trust." Engaging in various networks will provide the unique opportunity to develop relationships that match individual needs (Yun, Baldi, Sorcinelli, 2016). Amanda suggested, "one way to develop a network is to attend a small research conference." A smaller conference will afford the opportunity to network with faculty from other universities and "truly create bonds that last from year to year." These networks will provide ongoing opportunities to engage with peers at the same point in their careers in research and writing activities (Bottoms et al., 2013).

RECEIVING SUPPORT WITH TEACHING. Teaching is important and often overwhelms new faculty. Depending on the teaching loads of particular universities and colleges, junior faculty may spend hours prepping, grading, and reflecting on their teaching. Amanda suggested that new faculty should seek a mentor to "find out what it means to be a good teacher" and Lisa mentioned the importance of engaging with this mentor to "determine how teaching will be evaluated." Reaching out to faculty mentors within ones program area, faculty can gain a better understanding of these expectations (Taylor et al., 2015). Doing so will provide clarity in the amount of time one should spend on preparing lectures and grading.

CONCLUSION

Throughout the process of conducting and analyzing this autoethnography, the participants realized that one of the most important reasons to engage in mentoring as junior faculty is to understand the nuances associated with working in higher education. Even though the needs of each individual faculty member will differ (Franko et al., 2016), engagement in mentorship provides an opportunity to develop a network of support as junior faculty navigate through the academic process (Bottoms et al., 2013; Harvey et al., 2016; June, 2008; Yun et al., 2016). The participants recognized through this analysis that mentoring relationships are in fact developed over time through multiple reciprocal interactions with an informal or formal mentor (Fountain & Newcomer, 2016; Franko et al., 2016; Gaskin et al., 2003; Kjeldsen, 2006). Because the needs of the junior faculty may vary throughout one's career, ongoing interactions with mentors will foster the development of a well-developed trusting relationship that will likely last throughout one's career (Bean et al., 2014).

Faculty who do not have the opportunity to participate in a formal mentoring program may want to seek support through informal mentoring. To do so, junior faculty should take the time to get to know senior faculty in their colleges and across departments or program areas. Often these relationships grow and develop into true friendships and provide the unique opportunity for faculty to ask for guidance in areas that one might not feel comfortable discussing with a more formal mentor. Another form of mentoring support for junior faculty may come from peer relationships as they are at the same place in their career (Bottom et al., 2 013). These relationships may begin at informal meetings at small research conferences or through community activities within academia.

Ultimately, informal and formal mentors have the opportunity to provide ongoing support based on the unique needs of the junior faculty regarding the areas of research, teaching, and service (Gaskin et al., 2003). Mentors help junior faculty understand the nuances of higher education and how to create a balanced career (Taylor et al., 2015). Although mentoring programs continue to gain popularity, each college or university may or may not provide a mentoring structure for junior faculty. Therefore, the onus is on the junior faculty to determine their individual needs and to foster the development of their own mentoring network.

LIMITATIONS

There are several limitations to the current study. First, the participants were from three different types of universities. Thus the needs and expectations very well could impact the perceptions of various formal and informal mentoring engagements. Secondly, the participants were all junior faculty at different points in their career. The differences in years as junior faculty could have impacted perceptions. Lastly, the moderate approach to autoethnography used for this study was selected to protect the vulnerability of the participants but also led to broad examples sometimes lacking specific levels of detail. An anonymous submission of mentoring narratives to a researcher may provide more details regarding both positive and negative mentoring experiences of junior faculty.

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