Supporting Tenure-Seeking Faculty in Online Programs: A Critical Discourse Analysis

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Abstract

The purpose of this research was to examine the needs of tenure-seeking faculty teaching in online programs and how they can best be supported by mentoring. Through the lens of Yob and Crawford's (2012) conceptual framework for mentoring, we examine through critical discourse analysis how 19 online tenure-seeking faculty talk about mentoring. Very little research has been conducted on the online tenure-seeking faculty experience. Much of the research in this area focuses on their work in the online classroom but not on them as individuals in relation to the academy. The problem we seek to address for online tenure-seeking faculty is the lack of understanding related to the types of support through mentorship that would best meet their needs. Our findings suggest that online tenure-seeking faculty discussed support in two ways: 1) support is non-existent where needed and 2) support is present and either sufficient, insufficient, or the faculty are not aware of the support. Online tenure-seeking faculty desire more intentional mentorship relationships that meet the needs of their unique roles both academically and psychosocially. This implies that institutions of higher education must intentionally structure online tenure-seeking faculty mentorships around the online modality of their roles, create multiple layers of mentorship addressing the business of higher education and personal growth and development, while also attending to tenure requirements and expectations. We conclude that intentionality is key to creating successful online tenure-seeking faculty mentorship programs.

Keywords: Online faculty support, faculty development, tenure-seeking faculty, mentoring, critical discourse analysis

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The role of tenure-seeking faculty can be demanding and requires navigating the higher education system to prepare for tenure and promotion. However, for online tenure-seeking faculty, the experience can be even more daunting. Therefore, having a strong mentor can be beneficial. Vaill and Testori (2012) state that "mentoring is a vital part of the online faculty development process" (p. 116). Mentors provide emotional support, opportunities to communicate and ask questions, help with the transference of institutional knowledge, and assist with creating challenges for growth and maturity within a faculty role.

Unfortunately, there is a dearth in the research related to mentoring online tenure-seeking faculty. Much of the research about online tenure-seeking faculty experiences focuses on their work with students in the online classroom (e.g., DeCoito & Estaiteye, 2022; Martin, Dennen et al., 2020; Martin, Sun et al., 2020; Martin et al., 2023; Oyarzun & Martin, 2023) but not on them as individuals. The problem we seek to address for online tenure-seeking faculty is the lack of understanding related to their needs for mentoring. Therefore, the purpose of this research is to examine the needs of online tenure-seeking faculty and how they can best be supported through mentoring. Using critical discourse analysis (CDA), we seek to answer the following research question: How do tenure-seeking faculty teaching in online programs talk about their mentoring experiences?

Literature Review

In the following section, we look at what it means to be tenure-seeking. Specifically, we focus on literature related to workload demands, socio-emotional well-being, and challenges related to navigating institutional culture. We also address current forms of faculty support related to mentorship.

What Does It Mean to Be Tenure-Seeking?

According to the American Association of University Professors (AAUP, 2023), "a tenured appointment is an indefinite appointment that can be terminated only for cause or under extraordinary circumstances such as financial exigency and program discontinuation" (n.p.). The primary purpose of tenure is to protect academic freedom and the constitutional rights of free speech for those who teach in academia. "When faculty members can lose their positions because of their speech, publications, or research findings, they cannot properly fulfill their core responsibilities to advance and transmit knowledge" (AAUP, 2023, n.p.). Therefore, faculty who are tenure seeking desire job security and these protections.

To gain tenure, faculty must apply for and obtain a tenure-seeking assistant professor position and then work to achieve the milestones outlined by their institution (i.e., university, college/school, department and/or program). This usually means excelling in three areas of scholarship: research, teaching, and service. Faculty expectations related to these three areas can vary across institutions and are determined by the institution's ranking (i.e., R1, R2, M1, M2). Tenure-seeking faculty must provide documentation showing they have met the criteria defined by their institution for tenure and present their documentation for review by their school/college, as well as outside reviewers within their field.

Learning how to not only meet, but also excel in the requirements can be demanding and contribute to additional challenges. Research has shown that these challenges include workload demand and socio-emotional well-being (Bohan & Perrotta, 2020; Greene et al., 2008; Kellen & Kumar, 2021; Kibaru, 2018; O'Meara et al., 2022; Seaton & Schwier, 2014). The underlying issues related to workload demand seem to consistently be related to a lack of intentionality (Earnshaw & Bodine Al-Sharif, 2023) and deliberate design within the structure and culture of academic departments. Faculty teaching responsibilities may have an impact on tenure and promotion related to research productivity due to the unbalanced workload (Greene et al., 2008; Seaton & Schwier, 2014). In a study conducted by Greene et al. (2008), tenure-seeking faculty reported:

> Teaching responsibilities consumed the majority of their workload, yet…research productivity was the major factor in determining tenure and promotion…Since tenure decisions are largely based on productivity of publications rather than teaching, this was a major source of stress for many respondents. (p. 432)

These workload inequities may lower faculty productivity and decrease retention, while also impacting their socio-emotional well-being. Additionally, faculty may "feel unrecognized and unrewarded for their many years of 'above level' service [and] will inevitably experience disengagement and burn out" (O'Meara et al., 2022, p. 4).

There may be additional challenges for faculty teaching in online programs. Online faculty are working traditional business hours to be available for faculty meetings, professional development, service-related meetings, and research. But for faculty who teach online, the hours worked may extend into evenings and weekends, thus blurring the lines between work hours and non-work hours. "With online teaching, there is never a finite start and stop class period" (Richter & Schuessler, 2019, p. 28). Many online students are working adults who are doing their schoolwork outside of business hours, so faculty may have office hours or are responding to student emails during that time. The notion of online faculty always needing to be available for students has been referenced in several studies (Kibaru, 2018; Lin et al., 2012; Richter & Schuessler, 2019; Seaton & Schwier, 2014).

Kellen and Kumar (2021) conducted a literature review on the barriers faculty face while teaching online. They identified several studies (Bohan & Perrotta, 2020; Kibaru, 2018; Seaton & Schwier, 2014) that discussed how online faculty, specifically, "suffered feelings of professional isolation and missed informal colleague exchanges, particularly if they lacked an on-campus workspace" (Kellen & Kumar, 2021, Barriers to Achieving Professional Success section). Bohan and Perrotta (2020) also noted this sense of isolation in their study. "The lack of regular in-person interactions with colleagues and students caused both authors to feel disconnected at times from their academic communities, especially since they both taught asynchronous online courses" (p. 58).

New tenure-seeking faculty who teach online not only need to juggle the demands of online teaching and workload, but they also need to juggle the demands of navigating an institutional culture while also being aware of tenure policies and working toward tenure and

promotion (McCormick & Barnes, 2008). Having support in these areas can be extremely beneficial for tenure-seeking faculty.

Current Forms of Faculty Support

There is a plethora of support offered to tenure-seeking faculty at institutions across the United States (CSU Channel Islands, 2023; KSU, 2023; Mbuagbaw et al., 2020; PennState, 2023). This support may come in the way of being assigned a formal mentor, receiving recognition or financial incentives, having professional development for online pedagogy, and receiving technical training. Additionally, there may be research groups or identity-based support groups (i.e., early career tenure-seeking faculty, parents in academia, BIPOC faculty, global faculty). Offices of research or centers for teaching and learning may also offer various professional development courses to assist tenure-seeking faculty. While these support offices serve an important purpose for tenure-seeking faculty, they do not always meet the unique needs of the online faculty experience due to issues of access, modality, time constraints, and emphasis on one area (i.e., teaching). However, this does not fully address the tenure-seeking portion of their role.

Mentoring, both formal and informal, can help tenure-seeking faculty understand tenure policies and help them connect to other resources across campus (Greene et al., 2008; Walzer & Trower, 2010). "Assistant professors are more successful in research and scholarly productivity when they receive mentoring from multiple sources" (Lumpkin, 2011, p. 363). Mentoring groups can also help tenure-seeking faculty contribute "to a sense of community, belonging, and emotional support, while also increasing productivity related to scholarly activities and goals" (Gosling et al., 2020, p. 74).

Conceptual Framework

Much of the research related to mentoring in higher education focuses on doctoral programs and specifically, the faculty-to-graduate student relationship (Byrnes et al., 2019; Kumar et al., 2022; Kumar et al., 2023; Yob & Crawford, 2012). Our research looks specifically at mentoring between tenure-seeking online faculty and more senior faculty. Therefore, we adapted Yob and Crawford's (2012) conceptual framework for mentoring that was initially used to examine the faculty and graduate student relationship to our work. The conceptual framework for mentoring captures two broad domains for mentors: academic and psychosocial. The academic domain refers to the "technical and information functions of the mentor" (Yob & Crawford, 2012, p. 38) that is related to knowledge transfer for the attributes of competence, availability, induction, and challenges. For our work, competence includes having the needed expertise and ethics to provide needed support related to institutional knowledge and navigation of institutional systems. Availability refers to the mentors sharing of time and accessibility for both professional and non-professional issues—taking time to advise, socialize, and converse in a variety of different spaces and on different, but pertinent, issues. Induction in our work refers to the work of a mentor in introducing or transitioning their mentees into their professional roles and faculty through career development and imparting information and guidance related to institutional and departmental culture. Finally, mentors must also be able to challenge their mentees in spaces where growth is needed through constructive criticism and questioning.

The psychosocial domain refers to the "qualities and skills in building and sustaining interpersonal relationships, and the values, attitudes, and affects involved in mentoring (Yob & Crawford, 2012, p. 41). This encompasses the following attributes: personal qualities, communication, and emotional support. Personal qualities refer to the mentor's ability to build trust, respect, openness, and shared interest with the mentee while also surrendering control over time to allow the mentee to fully engage independently in their faculty role. Mentors must also be competent and credible communicators who value mentee silence for reflection, provide affirming body language, and can effectively confirm understanding through collegial dialogue and even disagreement. Emotional support is dependent upon the mentor showing a genuine interest and concern for the mentee as an individual and requires the mentor to provide encouragement and affirmations and display emotional intelligence during interactions with the mentee. Importantly, there must also be "a greater degree of boundary crossing, that is, cross-sharing elements of one's personal life, opinions, and activities between mentees and mentors . . . [as] one would find in other kinds of professional relationships" (Yob & Crawford, 2012, p. 44).

Methodological Approach

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is the methodological approach we selected for this work (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997; van Dijk, 1995). CDA is an interdisciplinary analytical framework used to study discourse (Mullet, 2018; van Dijk, 2011). It is important to note that what makes this methodology *critical* is the way in which discourse is examined in relation to social conditions and power relationships (Chilton, 2012). Wodak (2001) stated that CDA is embedded within concepts of power, history, and ideology that can be captured through discourse. Mullet (2018) noted that CDA is used to "identify discourses of power and avoid language that accepts discourse of power as normative" (p. 134). CDA was the appropriate choice for this research because it provided an avenue for the researchers to investigate the ways in which tenure-seeking faculty teaching in online programs talk about the mentoring support they need as individuals in relation to tenure and promotion, workloads associated with online teaching, and engagement with students and colleagues.

Research Team

Both researchers are tenure-seeking assistant professors who serve at institutions in the southeastern Carnegie region (CCIHE, n.d.) of the United States. The first researcher has been a full-time instructor and adjunct faculty member at multiple institutions across the United States in technical communication and instructional design. She formerly worked as an assistant professor and program coordinator for an asynchronous online instructional design and development program at an R1 institution in the southeastern region. Currently, she serves as a learning, design, and technology faculty member at an R2 institution in the same region. She also has over 20 years of experience in online learning as a student and instructional designer. The second researcher began her career in higher education working in student affairs and services predominately focused on administrative roles within enrollment management. In her faculty roles, she served as a visiting assistant professor of higher education at an R1 institution in the southwestern United States. Currently, she is a faculty member and program coordinator for an asynchronous online higher education administration program.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was established by using a research team and the collection of data across six Carnegie regions (CCIHE, n.d.). The research team established a regular meeting schedule during the data analysis process and triangulated findings. Researchers recognized their own positionality within the research and, as CDA methodologists, rejected a neutral stance but chose to "remain aware of the social, political, and economic motives that drive their own work and acknowledge that they do not occupy a superior position" (Mullet, 2018, p. 120).

Participants

For this research, participants are in tenure-seeking roles as assistant professors who teach online and are between the ages of 18 to 89. Respondents were from six Carnegie-assigned regions of the United States. Nine of the participants were female, ten were male. All but four participants identified solely as white/European American, one participant identified as black/African American, two participants identified as Asian/Asian American, and one participant identified as Asian/Asian American and Latino/a/Hispanic. Pseudonyms were assigned to protect the participants' identities (see Table 1 & 2).

Table 1

Participant Identifiers

Participant Pseudonym	Sex at Birth	Gender Identity	Sexual Orientation	Race/ Ethnicity	Age
Adi	F	F	Bi	W/EA	35
Alex	M	M	G	W/EA	36
Bobby	M	M	G	W/EA	36
Chao	F	F	A	A/AA	38
Cruz	M	M	H/S	A/AA & L/H	44
Dani	F	F	H/S	W/EA	41
Evan	M	M	H/S	W/EA	39
Fong	F	F	H/S	A/AA	30
Gavyn	M	M	Q	W/EA	32
Hunter	M	M	H/S	W/EA	38
Julian	M	M	H/S	B/AA	33
Kelly	F	F	H/S	W/EA	46
Logan	M	M	H/S	W/EA	46
Morgan	F	F	H/S	W/EA	39
Nat	F	F	H/S	W/EA	31

Peyton	F	F	H/S	W/EA	35
Rene	F	F	H/S	W/EA	37
Shawn	M	M	H/S	W/EA	39
Tate	M	M	H/S	W/EA	29

Note. Bi (Bisexual), G (Gay), A (Asexual), H/S (Heterosexual/Straight), Q (Queer), W/EA (White/European American), A/AA (Asian/Asian American), L/H (Latino/a/Hispanic), B/AA (Black, African American)

Table 2

Participant Institutional Identifiers

Participant Pseudonym	Carnegie Region	Years in Higher Ed	Years at Current Institution	Years Teaching Online	Modalities Taught
Adi	ME	3	.5	4	Online only
Alex	GL	14	6	6	Online only
Bobby	SE	10	3	6	Both
Chao	SE	12	5	10	Both
Cruz	RM	3	2	2	Online only
Dani	ME	16	6 months	3	Online only
Evan	SE	6	7 months	4	Online only
Fong	SE	2	1 sem	2 sem	Online only
Gavyn	SE	2.5	1.5	2.5	Online only
Hunter	TP	17.5	1.5	2	Online only
Julian	ME	8	7 months	3	Online only
Kelly	SE	10	3	8	Both
Logan	ME	7	4	3	Both
Morgan	SE	20	3	3	Online only
Nat	ME	7	8 months	3	Online only
Peyton	ME	9	1	9	Both
Rene	SE	15	2	4	Online only
Shawn	TP	9	4.5	9	Both
Tate	SW	18	5	10	Both

Note. ME (Middle Eastern), GL (Great Lakes), SE (Southeastern), RM (Rocky Mountains), TP (The Plains), SW (Southwestern)

Data Collection

Purposive sampling, the intentional selection of participants based on their knowledge and experience with the subject matter being researched, was utilized for this research (Robinson, 2014). Upon receiving IRB approval, the researchers sent a recruitment email through the American College Personnel Association (ACPA) and the Association for Educational Communications and Technology (AECT) listservs and posted on professional social media websites within the researchers' professional network to recruit potential participants for the research study. The email and posts included information about the purpose of the study, qualifications to participate, and a Qualtrics link they could click to consent to participate in the study and to provide initial demographic information. In total, 19 participants volunteered to be interviewed. Participants were then contacted by the researchers for an interview. The researchers conducted the interviews using 16 semi-structured interview questions (Schwandt, 2015) that focused on individual developmental needs, student engagement, and tenure and promotion. Interviews lasted no more than 1.5 hours and were recorded and transcribed verbatim using transcription software.

Data Analysis

We used intertextuality as our method of analysis. Intertextuality looks at the ways in which texts intersect across both vertical and horizontal axes (Kristeva, 1980). Horizontally, the authors (participants) and the researchers (readers) build a relationship with the text revealing power structures, voices that may have been silenced and areas where social action is needed. Vertically, each text is compared to one another revealing where they may be interdependent. As the texts intersect across these axes, they create *intertext.* It is through these intertextual relationships that power relations are revealed and that the meaning-making process occurs revealing codes and themes (Fairclough, 1992). Within our work, there were three overarching themes and two sub-themes which are discussed in detail in the findings section.

Findings

This study sought to examine how tenure-seeking faculty teaching in online programs can best be supported through mentoring. Specifically, we wanted to know how they talked about their individual needs for support. From our analysis, we learned that faculty who teach in online programs discussed support in two ways: 1) support was non-existent where needed and 2) they had support and it was sufficient for their needs, they were unaware of it, or what was available was insufficient.

Support Does Not Exist Where Needed

When support was non-existent, prior knowledge was either used or expected to be used to navigate the structure of higher education. Through the lens of CDA (Chilton, 2012: Mullet, 2018), we can see in many ways that some online tenure-seeking faculty were left isolated and powerless with little to no support and often had to either become self-sufficient or advocate for their own assistance. There was little to no proactive work on behalf of the institution or department to provide them with needed support. For example, Hunter held prior knowledge from membership in a professional organization for his field that had helped him when he was struggling to navigate the assessment process for his assignments. He stated,

> I've really had to rely on prior knowledge in order to do that . . . And I will admit that when I was thinking about assessments in terms of assignments, I really relied on what other people had done before me . . . But the institution hasn't necessarily given a lot of support on it.

However, Gavyn was assumed to have prior knowledge because of his prior work experience, but his prior knowledge was not from the academic side of higher education but instead the business side. Due to this assumption, he did not receive critical information about the annual review until after the fact. He stated,

> I was not told anything when I was hired. I wasn't even given the tenure packet. So, I had to go online and find that myself, and make out a plan on what I was going to do . . . For our annual evaluations, which go into tenure and promotion, they do have a rubric that we can access, which I did not receive until after the fact. So now that I have that rubric, I know what they're looking for . . . We do have mentors. I don't know who mine is, I was never told. . . . I think that the reason I wasn't told [was] because even though I was technically a new hire it's my second year here. So, I think they just assumed that I already knew.

In some cases where mentorship support was not available or not formalized, faculty had to be proactive to create their own communities of support inside and outside of the institution through informal meetings with senior faculty. Faculty were forced to be self-sufficient monitoring their own work and progress. Evan shared,

> Nobody is really monitoring me. I could be doing a terrible job. But I don't have anybody who's actively monitoring me to be like, "Oh, this is something that you could do better in." It's more just like self-policing . . . So, it's not like they're forcing me to take support in this area. It's more like . . . if you did want it, you could ask your fellow colleagues to spend the time and look through your teaching.

Similarly, Alex stated,

> On campus, there was actually no formal mentorship program. So, I actually started one with a few colleagues that were all when we were in year five. So, this was last year, we're like this can't keep going on. We're losing so many people, and it's not a matter of we need to do more, you know, and if administration isn't going to do it, we have to do it ourselves.

In some cases, faculty needed support in the business functions of higher education related to enrollment management and institutional knowledge. Kelly and Tate were both faculties of one within their programs and often discussed concerns with the workload related to managing their programs, enrollment, assessments, and reporting and maintaining documentation for accreditation without the proper training or support. CDA (Wodak, 2001) exposes the power structures that create undue pressure from administrative bodies for online tenure-seeking faculty. Specifically, these faculties of one are expected to provide accreditation reporting with

limited to no prior experience while also carrying the burden of teaching in over-enrolled courses. Kelly shared,

> I mean, to be honest, I don't feel like I'm really getting any specialized support, because I'm an online faculty. I think what would be nice would be some specialized training in that area [enrollment management], or limits on enrollments and, of course, things like that. I think they [students] should be thought of as more than just the money maker, and [what] we really want [in the program is] the quality, the rigor, the high standards, the engagement. All of that – it's not a moneymaker. We can throw as many people as possible [in the classes].

Tate discussed,

> We're given no support for this [reporting for accreditation]. But we're given very clear expectations . . . Getting access to the data is difficult, [as is] having somebody be able to interpret that data meaningfully . . . I'm given no course release, no release time, nothing out of my service . . . just get it done . . . If I don't get tenure, because I was too busy doing this required service [that] I couldn't say no to for our accreditation process . . . I may even seek out an attorney.

Adi was not the only faculty in her program, but still needed guidance on how courses should be offered and how to interpret communications shared in meetings. Through her discourse, we can see that the hoarding of knowledge by peers, whether intentional or not, has created a gap in her ability to understand and interpret information (Wodak, 2001). She shared,

> I wish there was more targeted programmatic support where people from my program are reaching out to have conversations throughout the year with me and other new colleagues in our program about course offerings, ways of collaborating, making sure we understand what's being discussed in the meetings. I'm speaking to some of that institutional knowledge. That would be really helpful and hasn't really existed for us.

Alex, a gay white male, also noted that not having tenure and being from a marginalized identity impacted his ability to advocate for himself and his students. Through his discourse, we can see that he felt powerless and silenced noting that he had to be mindful of the type of research that he did (Mullet, 2018). He stated,

> Unfortunately, [the program] didn't have the support or structure in place to really help students along, and it's hard to advocate for it being untenured. It's hard to be like, "Hey, this is all that we're doing wrong." That's been the biggest challenge . . . [Also,] I have to be mindful of even the type of scholarship that I do, because I don't want to get tokenized as you know, the gay guy on campus, and it's challenging at times, because they don't take my complaints as seriously. They're like, "Oh, he's just the bitchy, gay guy."

Support is Present

In many cases, varying levels of support were provided by the institution, but it did not always meet the needs of online tenure-seeking faculty. In a critical examination of the discourse (Chilton, 2012), we noted that these online tenure-seeking faculty were able to receive the support that they needed or may have held a level of confidence due to a lack of oversight and accountability that allowed them the privilege to push back. Others lacked an awareness of the support available to them or, in some cases, the support was just insufficient. For online tenure-seeking faculty who were working in spaces where support was present but insufficient, there were issues due to the constraints placed on the availability of resources for support.

Support is Sufficient

For both Cruz and Dani, their institutions offered a well-structured formal mentoring program. Cruz noted that the institution provided a small stipend to the mentor to encourage participation in the mentoring program. He shared,

> I was paired with somebody [who was] a senior faculty member from a different part of campus, and we met monthly. . . . They get a stipend to spend on coffee and tea. I think he did one where we actually went out to lunch. He invited the person that he had mentored the year before. So, it was the two of us, and we all grabbed lunch, and he paid for it out of that little fund. So monthly for the whole first year, I was able to just ask anything, talk about anything that was happening in my department that might have seemed odd . . . Honestly, that was super helpful year one.

Dani discussed having a physical space created by the institution that specifically focused on mentoring. She stated,

> I do think there is sort of the danger of isolation for faculty who are in all online programs. I know that people are aware of this at our institution. I mean, I think they do try, especially the [mentoring center], they try really hard to have regular check-ins. And actually, the Dean has mentioned this in a couple of different venues about, you know, wanting to build community across our school, and that can be challenging in an online environment, but that it's important to him. So, I know that people are cognizant of this, but I do think it's a real challenge.

Logan, Peyton, and Bobby felt confident enough in their positions to not need support even if offered. They viewed their roles from a privileged positionality where they could make decisions and statements without oversight. Their identity as online tenure-seeking faculty seemed overlooked by their institutions and allowed them to push back on institutional protocol without consequence.

Logan felt there was support and that others listened to him, but he also noted that he could say what he wanted, even if it was not politically correct, without concern. He shared,

> I tend to make myself visible. I don't tend to really care that much. I mean if I think it's the right thing to do, then it's the right thing to do. And I will say it or do it, and I don't

> really care. If somebody disagrees, I mean I care, but if there are political repercussions, I'm willing to accept that if it's the right way to go. Right. So, I don't know, like, I guess, I'm willing to fight for the things that I feel are valuable. . . . So, I guess the short answer is I don't feel unsupported. I do feel supported. I also feel here as though I'm listened to, which I think is more important to me.

Peyton also spoke from a position of privilege. She benefited from working online with no direct physical oversight by her administrators. She liked having no accountability. She stated,

> Technically, I have a campus about 20 minutes from me. There's no students, it's just offices. I have an office, [and] I'm not required to go in any time. My dean is about four hours away, and my department chair's three hours a different direction geographically away. So, there's no one on my team at my office. I don't go in. I work very well from home. And no one questions that. No one questions if I don't answer an email at 3pm until the next day, because I stopped working on Tuesday. I started working at five in the morning. I see that as an incentive for you know, a little extra bonus, because I'm doing what I'm supposed to be doing. They're not questioning the hours that I work, which is very nice.

Bobby, who has prior administrative experience, also spoke from a position of privilege. He chose not to attend a meeting, because the institution did not recognize his need as an online faculty living far from campus. He shared,

> Last week was our college-wide meeting, and luckily, they sent the agenda ahead of time [and the meeting] was two hours, and it was literally two hours of talking about the announcements. And I was like, my presence is not going to be valued in the same way there. So, I just didn't go. I'm not sure if I'm gonna get in trouble for it or not, but I'm not wasting $50 in gas and my time and all the things that I could actually be doing [for] my job that's sitting in a room for two hours that could have been on Zoom.

While Logan, Peyton, and Bobby were all privileged in the sense that they were not being held accountable in the same way that perhaps on-campus faculty who spoke out, pushed back, or had to drive long distances to work might be held accountable, their discourse also shows where abuse of the *online* portion of their position could be present. With limited oversight and lack of mentoring, these actions could become routine and lead to other discretions that may impact their employers' satisfaction with their work performance.

Lack of Awareness

In some cases, support may be available in spaces across campus, but online tenure-seeking faculty may not be aware of the opportunities that are available. Both Fong and Rene discussed finding support through happenstance. Fong noted,

> I didn't know they had this opportunity, until I reached out to the assistant director with the program asking for help with something else. And he mentioned, oh, you know, we have this [faculty program], you might want to look into it. And so that's how I learned about it . . . Aside from that, I don't know if there are other forms of support available for

> the class, because it might be a case where there is, and I'm just not aware of that, which I'm starting to realize that there are a lot of things [that] are not very widely advertised… But, again, it's one of those things where you have to seek it out.

Likewise, Rene shared,

> We have some like instructional design folks through the library, but I kind of found them by happenstance, because I was working with a class to do some work with the reference library, and it was like, oh, these are the resources. So, I know that we have them, but it was never clear to me, like, how to work with them.

For both Fong and Rene, institutional knowledge about available resources was limited, therefore, creating a social condition (Chilton, 2012) that could ultimately limit their performance ability in comparison to their peers who may already have this knowledge and be using the resource.

Support is Insufficient

Several participants discussed having some level of support, but that support was insufficient to meet their needs. Sometimes the quality was lacking, or the modality of available support was set up for face-to-face faculty. Though the institution, as a system of power, could check-the-box showing that support was offered, the discourse of those receiving the support showed there were still needs to be fulfilled (Mullet, 2018).

Julian discussed that being an online tenure-seeking faculty member has inhibited his ability to participate in a lot of the conversations that are taking place only on-campus. Likewise, when he does go to campus, he is mistaken for a graduate student because of his youthful appearance. He stated,

> You have to read the new information that is being shared and oftentimes, it gets frustrating. It's just you have to read every email, [and] the follow up email [that] comes from your department or your department chair or your dean [that] says, "Hey, have you seen this?" And it's just like, yes, I have seen it because I have to see everything. I'm not there [on campus]. I miss out on a lot of institutional connections and contacts and word of mouth [conversations] . . . And also, because I look young, it's like 'you're a graduate student,' unless I wear a nametag . . . It's like, 'Are you a graduate student?' Like no, I'm not a graduate student. I'm actually a faculty member here, and I look incredibly young.

Several faculty discussed participating in formal mentoring programs, but the programs were not meeting the specific needs they had, because their assigned mentor was not in their field of study. Morgan noted,

> When I first started, I was given a mentor. She was in library sciences . . . But I find there are some areas [where] she really can't help me because she's not in my particular program area. I've sent her papers, and she's attempted to give me feedback before but again, not knowing my content area. It was helpful but not helpful enough for me to feel competent submitting something for publication.

Chao, an asexual Asian/Asian American female, discussed having multiple levels of support through various identity-based mentoring groups. However, her needs in relation to her identity as a mother were not being met. She shared,

> I just want to talk about how to balance parenthood with being on tenure-track you know what I mean? I don't want to talk about that with my colleagues. I talked about that with [a peer who has children] sometimes but you know, not with everyone because there are some people [who] don't have kids, and they don't want to talk about kids, and they don't understand the struggle of having kids while being on a tenure track.

Bobby, a gay white male, shared that his institution also attempted to match his mentoring needs based on his identity but completely missed the mark. He stated, "I'm gay and he [the mentor] was gay and that's why they put us together." There was a lack of discourse by the institution with Bobby about whether his sexual orientation should be a factor in the mentor/mentee relationship. His needs as an online tenure-seeking faculty had nothing to do with his sexual orientation.

Nat also discussed that there was a new mentor orientation, but the modality and timing of when it was offered was not effective. She stated,

> We did have an in-person, new mentor orientation, which was really great. Unfortunately, it was at the end of September, which was like three months into our job, and one month into the semester already. And so, we were like, why didn't this happen in July when we started?

Sometimes both the quality and timing of the mentoring support are issues. Gavyn discussed his experience working with the grants office and being unable to submit the grant due to a complicated system that provided outdated technology training. He shared,

> I know most of our faculty refuse to submit grants just because the system is so complicated that no one can figure it out. . . . I gave up and decided I just won't submit it because I could not figure out how to do it [even after asking questions]. And so, they say that we have support, but they don't actually help us. . . . The main reason I stopped doing it [the mandatory training] was because I would complete one of the training sessions, and then the next month, I got an email from the provost saying that we're not continuing our contract. . . . So, the technology is constantly changing, and they're not really keeping up with anything . . . I've been going to YouTube and some of the other faculty members. I just had to ask someone "How do I turn off the thing in the gradebook where the students can see everybody's grades?" That's not something the university tells us anything about. Someone had to Google it, and then she shared it with all of us. We only found out about it because the students were telling us about it.

Shawn shared that the institution provides incentives for research, but limits access in such a way that an online graduate faculty of one may not be able to access it. He noted,

> The university provides a ton of things, right, like a summer research grant. The university provides you $4,000, [but] there are some problems with how it's implemented . . . In the College of Education, technically, the contract says you're a nine-month employee, but you are bullied-slash-forced into teaching overloads in the summer. And if you teach in the summer, you are not allowed to do the summer research program. And about a half of the university funding for scholarship is tied to you doing research with undergraduates, so my department's graduates only. So, you know, you're already excluding and just miss me personally, from three quarters of the stuff. Many of the other things are very prescriptive, where they're like this university program is available, you can apply on August 1, and Applications close on August 8, and okay, well, I'm super busy around that time, I don't have time to deal with that. Because I'm running a program by myself. And that's right before the fall, and I've got new students. So, on paper, there's a ton of support, a lot of financial support.

Nat had the most difficulty accessing support as an online faculty, because her physical office was not located on the same campus as her peers within the same program. She stated, "so if I go into my office, there isn't anyone there who's from my department . . . I didn't know who was even in my department . . . that information wasn't really visible to me."

As we examined the discourse (Chilton, 2012) around insufficient mentoring support, we noted that institutions have the power and resources to provide needed support, but often lack intentionality in their approach (Earnshaw & Bodine Al-Sharif, 2023). There was often a clear desire to be inclusive of online tenure-seeking faculty's identities and to provide opportunities for support, but due to limited interactions and discourse with these individuals as has been noted in recent research related to administrative support of online faculty (Bodine Al-Sharif et al., 2024), the institutions completely missed the mark.

Discussion

Our findings indicate that many times participants had to be proactive in getting the mentoring support that they needed. Some had prior experience working administratively in higher education, as contingent faculty, and/or held prior positions as tenure-seeking faculty giving them familiarity with the *business* of higher education. Others were well prepared and networked in their fields due to the preparation that they gained in their own doctoral programs. However, there were still areas where each participant needed varying levels of guidance and support within both academic and psychosocial domains (Yob & Crawford, 2012).

In terms of the academic domain, participants consistently discussed their needs for individual assistance in negotiating the systems and processes of higher education as defined by their institutions (i.e., tenure and promotion process, enrollment management, technical training) (McCormick & Barnes, 2008). Likewise, within their schools/colleges and departments, participants discussed having to self-advocate for support and in many cases sought out peers in similar situations to partner with to create their own systems and networks of support. They needed a competent mentor who could guide their understanding and effectively communicate institutional structures, policies, and processes (Yob & Crawford, 2012).

Related to the psychosocial domain, some participants also discussed that their social constructs of identity created unique challenges related to accessing support. Specifically, race, age, and sexual orientation were at times determinants of the type of support provided and/or access given to needed resources. In addition, parenthood also played a factor in the type of support needed. Lumpkin (2011) discussed the need for multi-layered support which can be directly related to differences in identity, role requirements, and socialization. Participants consistently needed someone to provide direction and guidance across a wide variety of needs related to their academic appointments. This clearly showed the importance of a well-developed onboarding and orientation process that includes ongoing mentorship relationships with individuals who have shared personal qualities and can provide them with both the academic and emotional support needed to be effective in their roles.

Online tenure-seeking faculty often shared feelings of isolation (Bohan & Perrotta, 2020). Because they are not able to walk down the hall to ask questions or informally mingle with their peers, they are often left out of conversations that are happening on campus (Kellen & Kumar, 2021). They are also unable to participate in beneficial professional development programs that are only offered on campus. Online tenure-seeking faculty must keep up-to-date with pertinent information through emails, self-advocacy, and by seeking out their own support. For online tenure-seeking faculty who are doing well within their roles and can take advantage of some privileges within their positions, there still needs to be a mentorship relationship created to challenge these individuals and also provide appropriate checks and balances as they are inducted into more senior roles (Lumpkin, 2011; Yob & Crawford, 2012). This will ensure that these individuals are not misusing their privilege in such a way as to hurt their future performance evaluations and negatively shift online faculty expectations for the institution.

Limitations

This study looked predominately at higher education administration and instructional design faculty in the United States. We suggest that more research be conducted in other fields of study. As with all qualitative work, the findings of this study are context-dependent and therefore, specific to our participants and their experiences. It is non-generalizable and perhaps not representative of larger populations.

Implications for Practice

Based on our findings, we provide the following three suggestions for practice to create more intentional support. First, we strongly suggest that there is a formal mentoring program that meets the needs of the tenure-seeking online faculty prior to day one on the job and specifically is embedded in the onboarding process. Second, the needs of our participants varied across the multiple layers of the institution as well as their multiple constructs of identity, and therefore, so do their mentoring needs. There is no one individual who will be able to provide all the mentoring needs of online tenure-seeking faculty. Therefore, it is pertinent that mentoring programs move away from a one-to-one only match and think more holistically about the multi-layered needs of online tenure-seeking faculty who may or may not be regularly on campus. Third, the modality of meetings, professional development, and mentoring needs to accommodate the online nature of these faculty's roles.

Implications for Research

Our participants were predominantly from fields in higher education and instructional design. Some participants were burdened with administrative and training duties outside of their faculty roles based on their prior training and work experience related to their fields. This additional duty often took away from their ability to move forward with tenure and promotion. We suggest that further research be conducted on the burden of faculty who have subject matter expertise and may be called upon to do work outside of their faculty duties. We strongly suggest that research be conducted in developing best practices for onboarding new tenure-seeking faculty in online programs and mentoring programs. Additionally, we strongly suggest similar research be conducted based on individuals working in contingent positions.

Conclusion

The purpose of our research was to examine the needs of tenure-seeking faculty teaching in online programs and how they can best be supported through mentoring. Our research suggests that online tenure-seeking faculty have needs that are not being met. Though they may be able to navigate certain areas of the institution and business practices for higher education, they are still lacking in some areas that cannot be addressed without a multi-level mentoring program. Online tenure-seeking faculty need a mentoring program that recognizes who they are based on their field of study, social constructs of identity, and teaching modality to fully support them as they strive to reach tenure.

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