

Conceptions of Mentoring Among Senior Faculty at a Research Intensive University
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Overview

Junior faculty members, often struggling to balance research and teaching demands, have long looked informally to senior colleagues for advice, wisdom, information, comfort and feedback (Boice, 1992; Mullen & Forbes, 2000). Recognizing the value of such mentoring relationships, many colleges and universities across the United States have sought to establish more formalized mentoring programs for early career faculty. Yet, faculty mentors do not usually receive formal mentoring training, nor do they share a common conception of what it means to be a mentor or what a mentor should do (Calkins & Kelley, 2005). Many faculty simply draw on their own experience of being mentored—if indeed they had received such mentoring either as junior faculty members or as graduate students—with mixed results (Calkins & Kelley, 2005).

This study investigates the extent of this variation in how senior faculty understand or conceive of the experience of mentoring junior colleagues. In particular, it looks at the variation in senior faculty conceptions of mentoring within a formal, eight month long, faculty development program focused on the development of their mentee's (junior colleague) expertise in teaching.

Faculty as Mentors

The idea of mentoring in higher education developed in the 1970s and 1980s, as academicians began to adopt training techniques found in corporate models of employee development (Calkins & Kelley, 2005). The literature on academic mentoring initially focused on defining mentoring (Jacobi, 1991) and identifying mentor roles, especially in

gender-related and minority student contexts (Cronan-Hillix & Gensheimer, 1986; Daloz, 1986; Maack & Passet, 1988). Different mentor roles have often included sponsor, teacher, change agent, advisor, guide, supervisor, role model, coach, confidante, and friend (Kram, 1995; Tobin, 2004). Commonly mentioned positive personality traits for mentors, as identified by mentees, have typically included being intelligent, knowledgeable, helpful, caring, and ethical (Clark, Harden, & Johnson, 2000). Other mentor behaviors and responsibilities have included the mentor guiding their mentees' professional development (often in terms of ethics and career planning); encouraging, counseling and offering advice; sponsoring their mentees professionally; and generally developing their mentees' self-confidence (Anderson & Shannon, 1988; Kram, 1995; Cronan-Hillix, *et. al*). Boyle and Boice (1998) further found that senior faculty considered "exemplary mentors" had been at the campus for several years, had experience teaching and publishing, would schedule regular meetings with their mentees, and would share their own early career experiences with their mentees.

Recently, institutions of higher education have begun to recognize the value of more formal mentoring for junior faculty, who frequently struggle to keep up with their broad, academic portfolio of scholarly research, teaching or clinical demands, and other professional obligations (Boice, 1992), often led by their professional schools such as medicine and business (Berk, Berg, Mortimer, Walton-Moss, & Yeo, 2005; Levy, Katz, Wolf, Sillman, Handin, & Dzau, 2004).

Many institutions have developed mentoring programs for faculty focusing on a range of academic activities, including both research and teaching, clinical practices (Pololi, Knight, Dennis, & Frankel, 2002). In many cases, these are informal, although

sometimes they have been formalized. Faculty have traditionally received more support in this way in their research indeed, post doctoral positions have provided apprentice or mentor like research relationships for faculty at the beginning of their careers.

Mentorship programs for teaching have typically been less frequent – often assumed as having been addressed in graduate school through teaching assistantships. There have been some departmental programs but they are rather rare. More recently formal faculty development programs in teaching for younger faculty have included the use of senior colleagues as mentors (von Hoene & Mintz, 2002) Such mentors have provided support with respect to teaching in the department, departmental culture, observation and feedback.

Yet, mentors—whether the role was formally assigned or voluntarily adopted—do not necessarily know how to mentor well, and the value of providing effective mentoring for mentors has received only minor attention. Furthermore, research on the different ways in which mentoring is understood by the mentors themselves and the implications for mentee development has not been well investigated. Lastly, while many studies emphasize the benefits to the mentor such as improved status and general satisfaction derived from the mentee’s accomplishments (Jacobi, 1991), few studies have suggested how mentors, through reflecting on the process of mentoring, can learn from and be changed by the experience of mentoring itself (von Hoene & Mintz, 2002; Calkins, *et al.* 2005). This study makes a preliminary attempt to address this gap in our understanding of academic mentoring. Furthermore, by analyzing and understanding how faculty mentors differ in their conceptions of the practice mentoring, we hope to identify ways in which faculty developers construct mentoring programs that promote critical reflection,

learning, and meaningful professional development for both the mentors and their mentees.

Methods

Methodology

We use the term “conception” to describe the ways in which someone experiences “something,” a phenomenon or practice. Pratt (1992) describes conceptions as “specific meanings attached to phenomena which then mediate our response to situations involving those phenomena. We form conceptions of virtually every aspect of our perceived world, and in so doing, use those abstract representations to delimit something from, and relate it to, other aspects of our world.” The concept may express a general understanding of a given discipline (e.g. History) (Entwistle, 1997), or of particular practices such as essay writing (Hounsell, 1997), or creative writing (Light, 2002), or student learning (Marton, et. al.1993). It has also been used in a more narrow way to describe how students understand a particular topic or idea in a syllabus (Marton & Booth, 1997). We focus here on the application of this concept as a key descriptor of more general conceptions of experience and understanding; specifically, how a mentor experiences or understands the practice of mentoring junior faculty on a program aimed at developing their expertise and understanding of learning and teaching in higher education.

Description of Faculty Development Program

Participants in this study were senior faculty members who were mentors in a year-long faculty development program designed to enhance the teaching of early career, tenure-track faculty. The program required each of the junior faculty to select a senior

colleague in their department who would agree to serve as a mentor for the year.

Mentors were encouraged, but not required, to attend all program events, which included a 2-day overnight retreat, six dinner workshops, and three workshops focused on teaching and learning related issues. Mentors were also expected to discuss teaching-related issues with their mentees, and to offer constructive feedback about their mentee's teaching-related project and accompanying critical account. The project usually consisted of the creation of a new course or curriculum, the revision of an existing course or curriculum, or an innovation of one course element.

Recognition of the various roles and responsibilities of the mentors and their patterns of participation within the program was uneven and often due to the initial contact by their junior colleague or mentee. Although we did provide some documents about what it meant to be a senior faculty mentor in our program, there was often a communication disconnect between the mentor and mentee which transferred over to the program. A number of senior mentors reported that they did not know they were mentors, even though mentees were expected to discuss the program and their project details with their mentors. Others left the program knowing very little about what their mentors had learned or accomplished. Many mentees also indicated in interviews that they never involved their mentor in teaching at all. More characteristically, however, we found during the interviews described in this study and informal conversations, that many mentors really had no idea about what it meant to be a mentor at all. The following quotes by a mentor and a mentee suggest a measure of this disconnect:

[The mentoring component of the program] has been a bit disappointing...I know about the course [the mentee] selected and we talk about it, but they never come

by to me, and I've never been encouraged to talk about 'So, how are you attacking this?' or 'What are you doing now?' You know, I'll see the faculty during the year, but I'm not affected that much by the fact that I'm their [program] mentor except that we go to the dinners together. And then at the end, when they're presenting what they did, it's the first time I've heard most of the details for their particular project.... [Program Mentor]

"You know, it might just be my fault. [W]e didn't really consult much. We didn't really work together. He was very supportive. He said come by any time you want, but I didn't feel the need to. And I know he's very busy. We're all busy, and any moment I had, any free time, I would think about my project, or I would work a little bit on my project...I didn't think it was necessary, to tell you the truth, to go see him... We talked about things, but he wasn't there all the time....He was very supportive, but it wasn't a very active role.

[Program Mentee]

Very few faculty reflected on what it meant to be a mentor or a mentee, particularly with respect to teaching, and what they could learn from the mentoring process. In many more informal, even formal mentoring programs, this kind of experience is not that uncommon. This study is undertaken in that context and does have the benefit of providing the study with maximum variation in our sample (Patton 2001).

Participants

Twenty-one tenured senior faculty members from a private research I university were interviewed about their involvement as mentors in the program. Two from the 2004-2005 cohort were interviewed to develop the instrument, 8 came from the 2005-2006 program, and 11 from the 2006-2007 program. Six came from medicine, 9 from science and engineering, 3 from humanities and social sciences, 2 from other professional schools, and 1 from music. Scheduling conflicts precluded the other 17 senior mentors involved in the program from completing the pre-program interview.

Interviews

We interviewed each senior faculty member at the beginning of the academic year. The interviews were semi-structured and lasted 30-50 minutes. Six interview questions were designed to elicit the participant's understanding of mentoring (e.g. "What does it mean to be a mentor? What are the traits or qualities of an effective mentor?"), and their own prior and current experience as a mentee and as a mentor.

Procedure

The interviews were audio-taped, fully transcribed, and analyzed. First, one of us read through the interview transcripts to select passages in which the participants' discussed their ideas and conceptions of mentoring. Each of us then analyzed the excerpted data to identify key variations in the participants' conceptions. From this preliminary analysis, we identified two main orientations towards mentoring, which we used to further sort the mentors into four main categories (discussed more fully below). Throughout the process, we reviewed the transcriptions in their entirety to keep the quotes in context.

Findings

Conceptions of Mentoring: Categories and Features

Not surprisingly, nearly all of the mentors indicated the same characteristics of what makes a “good” mentor as those which are well-documented in the literature. They emphasize approachability and accessibility, as well as being knowledgeable and caring (Clark, Harden, & Johnson, 2000). Most talked about the necessity of offering advice, being encouraging, and building self-confidence (Anderson & Shannon, 1988; Kram, 1995; Cronan-Hillix, *et. al*). Nearly three-quarters indicated that they had never been mentored formally, and five stated that they had never received any mentoring, except perhaps from a parent.

The analysis of the data identified four general types of conceptions or conceptual understandings of mentoring within two broad orientations: mentor-focused and mentee-focused (see Table 1 below). These four types are, moreover, characterized, by three features. The first, the defining feature, describes the variation in how the faculty mentor viewed his or her position within the mentoring relationship. The second and third are descriptive features and describe the variation in how the mentor understands the nature and the quality of the mentoring process respectively.

In the mentor-focused orientation, the mentor generally views himself or herself in the position as the mentee’s measure of success. The mentee is encouraged to closely follow the mentor’s steps (or strongly warned to avoid the mentor’s mistakes) in order to achieve the same or better professional success and status as the mentor. Mentoring for the mentor-centered mentor is often viewed as a necessary part of his or her job, although

the mentor may see some external benefits of mentoring, such as seeing his or her image reflected in the mentee's work, or aspects of reflected glory.

At the other end of the relationship focus stands the mentee-focused mentor. Such mentors who hold the mentee-focused orientation encourage mentees to develop their own voices and find their own paths to success. Indeed, they define success for themselves in terms of how well the mentee has achieved this independence of voice. The mentee-focused mentor is often more reflective, looking to learn from the mentee, and the process of mentoring itself (Calkins & Kelley, 2005; von Hoene & Mintz, 2002).

The two descriptive features of the mentoring relationship allowed us to construct four general conceptions of mentoring. In the first descriptive feature, we looked at the essential nature of the process; that is whether the mentors viewed the mentoring relationship as primarily reproductive or constructive. In those cases in which the mentoring process is essentially reproductive in nature, the mentor seeks to mentor as he or she was once mentored, or otherwise reproduces mentoring that he or she observed. Those mentors who regarded mentoring as essentially a constructive process actively construct alternate or new ways of being mentored, even if the mentor had never been mentored him-or herself. The second descriptive feature, concerns the quality of the mentoring process; that is, how active or passive the mentor described himself or herself in the relationship. For example, almost all of the mentors talked about offering advice to their mentees, but some were much more hands-on and engaged in the process, while others waited for their mentees to approach them with a problem.

We found that these three defining and descriptive features account for the main variations in mentoring conceptions, and describe both the two broad orientations and the

four types of conception which emerged from the interview transcripts. Categories I and II illustrate the variation between two mentor-focused conceptions, while categories III and IV reveal the variation between two mentee-focused conceptions. The descriptions below illustrate these four distinct conceptions under the two broad orientations.

Mentor-Focused Conceptions of Mentoring

Categories I and II share the defining feature—the mentoring relationship is mentor-focused—and one descriptive feature: the nature of the mentoring process is primarily reproductive in nature. The categories are distinguished, however, by the process quality; that is, how active or passive the mentor is within the mentoring relationship.

Mentor-focused mentors expect their mentees to approach problems as they do, essentially reproducing their own steps to success, rather than allowing the mentee to define success for himself or herself:

I think a mentor is somebody who's hopefully has gone through sort of similar experiences that you are going through now, that you can go to and sit up and say, hey, this is what I am seeing, what did you do? Somebody you can sort of get advice from their experience. [Electrical & Computer Engineering]

Her [the mentee's] teaching has got to look a certain way if everything is going to go smoothly for her institutionally, right? Toward tenure and you know, toward all those professional things. So, at some level, it's about making sure that there

are these expectations, like them or not, that need to look a certain way and how are you going to do that? [History]

There is often a single-level focus to the mentoring: advice is often ad-hoc, situational, and driven by simple tips.

In categories I and II, the mentor seems to view mentoring as a didactic process, in which the mentor tells the mentee what to do or provides the 'right' answer to a problem.

I think the basic idea [of mentoring] is somebody who, [since] the big deal is getting tenure, can tell you what you should be doing and research teaching, grants, all this stuff. [Electrical and Computer Engineering 2]

Category I:

Mentor-centered mentors in category I tend to be passive, waiting for their mentees to approach them with questions or concerns, usually not initiating contact or follow-up themselves. Significantly, the mentors seem to assume that if they do not hear from the mentee, then everything is fine.

I am not sure [what effective mentoring is] since I haven't done it. [My mentee] usually doesn't come and ask advice about things... [Communication Sciences]

Category II:

Mentors in category II tend to be more active and hands-on, frequently initiating contact. They expect a lot from their mentees, and at the same time, they see their mentees as following their own recipe for success.

I want really [to be] friendly, to help them, to be very open, and to be supportive, but at the same time to be demanding. It means that we need excellence, we need everybody to do their best, they have to be responsible. [Engineering]

As in category I, mentors in category II usually do not expect to learn or gain anything from the mentoring process or from their mentees. Any perceived rewards come from the satisfaction of having helped the mentee's professional development, the perceived enhancement to their own profile or reputation, or the perception of having performed a necessary or required task for the department or institution. Mentors holding both category I and II type conceptions seem less reflective of the mentoring process, often bound by their own prior experience of being mentored, if indeed they believe they had been mentored at all.

Mentee-Focused Conceptions of Mentoring

In category III and IV conceptions, the mentoring relationship is mentee-focused and is constructive, rather than reproductive. As in categories I and II, the relationship is further defined by how engaged (or active) the mentor is when interacting with his or her mentee.

In the mentee-centered conception of mentoring, mentors seem more reflective about what it means to be a mentor. They are open to constructing a different mentoring relationship, meaning they are open to mentoring differently from how they were once mentored. They recognize that the mentee's experience is unique and may not fit their own prior experience. Such mentors believe they should challenge their mentees to excel,

but allow them to find their own unique paths to excellence. The mentoring relationship often has a multi-level focus; mentors may discuss day to day practical problems with their mentees, as the mentor-centered mentors do, but they also address deeper, ongoing professional and career-related issues.

The other kind of mentoring, which I think is probably more meaningful in terms of a career, is the kind that happens when a person comes in and says, ‘Ok, I’m approaching my third year review....What kinds of things do you think I should be doing differently in my work?’ [Music Education]

Category III

Mentors in category III differ primarily from those in category IV by being more hands-off, or passive, in the mentoring process. Like mentors in category I, they often advocate letting their mentees solve a problem on their own, and may wait to be asked before offering feedback or advice. Unlike category I mentors, however, who may let a mentee “fail” for not soliciting or not following the mentor’s advice, category III mentors are more likely to view “failure” as an important part the mentee’s professional growth and development is understanding his or her own strengths and weaknesses.

And then there are also times where it just bothers me when people want to reinvent the wheel, so why don’t we do it this way and I think that could be a fault of mine where I step in and say, been there, done that, can’t do it that way, instead of letting them try and learn for themselves. Usually I have found that my inclination is to stop it because it is stupid, and I let them go and I am glad they did, because it was better, they really found the solution and they discovered

things I had not anticipated, so it would have been wrong to have stifled that
[Biomedical Engineering]

Category IV

Category IV mentee-focused mentors differ from category III mentors in that they are often highly engaged and active participants in the mentoring process. They tend to make more effort to actively support the mentee and keep tabs on his or her professional activities. Like those in category II, category IV mentors do not wait to be asked to give tough criticism and honest feedback to their mentees when necessary. They differ from those in category II, however, by not requiring the mentee to follow the mentor's established expectations for success:

He or she has to be willing to spend time to think about the needs of the mentee. Have to be willing to put time aside and to really get an interest of the activities of the mentee and just not be afraid and calling the mentee and saying I think you should consider this or do this or why don't you change this. It may take a lot of time, of your time, because if you have to, for example, be willing to mentor somebody in science, and maybe you have to be willing to read their grants or read their papers and that takes time, so participating in activities and then you know, just whenever possible, to do a project together [Psychiatry].

I think [mentoring] means looking out for the person that you are mentoring and seeing to their professional development. And that means,

if you see them doing something stupid, you are not afraid to tell them that and if you see an opportunity there, do something to help them to make the connection....It is something that as a mentor you don't really want to say, because it is going to cause a little bit of pain, but nonetheless you have to, so that's what I mean by brutal honesty [Computer Science]

Mentors holding the mentee-focused conceptions seem more open to learning, both from their mentees and from the experience of mentoring. They see many benefits to mentoring, and view the process of mentoring as an important part of developing community, both in the department and in the discipline.

[Effective mentors] are also in touch with the university itself and it's goals and it's characteristics and understand the local politics and can translate those into a positive view toward the young person going through, to a point where it might very well might be important for a mentor to have some courageous behavior where they might explain to the mentee that maybe this is not the right place for them or maybe there needs to be readjustment in thinking about, in terms of long term [Music Education].

Discussion

To some extent, our sample of senior faculty mentors may be skewed. Not only did these mentors agree to be a part of the program, but they also agreed to set aside some time to be interviewed, implying at least a tacit interest in thinking about what it means to

be a mentor. After all, it is hypothetically possible (and anecdotally probable) that some mentors in the program who opted *not* to be interviewed might be considered completely disengaged, not even meeting the basic criteria of a “good” mentor conceptualized by those in category I. The study participants did, nevertheless, provide a range of variation in their understanding which allowed for the construction of a framework for describing mentoring understanding somewhat generally.

While the defining feature appears to distinguish between mentor and mentee focused, the variation in the nature of the process may differ between the within category types than seems to be apparent in this data. This may be more of a continuum with respect to the faculty – specifically in terms of difference between mentee and mentor related reproduction and construction.

We categorized 9 mentors as mentor-focused, with 7 in category I and 2 in category II. Twelve mentors were classified as mentee-focused with 8 in category III, and 4 in category IV. There is no attempt here, however, to suggest that these numbers reflect larger patterns in academia; they are meant simply to describe our sample.

We noted that 15 out of 21 mentors were categorized as passive, which might reflect the lack of information and understanding they had about the role and duties of mentoring within the program. Yet, since our questions were designed to elicit general conceptions of mentoring, as well as what it meant specifically to mentor their junior colleagues in teaching, this passivity may also suggest that mentors may not know how, or may not be willing, to interact with their mentees in a more engaged way.

Conclusions

The findings from this pilot study provide a preliminary framework for understanding how senior faculty members may conceive of mentoring, particularly in regards to the teaching practice of junior faculty. Faculty development programs that systematically encourage reflection and critical inquiry into the mentoring process may help senior faculty develop a more sophisticated approach to mentoring that ultimately benefits their junior colleagues struggling to succeed in academia.

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Table 1: Senior Faculty Conceptions of Mentoring in Teaching

Category Types	Mentor-Focused		Mentee-Focused	
	I	II	III	IV
<p>DEFINING FEATURE</p> <p>1 Relationship Focus</p> <p><i>Mentor Vs Mentee</i></p>	<p>- Regards mentoring as peripheral to mentor's work</p> <p>-Means to pass on his/her experience to be reproduced by mentee</p> <p>-Rewards mainly external (checking off a duty, enhanced mentor reputation)</p>	<p>-Views mentoring as important part of his/her job</p> <p>-Opportunity to create someone in his/her own image/continue his/her work</p> <p>- Rewards mainly external (satisfaction in mentee's success, enhanced mentor reputation)</p>	<p>-Encourage mentee to develop own voice; mentee defines success for self</p> <p>-Opportunity to help mentee grow and learn about self</p> <p>- Rewards are external and internal (personally satisfying and means for mentor to acquire new teaching ideas)</p>	<p>-Encourages mentee to develop own voice; mentee defines success for self</p> <p>-Opportunity to help mentee grow, learn about self, and place in community</p> <p>- Rewards are external and internal (personally satisfying; transforms mentor's ideas of teaching)</p>
<p>DESCRIPTIVE FEATURES</p> <p>2 Process Nature Focus</p> <p><i>Reproductive Vs constructive</i></p>	<p>-Mentors as he/she was once mentored; reproduces own experience</p> <p>- Expects mentee to approach problems he/she does</p> <p>-Already knows what is "right" or what will lead to success</p> <p><i>Reproductive</i></p>	<p>-Mentors as he/she was once mentored; reproduces own experience</p> <p>-Encourages mentee to approach problems as he/she does</p> <p>-Already knows what is "right" or what will lead to success</p> <p><i>Reproductive</i></p>	<p>-Figures out ways to mentor other than how he or she was mentored</p> <p>- Hopes mentee will develop his/own own solutions with guidance</p> <p>-Does not expect mentee to follow mentor's path</p> <p><i>Constructive</i></p>	<p>-Actively constructs new ways to mentor other than how he or she was mentored</p> <p>- Encourages mentee to construct new solutions with guidance</p> <p>-Does not expect mentee to follow mentor's path</p> <p><i>Constructive</i></p>

<p>3 Process Quality Focus</p> <p><i>Active</i> Vs <i>Passive</i></p>	<p>- May let mentee “fail” for not seeking or following mentor’s advice</p> <p>-May offer “right” tips and strategies, but only when asked</p> <p>-Less reflective and interested in mentoring process</p> <p><i>Passive</i></p>	<p>- Actively encourages mentee to do as he/she expects; very aware of being “right”</p> <p>-Will approach mentee for progress; Actively tries to keep mentee from making same mistakes (may be more upset if mentee hurts mentor reputation)</p> <p>-Very interested in mentoring process</p> <p><i>Active</i></p>	<p>-May let mentee “fail” in order to learn (opportunity for growth, and to learn about oneself)</p> <p>-May wait for mentee to approach after grappling with problem first</p> <p>-More reflective of what it means to be a mentor</p> <p><i>Passive</i></p>	<p>-Actively encourages mentee to find and develop own solutions/ try out new ideas, opportunities</p> <p>– Will approach mentee for progress; may seek to deal with problem together</p> <p>-More reflective of what it means to be a mentor</p> <p><i>Active</i></p>
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