



Myths and Realities about Mentoring Programs

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In many universities, induction and mentoring programs have become widespread; however – more often than not – their implementation has been disappointing. It is not entirely clear why mentoring practices may fall short of their ideals in university settings. In an effort to gain insights into the value, worth and support for mentoring programs at the University of Calgary, a survey was sent out to all department heads, deans and new faculty hired in 2002. The results indicate that 93% of those who responded agree that a mentoring program for new faculty is worthwhile. An informal discussion group was then conducted with new faculty members, as well as discussions with department heads who have established mentoring programs within their departments.

The results of the discussion groups with new faculty indicate that most new faculty members feel they need help with their programs of research. Specific examples of where help is needed included information on grants that are available to their area of study, grant application due dates, someone with expertise to review the grants, and a pool of examples of successful grants to review.

Also of concern for new faculty was the tenure and review process. Of least concern was support and resources for teaching and service. A number of new faculty indicated that sufficient help with teaching is available either within their departments or through the Learning Commons' workshops and/or consultations. With respect to services, most indicated that, as new faculty, this was not an immediate concern.

The discussions with department heads exposed a number of commonly held myths about mentoring programs. Following are four commonly held myths about mentoring programs and responses by department heads who have mentoring programs.

MYTH #1

Mentoring programs are a burden on senior/experienced faculty members.

REALITY

None of the department heads interviewed indicated that mentoring programs are an onerous burden on senior faculty members. Though, in some cases, time expectations/commitments are stated in writing. For example, in the Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering, the maximum mentoring time is four hours a week.

Typically, mentors meet with their mentees once a week for approximately ten minutes – although this varies from mentor to mentor and department to department. In addition, meetings between the mentors and mentees are typically not scheduled or mandatory. For the most part, the department heads assign the pairing, but the responsibility of how often and when to meet is usually the responsibility of the mentee. As Dr. Leon, who started a mentoring program in September, 2002 (Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering) observes, "there is a concern about being too structured. We are all adults, and it seems to work well when the mentor and mentee set the meetings themselves."

MYTH #2

Natural mentor/mentee pairing (e.g., friendships and personality types) works better than arranged mentor/mentee pairing and the best mentoring occurs spontaneously, without intervention by faculty developers and other meddling sorts.

REALITY

For those departments with successful mentoring programs at the University of Calgary, the department head identifies and assigns the mentors – although there tends to be some negotiation. And there are exceptions (such as the Faculty of Medicine) where the dean assigns the department heads as the mentor for all new faculty members.

Most often, selection of mentors is based on a number of loosely identified characteristics – such as common research interests, availability of faculty, and experience. Dr. Keay (Department of Chemistry) for example, makes efforts to pair new faculty with full professors based on similarity of research study; though, he also looks for 'good citizenship' qualities as well. However, while the Department of Chemistry's approach to identifying mentors is somewhat informal, the Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering has taken a more formal approach and identified specific characteristics of mentors outlined in a departmental document.

Research provides support for the position that department heads and/or deans should assign the pairs. In particular, research has shown that mentorship pairings do not work best when based on personality styles/characteristics or friendships. With respect to close friends who work together, it has been found that conflicts can occur if the relationship results in differences in interpersonal status. As for personality profiles, research that investigated matches based on the Myers-Briggs type indicators could not predict successful pairing.

Research has also revealed that spontaneous mentoring only occurs for about a third of new faculty, and tends to be irregular and short-lived. Moreover, this laissez-faire approach has two unfavorable results: (1) senior faculty apparently believe that new faculty do not need help (they feel because new faculty graduated from the same/similar environment they are already familiar and sufficiently prepared); and (2) women and minorities do not find spontaneous mentoring opportunities at the rate that white males do.

MYTH #3

The two perils of mentoring, sexual harassment and dysfunctional dependency, are serious problems that can derail mentoring programs.

REALITY

All those interviewed stated that sexual harassment was not a problem. However, it was observed by a number of department heads that female faculty have unique needs and efforts are made to pair female mentors with female mentees. Dr. Scott (Department of Paediatrics) has noticed, "Women have different issues. They often take on the role of parent in addition to professional. A mentoring program by women for women would help women in that it could provide them with additional tools ... and support each others' career development."

There is literature where authors have suggested that cross-sex mentoring relationships have limited effectiveness and often result in undesirable social consequences. However, no evidence has been found, despite several *a priori* reasons, that same-sex mentoring is more effective than cross-sex mentoring. Research has found, however, that male mentors are more likely to select male mentees. Moreover, in agreement with what Dr. Leon (Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering) has observed, the likelihood of finding a female mentor is questionable given that female faculty are underrepresented in most engineering departments and many are not in the appropriate career stage to be mentors.

With respect to dependency, all those interviewed indicated that dysfunctional dependency of a mentee on a mentor has never been an issue. According to Dr. Keay, the Department of Chemistry does not have this problem because of their hiring practices. He notes, "I think we avoid this kind of person (who would be dependent) based on our hiring practices."

MYTH #4

In the grand scheme of things, mentoring programs do not have a significant impact in the academy.

REALITY

For those departments with successful mentoring programs at the University of Calgary, the greatest benefit of a mentoring program is having a strong department. According to Dr. Leon, "when we hire new faculty and when we help them with a mentoring program, new faculty have a fighting chance. It is really a waste of our time, and theirs (new faculty), if they do not succeed." Both Dr. Leon and Dr. Keay provided examples of how mentoring programs can help both a department and new faculty: they both have had 100% success rates with their NSERC applications for their new faculty.

Dr. Severson's (Acting Head of Pharmacology and Therapeutics) advice to other departments and/or faculties who are wondering what the benefits are of a mentoring program is as follows:

I can still remember what a challenge it was when I was a new faculty member because I felt singularly unprepared to be a faculty member with new expectations. Therefore, my only advice is to be sure that mentoring is available.

Much of the research on specific aspects of mentoring programs is mixed – especially with how formal or informal the mentoring relationship should be, how mentors should be rewarded, and the characteristics of effective mentors. However, one area that is consistent in the research literature is that mentoring relationships have a significant positive impact on new faculty career patterns, performance and satisfaction. The research literature shows that new faculty who have been mentored show significant career advantages, demonstrate improvements in risk-taking and greater political savvy. New faculty who experience intense professional interactions with mentors show greater research productivity and career advancement compared to their peers who did not receive mentoring. Moreover, both mentors and mentees feel a greater sense of involvement and believe they are making a positive impact on their department and the university.

Good mentoring is not accomplished easily. There is, however, a growing body of resources on how to select, train, and support mentors, as well as how to set goals and assess outcomes. There is also good evidence that mentoring programs will fall short if they are not integrated with other developments in policy and practice. Alternatively, mentoring programs can degenerate into acts of restructuring when too structured. There is a need to find the right balance of structure and flexibility in a way that begins with institution-wide support that welcome new faculty and make them feel valued by instilling a sense of connectedness.

