Mentoring: Gains in Teaching and Leadership

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Abstract
The majority of faculty who work in higher education have extensive preparation in their disciplines and little education in how to teach. In addition, faculty have limited opportunities to develop leadership skills. Since we work in an environment with a mission of educating students and with an operation system of shared governance, effective teaching and leadership are critical for the institution’s success. Faculty development in the form of a formalized mentoring program can provide an avenue for the improvement of these two skills.

Introduction
A critical component of leadership development is finding opportunities for individuals to practice their leadership abilities. Mentoring provides experienced faculty with an opportunity to develop their own leadership skills while offering valuable support to younger faculty in the process. The literature on faculty development also suggests that mentoring furnishes a valuable professional development opportunity for experienced faculty—they can learn ways to improve their teaching skills from the mentees (Dutton, 2003). With these premises in mind, the Teaching and Learning Committee at a western land-grant higher education institution decided to create a new faculty mentoring program. Since the mission of the committee is to develop teaching skills, the program focused specifically on teaching. The authors of this paper have served several years on the committee and worked on the subcommittee that designed and implemented the project. The program is currently in its second year of operation in the 2006-07 school year. This paper reviews the mentoring literature, describes the program, presents the benefits and challenges experienced, and lists recommendations that others can use to develop new faculty mentoring programs on other campuses.

Context of the Program
The setting for the mentoring program described in this paper is a small land-grant university with 12,000 students in the Rocky Mountain west. Much like other universities, ours has resource constraints that prevent a fully funded teaching development center. A Teaching and Learning Committee, consisting of faculty representatives from each college and a representative from the Provost’s office, exists to support the needs of faculty seeking to improve their teaching. In the past, the majority of the budget has been devoted to teaching awards, teaching innovation grants, and lunch events, most of which are short-term and benefit more experienced faculty. The Teaching and Learning Committee sought a way to leverage limited resources, provide support for new faculty, and offer an additional opportunity for experienced faculty. With this intention in mind, members of the committee decided that a mentoring program would require few resources with potentially large benefits. The New Faculty Mentoring Program pairs excellent senior faculty with new faculty with the goal of providing teaching support for the new professor and professional development in the area of leadership and teaching for experienced faculty.

Literature Review
Mentoring pairs a more experienced individual with a less experienced individual with the express purpose of the mentor providing guidance, support, and knowledge to the mentee.
Mentoring has received significant attention in the management literature in the last 2 decades, primarily because of its connection to both job success and career success. Kram's (1985) seminal qualitative study of mentoring, which defined mentoring roles and stages in the mentoring process, stimulated theoretical and empirical investigation of mentoring in organizations. Numerous articles have followed Kram’s study and have explored three areas: (a) mentoring roles and types (Enscher, Thomas, & Murphy, 2001; Allen, Eby and Lentz, 2006), (b) antecedents for mentoring relationships (Aryee, Clay, & Chew, 1996), and (c) outcomes of mentoring (Fagenson, 1989; Scandura, 1992). Allen, Russell, and Maetzke (1997) wrote that formal mentoring relationships can aid in the socialization of newcomers. The organization can benefit from these matches (Schulz, 1995), and, on a personal level, mentoring may be one of the most developmentally important relationships a person can experience in adulthood (Bova, 1987). Mentoring has been recognized in the education literature as an important source of learning for educators and students, including instructors (Conley, 1995; Harnish & Wild, 1993), graduate students (Bollis-Pecchi & Walker, 2000; Grant-Vallone & Enscher, 2000), undergraduate students (Dutton, 2003; Glass & Walter, 2000), and non-traditional age learners (Burgess, 2007). Experienced and less experienced individuals can benefit from these relationships, with mentees reporting increased knowledge and a willingness to mentor others (Fassinger & Hensler-McGinnis, 2005) and mentors profiting from these collaborative partnerships in otherwise autonomous environments (Zachary, 2002).

Faculty development programs have been found to be more successful if they include faculty in the planning process, are voluntary, are publicized widely, and receive support from upper level administration (Alstete, 2000). Research has revealed that faculty prefer to form relationships with individuals outside their department because of the unique nature of the college and university promotion and tenure system (Lockhart, 2004; Sullivan-Catlin & Lernel, 2001). The literature suggests that faculty appreciate circumstances to expand new skills, and leadership is one of the new abilities most desired (Alstete, 2000). These new accomplishments can then be transferred to other situations such as departmental, university, and community leadership. Wright and Wright (1987) recommend that in mentoring programs, the pairs should be same-gender matches to avoid potential problems such as gossip of others, jealousy of spouses, and sexual attraction. The mentoring relationship provides a context for both teaching and learning by mentors and mentees. It is this unique nature of the mentoring relationship that makes it such a valuable tool to improve faculty teaching skills while developing the leadership and teaching abilities of the mentor in the process.

The New Faculty Mentoring Program

With limited resources and no university teaching/learning center, the Teaching and Learning Committee has had to be very creative in finding useful methods to provide professional development for faculty. The mentoring program allowed us to create a volunteer-run program with a very limited budget (less than $1000, mostly for lunches) that would directly benefit new and less experienced faculty. A subcommittee, consisting of four individuals and including the two authors as primary members, was formed, and these members started planning for the New Faculty Mentoring Program in the spring of 2005. Our goals for the program were to provide mentoring that would improve the teaching abilities of new faculty and to provide teaching improvement and leadership opportunities for experienced faculty. All plans for the program were reviewed by the entire Teaching and Learning Committee.

We recruited and extended personal invitations to faculty who had received teaching awards for excellence to serve as mentors. Teaching award winners were selected because we wanted to increase the likelihood that the mentor would have valuable teaching advice for the mentee. Faculty completed information forms that listed their areas of interest and reasons for wanting to be involved in the program. Nine professors agreed to be mentors, and the program was launched in the fall of 2005. Because of the success of the program, it was offered again in the fall of 2006, and this year, we have 10 matches. Two members of the subcommittee announced the program at the day-long New Faculty Orientation and stayed during lunch for discussion at small tables. Request forms were handed out during the session. On these forms, faculty listed their gender, contact information, background, and reasons for wanting a mentor. Due to the small number of

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request forms submitted, we also sent follow-up e-mails to new faculty 2 weeks after the orientation. In both years of the program, nearly half of the new faculty who were matched with mentors came as a result of the follow-up e-mail.

The subcommittee provided orientation and training for the mentors early in the fall semester. During the session we facilitated a discussion about their expectations for the relationship as well as our expectations for them. Guidance in how to provide leadership to the new faculty was given. Mentors were asked to meet with their mentees at least once a month to share their teaching experiences—both successes and failures. The mentors later stated that they found this discussion valuable, and it relieved uncertainty surrounding the mentoring relationship. The Subcommittee matched individuals based upon the data on the information forms they returned. As recommended in the literature, paired faculty were same gender and from different departments. Individuals were informed of their partnerships, and they assumed the responsibility for the initial contact.

Numerous opportunities to attend activities have been given to the pairs. In December, the subcommittee provided a lunch for them to evaluate and discuss their experiences. The matches have been invited to other Teaching and Learning Committee-sponsored lunches, and several attend these functions regularly. Arrangements for a free lunch were made at an on-campus café for the mentors and mentees. At the end of the first year, a recognition lunch was held, with mentors, mentees, and the university administration invited. Attendees included the university’s president, provost, and vice provost. This lunch provided an extra benefit to the Teaching and Learning Committee in that it gave their work additional visibility to administrators.

**Evaluation of the Mentoring Program**

In order to assess the effectiveness of the mentoring program, written and oral reaction was collected at several points during the year. Many times, oral comments were obtained informally during other Teaching and Learning Committee-sponsored activities and chance encounters at the Student Union cafeteria. During the midyear evaluative lunch, more formal oral assessment was sought. A written evaluation form distributed at the midyear and end-of-year get-togethers also produced valuable responses. One new faculty member wrote, “I have learned more about how to initiate in-depth discussion among students and how to self-confidently handle questions from students that I don’t have immediate answers for.” Reaction from several of the pairs stated that matches with individuals outside their departments were very beneficial. It freed up both parties to be honest and independent of the promotion and tenure process and allowed for interesting and valuable sharing of experiences. One mentor stated, “Even though physics and theater seem worlds apart, we have a strong foundation for communication.” While the program did not require that mentors and mentees observe one another’s teaching, several stated that they had and that they found this to be helpful. One mentor commented, “I enjoyed seeing my mentee teaching a political science class, then having him watch me teach a computer science class, and then discussing our observations.” This statement clearly reflects the benefits to both mentor and mentee. Additionally, while the focus of the groups was to be on teaching, several did discuss other topics. One mentee stated, “This has been a good experience for me to learn about teaching, research, and interpersonal skills.” Another wrote, “It was nice to have someone outside my department willing to read my grant proposals.” Nearly all individuals stated they would do it again. Those who chose not to volunteer the following year gave time constraints and other commitments as their reasons. Busy schedules and difficulty scheduling meeting times while their partners were the primary challenges that people listed.

Experienced faculty found that not only did the new professor benefit from the relationship, but the relationship gave them the opportunity to “refresh themselves” in their own teaching and career as well as develop leadership skills. A history professor serving as a mentor expressed this viewpoint at one of our lunches, and an extensive and lively discussion followed. The meetings of the pairs gave the experienced faculty a relaxed atmosphere to practice guidance with peers and to try out new leadership skills. The latter skills include long-term goal designing, planning, persuasion, organization, positive interpersonal communication, agenda setting, scheduling, and role modeling. One piece of constructive criticism that we received was that most pairs wanted
the program to start earlier in the year. As a result, in the second year of the program we established the pairs over a month earlier than in the first year. This allowed individuals an extra month to meet during fall semester, and most took advantage of this opportunity. Further recommendations from participants included expanding the program and scheduling additional structured activities for the matches.

Recommendations
After 2 years of conducting the New Faculty Mentoring Program, we have learned many useful ideas and make the following recommendations for individuals at other institutions who want to create a new faculty mentoring program:

1. Gain support from upper-level administrators. Administrators need to contribute some financial assistance for events and help with publicity. In addition, their support provides credibility to the program. Faculty in recognized programs can include documentation of their participation in promotion and tenure documents.

2. Include faculty in the planning process. Teachers understand the culture of the institution and what aspects should be included in the program. Faculty are also the best individuals to “sell” the program to their colleagues when asking for volunteers to be mentors.

3. Advertise the program widely and on several occasions to entering faculty. New employees are bombarded with information when they first arrive. Not all newcomers attend orientation. Repeated advertising of the program ensures that faculty have ample opportunity to learn about and remember the offering.

4. Select as mentors faculty who have won teaching awards. All faculty are not stellar teachers. Using recognized excellent faculty ensures that new faculty will have good role models.

5. Provide an orientation session for mentors. Our training sessions were only 1½ hours long; however, they afforded the occasion for faculty to learn about the goals of the program and to ask questions. Practicing leadership skills was also discussed during the session.

6. Create and distribute to mentors a suggested first meeting agenda. The form equips faculty with a plan of what to talk about during the first contact with their mentees. Recommended items include their current and past teaching experience and areas of teaching (such as distance education or large lectures) that they want to target. We recommend that pairs take some time to get to know each other as individuals by discussing their hobbies and interests.

7. Match mentors and mentees by gender. This avoids several potential problems and makes a successful pairing more likely. Institutions do not want to find themselves involved in legal difficulties because of a mentoring program.

8. Match mentors with mentees from different departments on campus. This gives the pairs a safe environment to honestly discuss teaching and other challenges.

9. Make matches as early as possible in the fall. The first year of the program, matches were made in early October. The committee believed that new faculty would want to wait until they learned some of the procedures in their own departments before being paired with someone outside their area. Feedback from the matches recommended that the matches be made in early September.

10. Provide many opportunities for mentors and mentees to get together for coffee, lunch, and other breaks. Everyone has busy schedules, and some structured activities can motivate matches to schedule time for their meetings. Everyone appreciates free food!

11. Obtain oral and written assessment information from matches throughout the year. Suggestions made midyear allow for adjustments before the year is complete. End-of-the-year evaluations furnish information that can be used for the following year.

Endnote
The authors thank the members of the Teaching and Learning Committee (TLC) during 2005-2006 and 2006 – 2007 for their help with this project. Special thanks go to Jeff Adams, Steve Juroszek, and Doreen Brown for their work as members of the TLC Mentoring Subcommittee.

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References


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