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## Chapter

# Relational Leadership: Advancing Leaders in Higher Education through Mentoring

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## Abstract

Mentoring plays an essential role in preparing the next generation of higher education leaders. This chapter will examine the role of mentoring on college campuses, describe its impact on faculty and staff growth, and highlight its function in leadership development. A background of mentoring research, including a discussion of its benefits, types, and stages will be shared. The chapter investigates the idea of mentors encouraging colleagues to become leaders through example, shared knowledge, and encouragement. A relational leadership theoretical perspective as it applies to mentoring provides a lens for understanding how mentoring and leadership intersect. Further, the chapter will consider the effect of gender on mentoring and mentoring in higher education. Results from a study conducted about mentoring relationships in higher education, leadership, and gender will be presented.

**Keywords:** mentoring, higher education, women, relational leadership theory, gender

## 1. Introduction

Traditionally, the professoriate has encouraged the next generation of college and university leaders through mentoring. The term “mentor” originated with the ancient Greek, Mentor, who king Odysseus put in charge of caring for his son, Telemachus, when Odysseus left for the Trojan Wars. Through Mentor, the goddess Athena encouraged and educated Telemachus. Throughout history, mentoring of students who often became the next generation of political and academic leaders was an important role for faculty at the great universities. In popular culture, the term has evolved to mean a trusted advisor, a guide, or a coach [1]. However, within education, mentoring has always played a crucial role, with teachers serving a mentoring role in and out of the classroom. Mentoring benefits both the individual mentors and institutions and, in turn, benefits both the academy and students as it encourages the development of leadership.

Mentoring can be seen as a way for higher education institutions to invest in their junior faculty and staff members as the mentoring relationship provides young members of the institution with experienced mentors who foster the professional and

personal skills they need to succeed [2]. Mentors are generally leaders on campus who take on the responsibility of serving as role models and nurturing the next generation by sharing advice, providing feedback, and encouraging them to develop their leadership potential [2]. Often, these mentoring relationships occur informally, but since the benefits of mentoring for individuals and institutions is well established, formal mentoring programs have become a more common systematic method for institutions to encourage junior faculty and staff in their professional development [3]. Regardless of how the relationships are initiated, mentoring plays a significant role in the development of future leaders on college campuses [3].

Ideas about how the pandemic has negatively impacted faculty and staff relationships, their work satisfaction, and their engagement with students and their profession are concerns in higher education institutions. Therefore, it is crucial for administrators and others in higher education to better understand the role of mentoring in faculty and staff relationships with colleagues and their institutions. This chapter examines the role of mentoring in the lives of faculty and staff members in higher education.

This chapter will consider the definition, benefits, stages, and types of mentoring, focusing on the overlap in the development of mentoring and leadership in higher education with an emphasis on gender. The research focuses on mentoring and leadership in the field of higher education, which is distinctively different from leadership and management in the business world but is essential for colleges and universities to understand more fully. The importance of mentors in job satisfaction and job performance will be considered. The chapter will also look at the idea of mentors encouraging colleagues to become leaders through example, shared knowledge, and encouragement. The efficacy of same sex vs. cross-sex mentoring and the efficacy of informal vs. formal mentoring are examined. A brief review of previous scholarship about mentoring in higher education is presented as well as information about how gender impacts mentoring and leadership. Relational leadership theory guides the approach of a study about mentoring relationships in higher education. An online survey instrument, refined from a pilot study, addressed four research questions: RQ1: What role does mentoring play in higher education for faculty and staff members? RQ2: What kinds of mentoring experiences affect faculty and staff members at higher education institutions? RQ3: Are there any gender differences in the mentoring experience for men and women? RQ4: Do mentors encourage their protégés to pursue leadership opportunities? Quantitative results and qualitative findings from this study are shared.

## **2. Background**

### **2.1 Definition of mentoring**

At its heart, mentoring is a relationship between a mentor and protégé designed to foster career and personal development [2]. Within the body of mentoring research, a mentor is described as a coach, a teacher, and a confidant, while most research focuses on how these caring relationships facilitate growth through reflection, critical thinking, and skill development [3]. For the purpose of this chapter, mentoring is a mutually beneficial relationship between a mentor and protégé that promotes development through transformative learning. This study focuses on the ever-evolving concept of mentoring in academe. Mentors within academia can be academic advisors, division chairs, or experienced faculty, while others find mentors in other disciplines or

departments. Mentors across higher education help grow the development of individuals and institutions. Similar to management, coaching is a term not applicable to the higher education context and so will not be addressed in this chapter.

## **2.2 Benefits of mentoring**

There are an overwhelming number of personal and career benefits to mentoring as mentoring provides both intrinsic and extrinsic benefits for both mentors and protégés [2, 4]. To begin, mentors provide much emotional support that helps their protégés. Psychosocial benefits to mentoring include increased self-confidence and self-efficacy [4]. Having a mentor and receiving positive psychosocial support from a mentor increases a protégés work satisfaction [5–7]. Also, positive psychosocial support positively relates to the protégés outcomes, optimism, flexibility, and adaptability [5, 6]. Reduced stress, anxiety, and depression are also key benefits for protégés [4]. The positive effect on optimism carries later into the protégés career [5]. Furthermore, multiple mentors intensify the effects. Research has shown a diversity of mentors and the interplay between these developmental relationships affect protégés positively [6]. Mentors themselves receive intrinsic benefits, such as a sense of personal accomplishment and greater job satisfaction [4].

In addition to the personal benefits of mentoring, career functions of mentoring focus on organizational culture and knowledge [2]. Mentors share knowledge and provide crucial feedback to protégés, which enhances their performance while building their competence. This learning of valuable skills is essential for career advancement [4]. Extrinsic benefits related to the career function of mentoring include faster advancement and greater pay [4]. Mentoring also leads to increased organizational commitment and less turnover [4, 6, 8], which is why organizations are attracted to formalizing the practice through structured mentoring programs.

Additionally, a more recently developed concept, called “reverse mentoring” is a new take on mentoring that allows a young mentor to guide someone older. The idea is “(r)everse mentoring in a multigenerational workforce will break down stereotypes, reduce conflicts, and lead to greater interaction among team members” ([7], p. 21). Through reverse mentoring, older protégés learn vital skills to enhance their leadership abilities while young mentors realize their own leadership potential, encouraging them to continue to advance those skills.

## **2.3 Informal and formal mentoring**

Informal and formal mentoring are differentiated by how they are initiated. Informal mentoring relationships are established by the mentor and protégé, corresponding to their personal needs and preferences, while formal mentoring is artificially arranged to meet an organization’s needs [3, 4, 6]. In the informal model, protégés select mentors who they feel have expertise they recognize as valuable while mentors select protégés who they believe have the potential for success [4]. Informal mentoring relationships, therefore, are more intense as the relationships begin based on personal desires, and they are also broader than formal mentoring relationships as they often include personal and professional development aspects. Informal mentoring relationships are also not bounded by time constraints. While informal mentoring relationships create mutually beneficial arrangements for mentor and protégé, sometimes informal mentoring may not be recognized by both parties as a mentoring relationship, so there can be more ambiguity in the relationship [6, 9].

Overall, the literature has determined that informal mentoring provide greater outcomes than formal mentoring program outcomes [4]. However, formal mentoring programs may achieve similar outcomes [4]. Recognizing the well-established benefits of mentoring relationships, organizations seek to expand these results across a greater number of organizational members by creating formal mentoring programs [4]. By formalizing the process, organizations hope to create opportunities for increased job satisfaction, increased job performance, reduced turnover, and leadership development. Formal mentoring programs provide structure for the matching of mentors and protégés as well as procedures and policies to guide the relationships. Since formal mentoring is prescribed, the outcomes can be less successful in some cases because protégés may not be high performing, career-driven, or willing to listen to their mentors [4]. Additionally, formal mentoring programs tend to produce less career-oriented goals due to the time constraints of such programs [4]. Further, somewhat surprisingly, involuntary formal programs lead to more positive outcomes than voluntary formal programs [4]. This may be because an important contributor to a formal mentoring program's success is institutional support and buy-in, and required programs are symbolic to participants of full institutional commitment [3, 4].

## **2.4 Stages of mentoring**

Mentoring is a process that happens over time. Several researchers have identified multiple stages through which mentoring relationships evolve [2, 10–13]. The traditional four-stage model includes initiation, cultivation, separation, and redefinition [2]. Mentoring begins when a mentor offers a protégé career support during the initiation stage. Next, the level of support increases during the cultivation stage and includes career and psychosocial support. The third phase, separation, is marked by a decrease in career and psychosocial support by the mentor, which is driven by the career development of both mentor and protégé. This leads to a process of redefinition, the fourth stage, in which the mentoring relationship either ends or is redefined by less direct support from the mentor to the protégé [2].

During these stages, mentors are approachable, caring role models for their protégés. They model appropriate behavior, share information about organizational culture, provide guidance on career development and advancement, encourage mentors during times of crisis, and foster confidence within the protégé [4].

## **2.5 Mentoring and higher education**

Mentoring in higher education is intuitive as it presents an extension of the learning process itself. The value of mentoring academics at all levels is noted by the literature [14] and can be rewarding and fulfilling for both mentor and protégé [3]. Faculty mentoring other faculty leads to increased employment satisfaction as well as improved outcomes for promotion and tenure for the individuals [3]. Mentoring assists protégés in overcoming personal and professional challenges that may arise, encouraging them to continue in their careers [15]. For the institution, mentoring increases faculty production and retention [3]. Mentoring also contributes to higher quality of scholarship output [16], which benefits the educational endeavor in general. Finally, student outcomes are also improved when their faculty are mentored as mentored faculty feel better prepared to teach their courses and advise students [4, 16].

## **2.6 Gender and mentoring**

Mentoring, both formally and informally, occurs primarily in dyads that are either same-sex or cross-sex. Overall, there are more male mentors, and this is primarily because men hold more executive and advanced positions. Further, same-sex mentoring occurs more frequently than cross-sex mentoring in business and academic environments [17], so more men are mentored than women. The preference for same-sex mentoring is easily explained due to the similarity in attraction principle. People are attracted to those who are like themselves [17]. These facts, however, create an environment in which it is more difficult for female protégés to find mentors.

There are other potential reasons same-sex mentoring occurs more frequently. One concern with informal cross-sex mentoring is the perception by others that there may be a romantic relationship between the two [17]. The public perception when older male mentors are paired with younger female protégés is especially problematic [2]. These rumors about cross-sex mentoring may be less common in formal mentoring programs than in informal mentoring [4]. However, these perceptions are particularly difficult to overcome for women working in traditional male occupations. In today's professional climate, fears about sexual harassment discourage cross-sex mentoring relationships from forming, creating what has been described as a "glass partition" ([18], p. 46) that prevents women from advancing and succeeding in predominately male organizations. "In contrast, men in predominantly male organizations have sufficient numbers of same-sex colleagues to befriend, further isolating women, and limiting women's ability to network and obtain information in informal settings" ([18], p. 46).

In higher education, researchers have found that women need support to remain in the field and succeed [19, 20]. Therefore, the lack of appropriate mentors for female academics creates a barrier for women in higher education to advance into leadership positions [18]. Furthermore, without adequate same-sex guidance, many women academics withdraw from higher education early in their careers [19, 20], and this consequence, in turn, will continue to perpetuate male dominance in the academy.

## **2.7 Women and leadership**

The workplace can often become an unsettling place for women without the presence of mentors. Women and minority groups often feel a sense of incivility in the workplace when in a position of leadership [21]. Women are the recipients of insolent behaviors more often than men but experience an increase in rude and disrespectful behavior when placed in a supervisor position. When in leadership positions, women often face derogatory remarks, interruptions, doubts of ability, and a disregard for opinions from male colleagues [22].

In addition to experienced behaviors, women are often faced with perceived behaviors from colleagues when placed in leadership positions. Because women do not often hold supervisory positions, they are expected to be more socially adept, communal, and welcoming to colleagues [23]. Women in leadership roles are often stereotyped with possessing higher intensity in emotions while being more emotionally expressive. These stereotypes create a stigma that women in leadership positions lack the ability to control emotions and that they will lead with emotions and feelings more than their male counterparts, resulting in a double standard for women and men in the workplace [24]. Men often are greeted with acceptance and respect in instances

when higher emotions such as anger are displayed. However, women are often seen as unreasonable or too sensitive in cases where anger is detected. It is for this reason that many women seek female mentors in higher positions as a means of influence [25]. Women in higher-ranking positions are often more likely to assist lower-ranking colleagues with promotions once they reach a position of influence [24].

This chapter illuminates the evolution of the role of women as mentors and protégés in higher education. These considerations are especially important during periods of isolation that occurred during the pandemic. In higher education, the lack of women mentors has hindered the advancement of other women.

### **3. Theoretical framework**

The relationship between leadership and mentorship is long established. With roots in ancient Greece, mentors have long been associated with leadership as well as overall human development and growth. Adapted from management literature, many theories of leadership have been proposed for implementation in education settings, including relational leadership [26], transactional leadership [27, 28], and transformational leadership [27, 28]. Mentorship encourages leadership development for both the mentor and protégé, creating positive outcomes for the individuals involved and the organization they serve [7]. Although characteristics of mentoring may be seen in various leadership styles and frameworks, this study approaches mentorship through a Relational Leadership Theory perspective.

#### **3.1 Relational leadership theory**

Much of the leadership literature emphasizes the leader experience and fails to realize that leadership occurs between both leaders and followers in relation to one another [29]. The mentoring relationship can be viewed in a traditional sense as the mentor in a leader role and the protégé in a follower role. However, this study broadens the context of leadership to consider the greater relationship between leader and follower as paramount to the discussion of how leadership is itself negotiated. This perspective is grounded in Relational Leadership Theory, which emphasizes the social construction of leadership through relationships, social interactions, and communication [26]. Mentoring relationships emerge and are sustained through communication and interactions between people [30], and this is how leadership may also be best understood “as a process that is co-created in social and relational interactions between people” ([29], p. 83). This study approaches mentoring as both a form of leadership and as a means of developing future leaders. Specifically, mentoring relationships are established and maintained through a process of interactions in which mentors and protégés are constantly defining and redefining their relationship while they co-construct the leadership process [6, 29].

Relational Leadership Theory can be viewed “as an overarching framework for the study of leadership as a social influence process through which emergent coordination (e.g., evolving social order) and change (e.g., new approaches, values, attitudes, behaviors, ideologies) are constructed and produced” ([26], p. 654). From a Relational Leadership perspective, scholars study how leadership relationships are produced and how relational dynamics affect leadership. The relationship-oriented leadership style is associated with many positive outcomes, including increased group cohesion, job satisfaction, leader effectiveness, leader satisfaction, and motivation [31]. Interestingly,

a study of department chairs in higher education determined relationship-oriented leadership style is associated with chair effectiveness [32]. Relational Leadership Theory highlights how mentoring relationships are sites of leadership as well as a method for leadership development, and the theory offers insight into how those mentoring relationships are integral to leadership in higher education.

### **3.2 Relational mentoring theory**

Super Bowl champion and former NFL coach, Tony Dungy, wrote a popular book, *The Mentor Leader* [33] and further drew attention to the connection between leaders, mentors, performance, growth, and success. Mentor leadership has the potential to transform the lives of mentors and proteges in powerful ways. While some maintain leadership is inherent, most scholars agree that leadership qualities and competencies can be learned. Time and concern for others is vital for organizations to develop leaders for tomorrow [34]. Therefore, this study advances the ideas of mentor leadership through a lens of Relational Leadership Theory.

Relational mentoring theory takes a relational leadership approach to mentoring, stressing the connections between mentors and protégés rather than resources. The positive, mutual experiences of mentoring develop skills such as authenticity, empathy, and vulnerability [35]. The need to belong motivates both mentors and protégés to initiate relationships [36], and a primary tenet of relational mentoring is its recognition that mentoring is a mutual relationship [6].

### **3.3 Leadership and communication**

Crucial to the establishment of mentor relationships is communication. Various leadership styles have been identified that evaluate a leader's communication patterns [37]. Notably, research has found a connection between leadership styles and solidarity communication that affects job satisfaction and burnout [37]. Open communication between supervisors and subordinates also leads to higher job satisfaction. Solidarity refers to the psychological connection that employees feel for supervisors. When solidarity exists, workers experience more motivation, lower levels of burnout, and higher job satisfaction [37].

Mentoring relationships are established and maintained through communication. Communication is key to the psychosocial and career benefits protégés receive through their mentoring relationships. "Emotional support includes listening, showing concern, and providing reassurance of self-worth. Appraisal support includes feedback and confirmation" ([4], p. 21). Career benefits are communicated through giving advice, providing direction, and sharing information.

Traditionally, effective interpersonal communication skills have been required to establish and maintain mentoring relationships. However, in the digital age, the rules may be changing. Technology and digital communication may have altered and changed mentoring relationships, specifically mentor relationships may begin virtually and may be maintained and redefined through digital means [6].

## **4. Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to examine the role of mentoring on college campuses and describe its impact on faculty and staff leadership development. This



study addressed the role of mentoring in the lives of higher education faculty and staff members, the kinds of mentoring experiences that affect faculty and staff members, whether there are any gender differences in the mentoring experience for men and women, and the role of mentors in encouraging protégés to pursue leadership opportunities.

## **5. Method**

To further understand mentoring relationships in higher education and their impact on faculty and staff, a survey design was followed which included both quantitative and qualitative items. Questions about current and past experiences as well as gender and organizational position were asked to provide a comprehensive look at the role of mentoring in higher education.

### **5.1 Participants**

A convenience sample was used for this study. Participants were recruited using a snowballing technique on social media. The researchers shared a link to the SurveyMonkey survey on their social media and encouraged their friends to share it as well. The link to the survey was also shared via email at the researchers' home institution.

Using this technique, a total of 134 participants consented to participate in the study; however, 35 of these participants did not answer any of the survey questions, and therefore, they were excluded from the sample. This left a final sample size of 99 participants. This sample consisted of 61 females, 37 males and 1 who preferred not to answer. The average age of this sample was 46.78 years (SD = 11.21 years). Additionally, the sample was 91% Caucasian. The majority of the sample had a master's degree or higher with 22% having a master's degree and 68% of the sample having a doctoral or professional degree. The sample was also asked their role at the university and 68% of the sample was faculty with 23.5% serving as staff and another 8% who served as both faculty and staff. Finally, 78% of the sample worked for a private four-year college or university.

### **5.2 Measure**

This online survey instrument was designed containing quantitative and qualitative items informed by themes found in the literature; however, no existing instruments were used. To ensure content validity, a small pilot study was conducted, and the online instrument was refined. Participants completed a 51-question survey which was created in SurveyMonkey and then the link to this survey was shared on social media and via email. This survey included a series of demographic questions including age, gender, ethnicity, education level, their role at the university, and the type of institution in which they were employed. Following the demographics section, the participants were asked a series of questions related to their experiences with mentored both as the mentor and the mentee. These questions included whether they have been mentoring in their current or previous position, the gender of their mentors, how this relationship was established, the effects of this mentoring on their work, well-being, and leadership development.

### 5.3 Procedure

To participate in this study, participants must have had access to a computer or other electronic device with access to the internet (such as a cellphone or tablet). When participants clicked on the link to the online survey, they were first presented with a consent statement to read. After reading this statement, participants were asked to click either yes or no. If they clicked no, the survey was ended. If they clicked yes, then they proceeded to the next page where they could complete the survey. The 51-question survey took approximately 15 minutes to complete.

### 5.4 Analysis

After all the data was collected, the data was analyzed using the traditional Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Descriptive statistics were run on all relevant variables. One-way Analysis-of-Variance (ANOVA) was conducted with gender and role of university as the independent variables and other variables as dependent.

To provide a deeper understanding of the three research questions, three open-ended questions were included in the survey. Three open-response questions yielded a total of 194 narrative, qualitative comments. These comments were coded using thematic analysis and a pattern-matching technique [38]. This process began with multiple readings of the data. After the reading, initial codes were generated through open coding. From the coding, themes were identified. The data was read through again, and finally, themes were consolidated [38]. Word frequency counts were also conducted to create word clouds for each question. Below is a summary of the qualitative findings.

## 6. Results and findings

### 6.1 Role mentoring plays for faculty and staff members [RQ1]

Data supported the first research question by showing that mentoring plays a major role in higher education. Seventy-five percent of participants either agreed or strongly agreed that they had been mentored in their current position at the institution. For the majority of these individuals, these mentors were a combination of both men and women (57%), and these mentoring relationships were formed informally (69%). Then, participants were asked if they had been mentored throughout their career in the past (not just at their current institution/position) and again 74% said either agreed or strongly agreed. These mentors were also primarily a combination of men and women (66%). Participants were asked how often they had served as a mentor to others, and 61% said always or usually and another 30% said sometimes. The majority reported that their mentees were both males and females. Seventy-two percent of respondents said they mentored students, 61% said they mentored faculty members, and 44% said they mentored staff members.

The first open-response question asked, "What is the most important thing you have learned from your mentor?" The 78 comments were coded into four main themes that correspond to the dimensions of relational leaders [26]. These themes were: communication processes, social interactions, network, and self-concept. The majority (50%) of comments emphasized self-concept while 29% focused on social interactions, 13% on network, and 8% on communication.

Comments, such as, “Communication is the key to success,” and “Learning to listen well,” represented the communication process theme. The social interaction theme was evidenced by two comments that simply read, “Compassion.” Another social interaction comment indicated, “She gives advice on how to interact with admin.” Comments about network included, “how to get along in the culture of the school” and “working within the system.” Finally, many comments emphasized aspects of improving one’s self-concept, including, “to trust my own competence and abilities” and “have confidence in myself.” A word cloud of the comments for this question is represented below (Figure 1).

## 6.2 Effects of mentoring experiences on faculty and staff [RQ2]

Results also informed the second research question by showing that most participants believed that these mentoring experiences had both positive and negative effects. Ninety-seven percent of participants believed that mentoring was important to be more effective in their positions, and 93% believed that mentoring improved their work performance. In addition, 86% believed that their mentoring relationships improved the emotional and psychological health and the same amount believed that it increased their self-esteem and self-confidence. Additionally, 32% percent of participants reported that they believed that they had been passed over for a promotion because of their gender, and 57% believed that they have experienced barriers which have kept them from reaching their full potential in the workplace. Finally, 87% of participants reported that they have experienced an interaction in which they felt as though someone was not being genuine with them at work. For the majority, these disingenuous interactions included both men and women (57%). There were also significant differences regarding the gender of the positive and negative mentoring experiences by role,  $F(2, 69) = 8.00, p < .01$  and  $F(2, 47) = 5.31, p < .01$  respectively. Post-hoc tests showed that staff were more likely to report that their positive mentoring experience involved a male, while faculty were more likely to report that their positive mentoring experience involved a female ( $p < .01$ ). Staff were significantly more likely to report that their negative mentoring experience involved a female ( $p < .05$ ).

The second open-response question asked respondents to “describe one positive mentoring experience.” Five broad themes were identified: professional activities, organizational activities, communication activities, networking activities, and emotional support. The professional activities’ theme was then broken into four sub-categories that included teaching, promotion, education/training, and scholarship. Thirty-nine percent of the comments related to professional activities. These include comments about teaching, such as, “She helped me design and teach my first ever college course,” and comments about scholarship, such as, “co-presenting at a conference.” Other comments related to furthering their education or participating in



**Figure 1.**  
*Most important thing learned from mentor word cloud.*

professional development. One respondent wrote, “I was encouraged to pursue additional training to improve my leadership ability and position,” and another shared, “I probably wouldn’t have gotten my Ph.D. without her encouragement.” Comments related to promotion are represented by one respondent who wrote, “sharing application for promotion.” Five percent of the comments represented organizational activities, such as one which said, “assistance with opportunities in governance.” Another 27% of comments mentioned communication activities with many writing about talks and discussions. “Some of the best mentorship moments occur during chats over lunch,” one related. Networking activities were mentioned in 8% of the comments, exemplified by one comment, which read, “My mentor has invited other faculty to join our lunches, resulting in mentoring from others that I’ve not interacted with previously.” Finally, 21% of the comments referred to emotional support they received from a mentor. “I have been mentored by multiple women leaders who have always been encouraging, supportive, and fair,” one respondent wrote. A word cloud of the positive mentoring experiences described in the qualitative comments is presented below (**Figure 2**).

Participants also described their negative experiences with mentoring. These included five main themes: conflict, mentor qualities, accessibility, toxic communication, and destructive behaviors. Eleven percent of comments described conflict situations, with one writing, “It turned into psychological and verbal abuse, and I had to leave that position.” Another 17% of comments referred to specific mentor qualities, as one wrote, “manipulative, underhanded, dishonest.” Still others (21%) shared a lack of accessibility to quality mentors, including mentors who were largely “absent” or “burned out.” Twenty-eight percent of comments discussed incidents of toxic communication. “A previous supervisor made me cry every time I was in their office, always focusing on the negative and never the positive,” one respondent explained. Finally, 23% of comments mentioned destructive behaviors, such as sabotage, gossip, and external pressure. One respondent wrote, “An administrator thought that I didn’t like her, and she sabotaged everything that was under her control that was associated with me and nearly killed an entire program.” Below is a word cloud that represents the comments about negative mentoring incidents (**Figure 3**):



**Figure 2.**  
*Positive mentoring experience word cloud.*



**Figure 3.**  
*Negative mentoring experience word cloud.*

### **6.3 Gender differences in the mentoring experience [RQ3]**

Finally, data supported the third research question by showing that there were gender differences in the perceptions of leaders. A one-way ANOVAs was performed with gender as the independent variable and results showed four significant gender differences in this study. First, females were more likely to report having been criticized for being too assertive,  $F(1, 94) = 9.46, p < .01$  and were also more likely to have been criticized for being too sensitive/emotional,  $F(1, 95) = 5.36, p < .05$ . Next, women were more likely to report having been passed over for a promotion because of their gender  $F(1, 95) = 7.43, p < .01$ . In addition, women were more likely to report that their positive mentoring experience involved a woman as opposed to a man,  $F(1, 71) = 6.40, p < .05$ . Finally, there were three open-ended questions: (1) What is the most important thing you have learned from your mentor? (2) Describe one positive mentoring experience. (3) Describe one negative mentoring experience. For the positive and negative mentoring experiences, they were also asked whether that mentor was male or female. For the positive experiences, 62% reported this mentor to be a female, and for the negative experiences, 50% reported this mentor to be male and 46% reported them to be female.

### **6.4 Do mentors encourage their protégés to pursue leadership opportunities? [RQ4]**

There were mixed results concerning the connection between mentoring and the encouragement of leadership development, according to role at the institution. Participants were asked if they believed that their mentor encouraged them to pursue leadership opportunities at their institution and 80% either agreed or strongly agreed. A one-way ANOVA was performed with role at university (faculty, staff, or both) as in independent variable, and results showed a significant difference regarding whether participants were encouraged to pursue leadership opportunities at the institution,  $F(2, 83) = 4.67, p < .05$ . Tukey HSD post-hoc tests showed that staff members were encouraged to be leaders less often ( $p < .05$ ) than faculty members were.

### **6.5 Summary of results and findings**

In summary, this study confirmed the conclusions of previous research on mentoring and leadership in higher education. RQ1 asked, “What role does mentoring play in higher education for faculty and staff members?” It was determined mentoring has a widespread impact in higher education as almost all of the participants reported they have benefited from being mentored and the majority reported mentoring others. RQ2 asked: “What kinds of mentoring experiences affect faculty and staff members at higher education institutions?” The current results confirmed the body of mentoring literature as it relates to the psychosocial and career-related benefits of mentoring relationships with nearly all participants reporting increased work performance and emotional benefits. While the majority of respondents shared their mentoring relationships were informal, this is consistent with previous research that has determined informal mentoring has greater impact than formal mentoring programs. Overall, results demonstrated mentoring relationships are essential for success in higher education.

The narrative comments derived from the open-response questions provided a deeper understanding of the mentoring experience for faculty and staff, allowing for a more comprehensive investigation of the research questions. Support for the

Relational Leadership Theory was found in the qualitative comments as participants described the importance of communication, compassion, and relationships. Specifically, responses about the most important thing learned from their mentor outlined many of the dimensions of relational leaders, including a focus on communication, social organizations, network structure, and self-concept. These responses confirmed that individuals respond positively to mentors who exhibit relational leadership behaviors.

## 7. Discussion

Overall, this study aligned with previous research related to mentoring in higher education, demonstrating mentors clearly impact protégés and their development [3, 4]. The study confirmed past research that found mentoring relationships are beneficial in the process of acclimation to the academy [4]. The results also extended research in relational leadership to include mentoring relationships [14, 26, 34–36]. Characteristics of relational leaders include an emphasis on communication, social interactions, networking, and developing self-confidence in others, and the narrative comments demonstrated a strong preference for mentors who possess these characteristics.

However, there were some concerning results regarding leadership in higher education, especially as they related to roles of staff members in general and women in all roles. The study's results do not fully support past research that has found a connection between mentoring and leadership development [3, 7]. While faculty felt mentors encouraged them to develop their leadership potential, staff members expressed they did not feel encouraged to be leaders. Staff members provide important leadership roles on any college campus, and previous leadership studies have found mentoring is a key method to develop those qualities. If staff do not feel as if the mentoring relationships are supporting their leadership development, that could lead to a leadership vacuum on campuses unless staff members proactively find other leadership development opportunities. A lack of leadership development may lead staff members to leave the academy.

The current study as well as past research has found that women faculty need women mentors [17, 19, 20, 25]. While the gender findings related to leadership are alarming, they are not surprising given the current state of leadership in higher education institutions. The fact is the ivory tower is still primarily led by men operating within an old boy network [39, 40]. There is a clear underrepresentation of women in leadership positions within higher education [20, 39, 40]. With fewer available female mentors from which to choose, women are less likely to be encouraged to develop their leadership potential [18]. Further, the current findings indicated that women are hindered from advancement as more women reported being passed over for promotion. This phenomenon is often referred to as a glass ceiling or glass partition that keeps women from higher positions of leadership [18]. Recent data has shown less than one-third of top-ranking leadership positions are held by women in academia [40]. Finally, women in the study reported feeling the double standard of being a woman in a leadership role as they are criticized for being too emotional on one hand while, on the other hand, they are criticized for being assertive. These findings align with previous research that demonstrated the challenges women leaders experience in relation to their leadership style [24, 39]. Women who are leaders in higher education are often criticized for being blunt, terse, or direct, whereas their male colleagues are praised for similar directness [24, 39]. Faced with criticism regardless of their

behavior and with fewer role models from which to develop leadership potential, women in academe find it difficult to break the glass ceiling, glass partition, and achieve the professional success they may deserve.

While the results align with past research that has found better outcomes in informal rather than formal mentoring [6, 9], with the continued lack of a diverse group of mentors from which to choose, formal mentoring programs may provide more protégés the benefits they need and desire from mentors, encouraging them to stay in their academic positions.

## **8. Conclusion**

Mentoring in higher education continues to be crucial to the development of a sense of community of scholars at colleges and universities. The pandemic shifted the way colleges and universities function by limiting personal contact. As we emerge from the pandemic shutdowns and restrictions, we need to return to the deliberate development of mentoring relationships, which our study has shown is so valuable in maintaining and sustaining the academy. This study has demonstrated that it is especially important for women academics who, unfortunately, still have too few role models in higher education leadership. Formal mentoring programs may address this need although informal mentoring is more effective overall.

### **8.1 Suggestions for future research**

Further research about the effects of mentoring on faculty and staff job satisfaction may be helpful in explaining what has been called the great resignation in higher education. Research should investigate whether limited available mentors may be associated with faculty and staff burnout and resignation. The Chronicle of Higher Education has identified the “Great Faculty Disengagement” [41]. In short, many faculty, who have not left academia during the great resignation, have become disengaged with their profession. Research is needed to determine if mentorship may intervene and help faculty develop and maintain a sense of engagement with their profession. Others have observed that faculty are using social media to create communities that respond to this disengagement, and this application of social media should also be examined more thoroughly [41].

### **Conflict of interest**

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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