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# Mentorship: What It Can Do For You

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# Presidents of Independent Colleges Vary Career Paths

By Dr. Terri Moore Brown, Assistant Professor in Social and Behavioral Sciences, Fayetteville State University NC

Can we increase the number of women college presidents by studying the career paths of current presidents?

For research leading to an EdD in higher ed administration from North Carolina State University in 2000, I examined the career paths and experiences of female presidents of selected four-year independent colleges. Of the 129 female college presidents of ACE schools I polled, which excluded professional schools and those affiliated with the Catholic church, 91 responded to my questionnaire.

## Traditional vs. non-traditional career path

Few of the female presidents reported following a traditional career path to the presidency: faculty, department or division head and then chief academic officer. Half had not entered higher ed as a faculty member, half had not been department or division head and two thirds had not been chief academic officer just before their first presidency.

Early in their careers, the women didn't plan to seek the college presidency, either not recognizing their abilities or not knowing how to hone their leadership skills. As more females become college presidents, women can see themselves in the role and plan their careers accordingly.

## What they had in common

- **Credentials:** More than half the female presidents of independent colleges had a PhD, and more than a third had an EdD, confirming the doctorate as a valuable credential for females aspiring to the presidency.

- **Mentoring:** Most respondents reported having more than one mentor in career development. They had more male than female mentors; most said their primary mentors had initiated the relationships, not the reverse, which indicates more men are perceiving women as capable leaders in higher ed.

Most of those who had mentors had also been mentors, especially to women.

- **Professional development programs:** National professional programs contribute to the women's career advancement. Most had attended at least one of the five programs listed on the survey, which they felt enhanced their professional skills and provided networking opportunities. Especially beneficial were the HERS Management Institutes and the Harvard Educational Management program.

- **All-female colleges:** Nearly half the respondents had attended all-female colleges, which produce a significantly higher ratio of female leaders.

## Personal and institutional barriers

Women still face personal and institutional hindrances. Of personal barriers they reported, geographical constraints and maternal responsibilities were the most common, requiring women to get creative in integrating their

personal lives, careers and social lives. To attract more females to the presidency, college leaders can be proactive in offering solutions, such as hiring their partners or at least helping them find jobs, and providing info on area K-12 schools.

They also listed two top institutional hindrances: politics and exclusion from the old boys' network. But compared with a study a decade ago, fewer women felt excluded from the old boys' network.

Fewer reported personal and institutional hindrances than in previous studies, suggesting higher ed is doing more to support women leaders. Still, one president in her 40s said trustees told her she was too young to be a president.

## Recommendations

Changes in attitudes and practices are boosting the chances of women becoming college presidents. The women had experienced fewer personal hindrances, so perhaps independent colleges are providing more support in helping aspiring female presidents handle barriers. Since most of these presidents followed non-traditional career paths, independent schools seem to be more open to considering a variety of administrative and academic experiences. Those aspiring to the job shouldn't feel all is lost if they aren't already in the academic pipeline.

Serving in leadership roles enhances a woman's qualifications for the presidency and provides her with visibility. Accept leadership responsibilities inside and outside one's area (such as development, business affairs, academic affairs), chair campus-wide committees and create new administrative duties within a current job.

Outside the college, consider serving on accrediting bodies; present at academic conferences; publish; and participate on boards of professional, national, and civic organizations and in professional programs.

Get into mentoring, a key to career advancement.

Because less than 10% of the responding presidents of these four-year independent colleges were ethnic minority women, educational leaders need to do more to prepare them for a college presidency and to recruit those already prepared. To be effective, mentoring programs should recognize the differing needs of ethnic minority women and create culturally sensitive programs.

Schools have more work to do to increase the number of women in the college presidency, and women need to take more control and aim higher in planning their academic careers. ■

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Terri Moore Brown

*Independent schools seem to be more open to considering a variety of administrative and academic experiences.*

# Mentorship: What It Can Do For You

by Terri M. Brown, Ed.D., ACSW, LCSW, & Cheryl Waites, Ed.D., ACSW

Derrick is a BSW student whose goal is to become a child protective case manager. However, he lacks confidence in himself, and he is unsure of the path he needs to take to reach his goal. Derrick has a professor whose research interest and professional work experiences are in child welfare. Derrick is impressed with the professor's teaching style, child welfare experiences, and methodologies used in promoting students' self-confidence. Derrick feels this professor may be able to provide him the career guidance and mentorship he needs. Derrick schedules an appointment with the professor to discuss possible mentorship opportunities.

Shaniqua is an MSW student who attends a session on working with migrant families at the National Association of Social Workers annual conference. Shaniqua thoroughly enjoys the speaker's presentation. She learns that the presenter has extensive mental health experience working with migrant families and is an active member of several advocacy organizations that target the needs of migrant families. Because Shaniqua wants to develop competence in working with migrant families, she introduces herself to the presenter and asks permission to contact her with the intent of learning more about her work, getting involved with some of her projects, and pursuing a possible mentoring relationship.

## You May Need a Mentor

If you seek rewarding academic and professional experiences, you may use mentoring relationships to socialize yourself into the social work profession and to enhance your professional development. Mentorship usually involves a person of influence who has advanced experience and knowledge and who can provide supportive relationships to guide and assist a

mentee's career development (Kelly & Lauderdale, 2000). Mentors are sponsors, educators, critics, advisors, comforters, role models, coaches, and peer pals (Woodd, 1997). Faculty members, social work practitioners, administrators, and peers are other examples of persons who may serve as mentors (Schwiebert, 2000).

## Benefits of Mentorship

Mentors can help you in several ways, such as providing career advice, introducing you to the "right" people, contributing to career advancement,



and building self-confidence. Additionally, mentors can enhance your learning of professional knowledge, skills, and values (Schwiebert, 2000), if you are open to receiving these benefits.

To receive the full benefits of mentoring, you must have a positive attitude and be flexible, open to new ideas, and receptive to coaching and constructive criticism. Furthermore, you should possess a desire for personal growth and development. Do not use the mentoring relationship to gripe or complain. Mentorship is not a therapeutic relationship; therefore, you should not expect mentors to provide therapy or extensive help with personal issues. Above all, mentorship is a relationship built on trust, loyalty, and openness.

## Where to Find a Mentor

Multiple approaches may be used to find a mentor. Contact your

university's or college's social work department or your National Association of Social Workers state Chapter's office to determine if a mentoring program exists in your area. Also, some college campuses sponsor mentoring programs. Other channels for locating mentors are agency field placements and professional organizations, such as the National Association of Social Workers, Child Welfare League, Council on Social Work Education, Association of Baccalaureate Social Work Program Directors, and the Mental Health Association. All of these professional organizations have annual conferences and workshops that also can be channels for locating mentors.

## Characteristics of an Effective Mentor

During the stage of identifying a prospective mentor, consider characteristics that effective mentors possess (Brown, Davis, & McClendon, 1999). For example, a mentor

- takes a proactive role in his or her mentoring
- is committed to your intellectual and professional development
- encourages your interest
- protects you from unnecessary activities
- supports your career endeavors;
- promotes your successes and
- provides a safe environment for your intellectual pursuits.

When considering a person as a mentor, ask yourself several important questions. Does the person have the necessary knowledge and skills? Is this person compatible and willing to work with me? Does the person have strong communication skills? Is this individual trustworthy? Other questions you might ask include: (a) What are the specific areas in which a mentor may benefit me? (b) Is the individual known in the field or organization? (c) Does the person set high standards for self? (d) Is it important for my mentor to be nationally or internationally known? (e) Is it important for my mentor to belong



to professional organizations, boards, or committees? When asking these latter questions, think about your academic and career goals and the roles you see the mentor playing in helping you achieve those goals (Woodd, 1997).

Select a mentor with whom you feel you can work well both personally and professionally. The mentor must have a genuine interest in you. Find out if the individual has ever served as a mentor, and, if so, what happened to this individual's mentees. Is this person able to understand your unique needs, views, and goals? Determine if the individual has the necessary interpersonal skills that will enable him or her to give good advice and direction. Is the mentor viewed favorably by the institution and colleagues? Determine if the potential mentor has a good network and whether this person could refer you if he or she does not have the answers or resources. Depending on your needs, you should discover if the individual would be willing to introduce you to his or her professional and personal networks or if this person would be willing to advise you about employment opportunities, or serve as a reference.

## Establishing the Mentoring Relationship

After you have identified a prospective mentor, introduce yourself to the mentor, rather than waiting for the potential mentor to approach you. There are several ways to introduce yourself. For example, make an appointment with the mentor, or approach the mentor after a class, meeting, or presentation. Perhaps you would be more comfortable writing a letter, expressing admiration and appreciation of the person's work, asking him or her a question about a professional subject, and then asking if he or she would be interested in serving as your mentor. You might send the potential mentor a draft of a paper, a project idea, or other work and then ask for his or her feedback and thoughts. A first step might be to talk to others who know the potential mentor. Those individuals could provide feedback on the best approach to use.

Other effective approaches are serving as an intern or research assistant, performing volunteer work under

a potential mentor's supervision, participating in committees and organizations in which the potential mentor is actively involved, and getting involved in projects that will require you to work collaboratively with the individual.

Once the prospective mentor has met you, arrange an appointment to discuss the possibility of him or her serving as your mentor. The aforementioned approaches provide opportunities for the potential mentor to become familiar with your work and commitment.

Be prepared to discuss why you want the person to serve as a mentor and the benefits that both of you will receive from the relationship. If the person declines to serve, you may ask if he or she can recommend someone else who may be willing to serve as your mentor.

After the mentor commits to serving, you should discuss mentoring expectations and goals with the mentor.

- Determine if the potential mentor is willing to set aside time to spend with you.
- Talk about the knowledge, skills, strengths, and weaknesses that both parties bring to the relationship.
- Discuss your needs and hopes for the mentoring relationship, the mentor's expectations of the mentoring relationship, and how often you will have contact and meetings with your mentor, and when and where meetings will occur.
- Review what roles you and your mentor will play during contacts and meetings.
- Clarify each other's expectations (Brown et al., 1999).

## Maintaining the Mentoring Relationship

Once you have a mentor, both of you should establish goals. As the mentee, you should prepare yourself to follow through with commitments and go above and beyond what is required. Remember that the mentor is spending valuable time to help promote and develop your professional self. If the mentor introduces you to a colleague or invites you to a professional meeting, you must proactively engage in profes-

sional discussions to maximize the benefits of the relationship. Unless you do your part, the mentoring relationship will not be beneficial. You need to:

- take complete responsibility for your own professional development
- continually assess your strengths, limitations, goals, and progress followed by addressing your needs with the mentor
- remain open to new ideas
- recognize and express appreciation for your mentor's commitment, time, and efforts
- keep appointments and arrive on time
- follow through with commitments
- be aware of and respect the mentor's boundaries and
- maintain open communication by discussing difficulties and successes with the mentor.

Being involved in a mentoring relationship can be rewarding and empowering. Mentorship is one approach you may use to enhance your academic experiences and to promote career success. The strategies outlined above may be used to strengthen and expedite your professional development, and ease the transition from student to professional.

## Additional Resources

Brown M. C., Davis, G. L., & McClendon, S. A. (1999). Mentoring graduate students of color: Myths, models, and modes. *Peabody Journal of Education, 74*(2), 105-118.

Kelly, M. J., & Lauderdale, M. L. (2000). What social work managers should know about mentoring. *Social Work Executive, 15*(1), 3-11.

Schwiebert, V. L. (2000). *Mentoring: Creating connected, empowered relationships*. Alexandria, VA: American Counseling Association.

Woodd, M. (1997). Mentoring in further and higher education: Learning from the literature. *Education & Training, 39*(9), 333-343.

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