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## Chapter 26- Staff Mentoring and Development at Arizona State University

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# STAFF MENTORING AND DEVELOPMENT AT ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY

**Karen Engler-Weber**

## **Abstract**

Most university structures provide extensive mentoring and support for students and faculty, but the mentoring of university staff is often a neglected area within university systems, despite the clear need to support staff professional development, career advancement, and retention. At Arizona State University (ASU), the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) has developed an extensive university-wide staff mentoring and development program model that pairs staff mentees with mentors, providing the space and opportunity for mentees to identify their strengths and consider their long-term career trajectory at ASU. Through mentoring, participants learn more about specific skills, university areas, and career growth within the university system. Professional and leadership development sessions, along with peer coaching groups, provide additional opportunities for mentee growth. Program selection is competitive, requiring institutional support and management and a staff community that supports the success of all of its members. This chapter provides details on the structure and development of the ASU CSW mentoring program, operational management, and the financial investment needed to support this important opportunity for staff.

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Elaine Rostad, Audrey Dumouchel-Jones, Anna Wales, and Lindy Baker; university leaders including former Provost Mark Searle, Provost Nancy Gonzales, Deborah Clarke, Duane Roen, and Kevin Salcido; Kristen Young, one of our mentoring coaches and trainers; the Office of the University Provost for their financial support of the program; and most importantly, our outstanding mentors, who have dedicated their time and skills to supporting the success and growth of our staff at ASU. Also important to thank is my husband, Tom Weber, who supported my many long days at work to make this program a reality.

## **Mentoring Context and Program Development**

Mentoring is utilized extensively in institutions of higher education as a way to promote the success and growth of not only students but also faculty. Robust mentoring programs and procedures exist for students to support their retention, academic success, and the ultimate goal of graduation while focusing on their individual needs. Similarly, mentoring programs for faculty are often designed to provide support toward the goal of tenure, promotion, and career advancement. Yet when universities consider advancing the success of their communities, an often-overlooked group is staff. Professional development opportunities and procedures can vary greatly across academic institutions, often with the intent of providing training to do one's job better but less consideration on retention, career satisfaction, and advancement. Formalized mentoring programs for staff is often an underutilized strategy for supporting these goals.

At Arizona State University (ASU), the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) has developed an extensive university-wide staff mentoring and development program model that remains one of the only programs of its kind nationwide. Launched in 2013, the model provides one-on-one mentoring, professional and leadership development, strengths-based resources, networking, and peer coaching structures to support a cohort of mentees who are interested in advancing their career at ASU.

### **The Need for This Program**

The ASU CSW is an administrative unit whose mission is to identify and advocate for needed change in the university environment in order to enhance opportunities for women and underrepresented groups in the university system. The CSW fulfills its mission by providing extensive programming and activities with a particular focus on leadership development, professional development, work/life balance, and community engagement. The design of many of our programs focus on the development needs of staff, a group that often face obstacles in career growth such as confusion on career paths, uncertainty on career advancement, limited exposure to opportunities in the university system, and "feeling stuck" in their career trajectory. The CSW believed it critical to move staff members from the idea of having "just a job" at the university to instead consider their work as part of their long-term career. It is not just a difference in rhetoric but a key to staff retention, while acknowledging staff contributions to the success of the university as a whole. The CSW sought to develop robust programming that would support the retention and success of staff, and mentoring came to be viewed as part of the prescription.

In 2011, the CSW began the process with a year-long strategic review examining the prevalence and types of staff mentoring programs at public universities nationwide. Our review found that staff mentoring was largely absent from offerings in higher education, finding only three universities (0.4%) that had university-wide staff mentoring programs available to all levels of staff. A key observation in our review was that none of the mentoring resources identified provided a professional development component in conjunction with mentoring to support mentee growth (CSW, 2011).

## **Purpose and Objectives of Program**

The CSW's review provided a blank canvas for the CSW to create a unique and innovative model that would couple mentoring and development designed to support the success of staff. With the basic ideas in place, the CSW began structuring the model for the mentoring program. This process included multiple consultations with university units to address the legal considerations for implementing a formal mentoring program and to ensure that the program would adhere to university policies, Equal Opportunity/Affirmative Action guidelines, while also limiting any potential negative impact on participants in the program.

Piloted in 2013 and fully inaugurated in 2014, the ASU Commission on the Status of Women Staff Mentoring and Development Program utilizes a traditional one-to-one hierarchical model of mentoring (see Chapter 3 for more details on diverse forms of mentoring relationships), pairing experienced and excelling staff members with staff who are interested in developing their career and leadership skills. The program is meant to inspire and support a rewarding and evolving career at ASU. The goals of the program for mentees are structured to provide mentoring, networking, and professional/leadership development. Careful consideration was also directed to support the growth of mentors, with the program providing an opportunity to develop mentoring skills, expand one's professional network, and engage in meaningful university service.

## **Organizational Setting and Population Served**

The CSW program is open to all employees at ASU locations worldwide but limited to those classified as staff (non-faculty) and academic professionals. And while the program is managed by the Commission on the Status of Women, the program is open to all staff members, regardless of biological sex, gender identity, or expression.

## **Organizational Support for Mentoring Program and Infrastructure**

The CSW mentoring program is a highly structured, organized program that runs in a 6-month cohort model that begins in the summer and runs through the fall semester. The program cohort identified by summer and year (e.g., summer 2020), is comprised of 40 to 45 mentoring pairs. The program begins with separate orientation and training sessions for both mentees and new mentors. Over the course of the 6 months, mentees in the program will meet at least once a month with their mentor for a total of six mentoring meetings. In addition to these mentoring sessions, mentees will participate in a series of offered professional/leadership development workshops as well as monthly peer coaching group meetings focused on networking. The program is a formal commitment with requirements that both mentees and mentors are expected to meet, with the priority on completing all mentoring meetings. For mentors, we provide formal acknowledgment of their university service to bring visibility to what is often viewed as "invisible work." Mentees can expect to spend up to 23 hours for this program over the course of six months, while the minimum time requirement is 8 hours for mentors. ASU policies support release time for professional development for mentoring (Arizona State University, 1996).

## **Operational Definition of Mentoring**

The CSW utilizes a traditional one-on-one hierarchical model for mentoring, whereby an experienced staff mentor provides support and guidance for a staff mentee with a focus on career development and progression (Kram, 1988). Although it is a traditional model, many university staff members have had limited exposure to formal mentoring, which leads to greatly varying perceptions of exactly what mentoring is. A review of program participants indicated that over 53% had never had a formal mentoring relationship, and 43% came into the program with only having had some informal mentoring (2021 analysis). Some staff members perceive mentoring as remedial in nature—that mentoring is meant to correct deficiencies within their job performance, while others consider mentoring as friendship building, personal growth coaching, or a way to learn specific technical skills. The challenge therein lies in helping mentees understand what mentoring is and its boundaries within the context of this particular program.

Mentoring in the CSW program is driven by the needs of the mentees within the construction of a safe space. While the specifics of mentoring conversations are private,[1] the majority of mentoring pairs discuss identifying ASU-specific career paths, developing short-term goals, promoting skills, career advancement, and addressing challenges with career progression (CSW, 2022).

## **Mentoring Inputs and Resources**

### **Curriculum Development and Resources**

For many mentees, it can be overwhelming to engage in mentoring, especially if they have never been mentored before. The same can be true for new mentors. To alleviate this anxiety and support mentoring success, we provide mentoring guides with conversation starters as well as a career/leadership-focused book to utilize in discussions. The design of the CSW program also includes a variety of resources to directly support the professional development of the mentee. We start with a Gallup Strengths Finder 2.0 assessment (Rath, 2007), followed by a development session with a certified Gallup Strengths coach. The CSW then offers 12 different workshop sessions divided into three focus areas: identifying and promoting skills and strengths, ASU-specific career development strategies, and leadership development. Our leadership segment feature sessions led by VP-level leaders, providing a unique opportunity for mentees to consider their own leadership potential at ASU. To enhance the peer cohort experience, we introduced peer coaching groups to our program model, increasing networking opportunities for mentees who share similar career interests.

### **Funding and Sustainability**

The CSW provides the staff mentoring program completely free of charge to the program participant and their unit, with the CSW absorbing all financial costs and providing essential staff support from its one-person office to manage the program. Time allocation toward the program represents roughly 25% of the CSW's robust portfolio of programs. Non-monetary university-wide support is also important to keeping the program free and sustainable. Human Resources provides workshop trainers and a mentoring coach to support the program, while, lastly and most importantly, the mentors in the

program donate their time for service to the program.

## **Mentoring Activities**

### **Recruitment Activities**

With the large number of staff at ASU and the limited number of mentee spaces in this robust program, placement in the CSW program has become increasingly competitive each cohort cycle. It is for this reason that the recruitment, application, and selection process for mentee candidates is essential.

The recruitment cycle for the program begins with widely publicized information sessions that are hosted for prospective mentees and mentors. These sessions provide an overview of program design and defines mentoring within the context of the program. It is imperative that the information sessions help prospective mentees and mentors align their expectations with what the mentoring experience will be and what the program can provide. Staff members interested in becoming a mentee or mentor complete an application featuring short essay questions, interest areas, and, in the case of mentors, expertise areas. The essay questions provide an understanding of a staff member's career trajectory, goals, and expectations for mentoring. Their marked interest areas or expertise areas help with the matching process. The application does not ask for any identifying information across the protected classes, such as sex, gender, or age.

### **Selection Activities**

Mentee applications are evaluated by a committee on several metrics that include the perceived benefit of the program for the applicant. For mentors, the application review process assesses their suitability for mentoring. If a mentor is accepted, they become part of the CSW mentor pool and may be potentially matched with a mentee. Mentors stay on the program roster and are invited on an annual basis to participate in upcoming program cohorts and potentially be matched with a mentee. Evaluations of the mentor provided by the mentee are closely reviewed to identify areas where the CSW can support the mentor's growth or in the very rare case where it might be preferred to limit the mentor's participation in the program with no further matching.

### **Matching Activities**

Once the mentees and mentors for a program cycle are identified, the matching process begins. This is the most time-consuming and challenging part of hosting a mentoring program. While there are computerized matching programs for offer by educational corporations, the CSW developed a multistage matching process that is done manually rather than relying solely on algorithms.

The foundation of the matching starts with the interest areas of the mentees examined alongside the expertise areas noted by mentors participating in that cohort cycle. The interest grid helps to identify those mentors that are experienced in many of the areas identified by the mentee, while the mentor's title and position helps to narrow down the match. A review process is conducted to ensure there are no potential conflicts with a mentor match. Our program rules stipulate that a mentee will not

be matched with a mentor that has any supervisory authority over them, is not from the same unit, and is not involved in any work-related collaborations. A final look at the mentee's essay questions help to finalize the mentoring assignment. Although this method is time-consuming, we have a 99.8% matching success rate, with only four out of 330 pairs in the program history requiring a new match (CSW, 2022). Once the match is made, separate notifications are sent to both the mentor and the mentee that include the skills/interest areas that served as a basis for the match.

### **Training Activities**

At the start of the program cycle, we conduct separate orientation training for all mentees and for new mentors that cover a number of important points beyond the program guidelines to focus on best practices for successful mentoring. With only six mentoring meetings, it is important that those sessions are focused and effective, and that both the mentor and mentee know what to expect. A key part of this is not only mentoring training for mentors, but also providing training to mentees on how to be mentored. For new mentors, we encourage them to draw on their communication skills to support their mentoring and also provide strategies for when difficult conversations may come up. A mentoring program coach remains available throughout the program to provide support for a mentor or even a mentee to help make the mentoring relationship more effective.

### **Strategies to Monitor and Support Relationships**

Each cycle of the CSW program is developed and managed by the CSW program director. As with any formalized program, organization and frequent communication are critical to ensure the program's progress and to support the engagement of participants. In addition to program orientations, the CSW office will check in with mentoring pairs periodically, send out frequent reminders about upcoming activities, and lead/co-lead all development sessions so that there is a constant connection to the program.

### **Formative and Summative Evaluation**

During the program cycle, the CSW conducts periodic program evaluations with a longer assessment at the conclusion of the program for all participants, focused on the impact of the mentoring relationship and satisfaction with the program experience. Mentees also complete an additional evaluation on their specific mentor. Data is closely reviewed, and improvements are made for the next program cycle based on the feedback of our participants.

## **Mentoring Outcomes and Lessons Learned**

### **Outcomes of Program**

The investment by ASU in this staff mentoring program is returned in the outcomes for our mentee participants. In an analysis of cohorts from 2015 to 2021, on average, 97.7% of mentees indicated that the program inspired them to consider their long-term career at ASU, with 80.4% indicating that they saw themselves staying at the university for the next 5 years.[2] On average, 91% of mentees found the mentoring relationship helpful/very helpful in supporting their career goals and aspirations. Similarly,



on average, 90.1% of mentors across the same program cycles described the mentoring relationship as successful, and 94.7% of mentors indicated that they had a very positive or positive relationship with their mentee. An average of 89% of mentors felt that the program structure and resources fully supported their mentoring (CSW, 2022).

## **Lessons Learned**

Staff mentoring is an incredibly enriching experience, but it is not without its problems or complications. Sometimes the mentee gets overwhelmed by other responsibilities and drops off, and sometimes the mentor has a shift in commitments and is not able to continue mentoring. Sometimes a mentee really does not want to be mentored, and sometimes a mentor is just not good at mentoring. These are all “sometimes” occurrences, but it is important for any program model to anticipate these possibilities, address them, and continue moving forward.

## ***Recommendations for Future Designers and Stake holders of Academic Mentoring Programs***

Based on our program, the CSW offers the following suggestions and considerations for educational institutions considering implementing a mentoring program for staff:

- Staff support, effective communication, and strong organization are essential to the management and success of a mentoring program.
- Ensure that participants have a clear understanding of the definition of mentoring in your program and that the expectations align with what your program can actually provide.
- Understand that some mentees may have mentoring needs related to parts of their identity and determine the ways that your program may be able to provide support around these areas.
- Provide formal recognition of mentor service and mentee participation that can be added to annual reviews and personnel files.

When educational institutions invest in their staff and provide mentoring support in similar ways that they do for faculty and students, it creates a culture in which it is important that *everyone* learns, grows, and succeeds.

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[1] The privacy of the mentoring relationship is protected only to exception of conversations that warrant concern for the welfare of the mentor or mentee, safety of others, or conversations where there has been a stated violation of law or ASU policy.

[2] Average from summer 2020 and 2021 cohorts. Question data not available for previous cohorts.