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Mentoring Assistant Professors: Supporting and Nurturing Talent Needed to Grow a Program
(Model and Theory Development)
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Abstract

Mentoring junior adult education faculty in a college of education requires development of a knowledge base that goes beyond scholarly production, teaching and service. In a neoliberal business environment where student enrollment and retention determine the value of a program, developing social and professional networks, student recruitment, marketing and program planning are required to sustain a program. This paper explores how an effective mentoring program not only prepares mentees but determines the future success of a program.

Keywords: Junior faculty, mentoring, marketing, and social networking

When hiring newly minted graduate students into a tenure track position at a research university, there is a false expectation that superb research and teaching skills are the only talents needed to succeed. This paper explores other skills needed to ensure successful development of assistant professors, and the importance of mentoring. The insight offered in this paper is based on my years as the director of K-State's College of Education assistant professor mentoring program as well as my service on the college's tenure and promotion committee. It is myopic to assume that the transition from a graduate student to an assistant professor is a natural progression that will be smooth assuming the right person is hired. Junior faculty need development and space to make decisions, as well as make mistakes in a safe and nurturing environment. Without well-constructed mentoring, a highly talented assistant professor is akin to a ship without a rudder. Moreover, effective mentoring is an important aspect of building program and strengthening adult education departments. This paper addresses an unwritten problem in mentoring newly minted adult education professors, and offers a solution which is not intended to be the final word but rather to stimulate discussion.

K-State's College of Education mentoring program began shortly before I accepted my faculty position. I personally benefited from this program, first as mentee, later as a member the program's planning committee and finally as its director. This mentoring program focused on pairing assistant professors with tenured professors from another department in the college where the senior faculty member would have little or no authority over the junior faculty member and could provide a safe place to discuss problems and personal issues. Confidentiality was essential in building this strong mentoring relationship. Our mentoring program included monthly luncheons where various topics were presented and discussed, including the tenure and promotion process, the importance of diversity and respect for marginalized groups, how to deal with student mental health issues and crises situations, grant writing, and writing research results for peer-reviewed publications. All of these topics are important, and are designed to position junior faculty to be successful in a highly competitive and political environment through networking and relationship building. On occasion junior faculty from other colleges in the university were invited to participate in the monthly luncheons to support network opportunities

beyond the college's boundaries. In addition, mentors were encouraged to meet with their mentees one-on-one on a regular basis to offer them support and help when problems arose.

As discussed above, K-State's College of Education mentoring program is intertwined with the tenure and promotion process, which is guided by three main components: research and scholarly activity, teaching, and service. Scholarly production and grant writing is the main component and weighted most heavily. Yet, if a candidate is not a good teacher and is not providing service to the college and department, the strength of their research is negated. Though service to national and international organizations is important and appreciated, service to the department and college is essential. Junior faculty need to be seen by others in their college—some of whom will be voting on their tenure and promotion—as someone who is contributing their time to building a positive culture that leads to new programming, which is needed to sustain program and academic excellence. There is one aspect of a successful candidate that is not listed in our tenure and promotion documents, and is not discussed openly but often determines success—*fit* (how does this candidate fit the needs of their department and college; how does this candidate support other faculty and students; and how easy is this candidate to work with?). An effective mentor can help a mentee fit into the institution's culture and community. Though most faculty want to be change agents, they cannot make change until they have secured their place among their colleagues by respecting and following institutional and cultural protocols. Once their place is secured, which often requires several years or more of building relationships, then their efforts to impact change will be rewarded.

Much of the cutting edge literature on mentoring in higher education is from medicine (Fleming, et. al., 2015; Jakubik et.al., 2016) where clinical training is required. Throughout this literature search I did not come across one article that challenged the efficacy of mentoring, rather most focused on its benefits and best practices. And all focused on inner-institutional mentoring. One of the earlier adult education publications on mentoring was written by Merriam, Thomas and Zeph (1987), and explored faculty/student mentoring, senior/junior faculty mentoring (akin to the program I directed) and administrative mentoring. Their research analyzed 26 studies, most on faculty/student mentoring. Only one study looked at senior/junior faculty mentoring, and it tracked success using academic rank and publications—both individual accomplishments. Again, this article focused on mentoring's value as a means to nurture the development of individuals.

More recently there has been some excellent scholarly articles in the adult education literature on mentoring. One that is worth mentioning is Alston and Hansman (Eds.) (2020) special issue on mentoring in *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*. Pulling together some of the brightest minds in the field, this issue addressed ethics, LGBTQ and African American mentoring, mentoring practices in the military, student/faculty mentoring, and developing leaders. For this paper, the chapter that is most useful is Jernigan, Dudley and Hatch's discussion of mentoring black leaders in higher education. Using network and social capital theory they develop a conceptual framework that captures the importance of building political capital through mentoring that can strengthen a young administrator or assistant professor's ability to achieve personal goals while furthering the mission of the institution. Access to opportunities through partnerships in higher education is a key part of mentoring, and as this chapter points out, is not automatic but needs to be cultivated and strategically

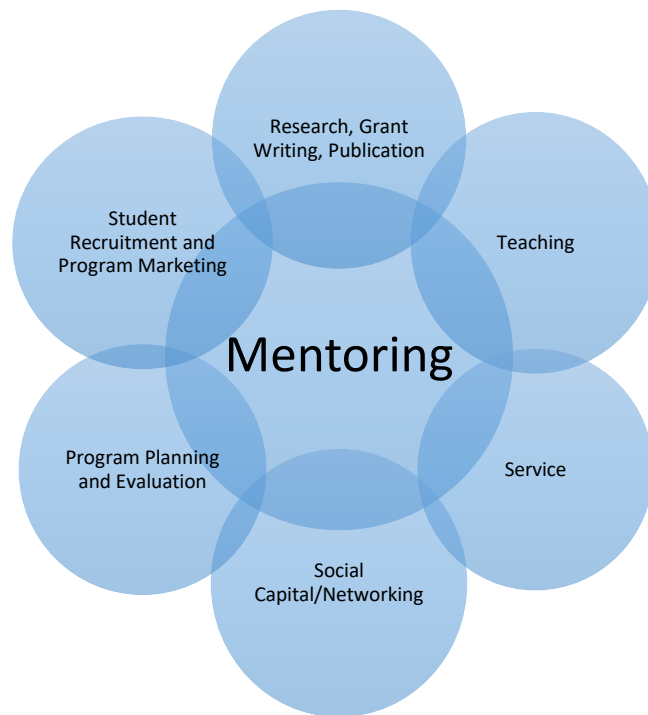
implemented through relationships between senior and junior faculty. What this chapter is missing, as well as most of the other chapters, is the need to expand both social and political capital beyond institutional borders (department, colleges, and university borders) into the community where students can be recruited.

An analysis of K-State's mentoring program's first nine years was conducted by Miller and Thurston (2009) using yearly formative evaluations and a summative evaluation where both mentees and mentors were surveyed. This evaluation found that both mentees and mentors generally found this program to be productive and important to successfully achieving tenure and promotion. Moreover, it met the college's administrative leaderships goals and expectation, suggesting preparing junior faculty to meet the needs of the adult education program was not a priority. One indicator of success that I recall that during my years affiliated with this program is that only two junior faculty members (out of more than forty mentees) who participated in the program were not promoted to associate professor. While this program was and is deserving its accolades, it was designed around an individual's requirements to achieve tenure and promotion, and did not explore larger issue of program development.

The omission in all of the literature reviewed for this paper, and in the program I know best, is program development and student recruitment. At a time when adult education and leadership programs and departments are experiencing difficulty growing and sustaining their relevance in a business environment where academic capitalism rules, every new hire needs to contribute to student enrollment and grant/contract procurement. In this neoliberal higher education world, the most effective path to relevance is a stable, if not growing, student enrollment—*butts in the seats* (Slaughter & Rhodes, 2004; Zacharakis & Holloway, 2016). Networks need to be developed that build pipelines by attracting students and procuring grants and contracts. Moreover, the goal is to institutionalize the adult education program and not have it identified with only one or two faculty members who upon retirement also signal the retirement of the program. What separates our program from others in the college is that ours is the only non-licensure program, so it is not essential to the universities vision of a comprehensive education college that includes special education, educational administration, and primary and secondary education. Hence, adult education must show its value by not only having a robust student enrollment, but also as an important partner with other departments in the college and university. Hence, at K-State's adult education program faculty contribute internally to other departments throughout the university, and within the mission of a land grant university, contribute to growth and health of the state's culture, community, and economy. Therefore, the successful assistant professor needs to develop skills in networking and program development that enhances not only their C.V., but also the overall reputation and capacity of their department and college. Without all faculty, including junior faculty, contributing to program development, the future of adult education in most universities is not sustainable.

The solution to this challenge can be addressed in part through mentoring newly hired faculty. Jernigan, Dudley and Hatch (2020) provide a starting point in their conceptual framework of mentoring black leaders in higher education. Modifying their Venn Diagram (p. 44), this framework can be expanded to include program development which includes building pathways and pipelines for future students. Having served on many search committees when faculty positions open, most committees first look for needed expertise in the department that

compliments the skill sets of existing faculty members, then they focus on research and teaching experience of each applicant. Of course there are also many other characteristics committees look at such as communication skills. But for most part committees look at applicants who will succeed at achieving tenure and promotion. I have been on a few search committees that also considered what each applicant might bring to sustaining and growing a program, but this is less common and more or less an intangible skill set that is harder to predict. As such, once a candidate is hired, then the mentoring process can address needs and opportunities in program building.



This design is fluid and needs to be adapted to individual adult education higher education programs. Here is a brief summary of each component.

Research, Grant Writing, Publication: At most universities research and scholarly activities are central to successful tenure and promotion. Hence this piece of the mentoring process is foundational to all mentoring programs for junior faculty.

Teaching: For many new professors there are the inevitable challenges the first few semesters. Key to retaining students after they are recruited requires effective teachers who are able to communicate clearly, develop clear syllabi, and develop reasonable expectations. In my experience, teaching is often where a mentor is most helpful to a mentee. This piece, along with scholarly production, is a core component of a mentoring program.

Service: Prioritizing service opportunities is a major challenge for most new faculty as it is difficult to say no when offered a committee position within the university or in a professional

organization. Our college expects junior faculty to serve on at least one college committee and one university committee, and to not overcommit to committee work, as service remains a small part of a faculty's contract.

Social Capital/Networking: K-State's mentoring program focuses on building social capital and developing professional linkages with other departments and colleges in the university, as well as outside the university to strengthen not only individual efficacy but also the department's capacity. For example, building bridges with the state adult education association, a regional economic development committees and local professional organizations are areas where a mentor can help a mentees identify external partnerships. Jernigan, et al. (2020) provide a nice presentation on social capital as part of developing a mentee's capacity. What it lightly covers is how important these networks can be by linking the department or unit outside of the university community. Via these external linkages pipelines can be develop to new students. An effective mentoring program can assist mentees in the development of these social networks.

Program Planning and Evaluation: New faculty should be involved with program planning from the beginning. Initially they most likely serve only as a team member, but through this exposure they will have an opportunity to learn how adult education in higher is a business and that priorities are determined by how much they will strengthen the program given the limitations of time and energy. Program planning is closely tied to networking and providing a service to potential stakeholders. Program planning, when using an asset-based model, is interconnected with networking, student recruitment and marketing.

Student Recruitment and Marketing: Without students our programs would cease to exist. Students exploring higher education opportunities have many choices, especially those who are not working for a license. New faculty can contribute to student recruitment during the first year in many ways. Mentors who understand the business of higher education can open doors and assist their mentees by first emphasizing the important of student recruitment as part of a sustainable program, and then by helping their mentee think through how they can contribute to this ongoing challenge without sacrificing too much time from their research and teaching.

Every successful program has leaders who know how to build a program. Though there are times when I don't want to admit that higher education is a business and in order for this business to survive we need a steady stream of new students. Yet, if I believe in my product I need to be willing to sell it to potential students. In my department we have historically had and still have leaders who were skilled in program development and student recruitment. I also think back to my years as graduate student at Northern Illinois University—this program gained national prominence through the leadership and program development skills of Bob Mason and Phyllis Cunningham who build a strong faculty where everyone contributed to building the program. Sadly, when these faculty retired they often were not replaced by junior faculty who had the same marketing skills, foreshadowing the programs sunset. This same story has repeated itself at other universities over and over throughout my adult education career.

For K-State, our adult education program draws its students primarily within a four or five state region and we do not have the luxury of too many students knocking on their doors. This means that student recruitment begins locally and regionally, and though being a national

and internationally scholar is important to T&P process, student recruitment and retention is essential to our program's sustainability. Finally, each generation of faculty has to find a marketing and recruitment strategy that fits their personality and skillset as they cannot rely on those who stood before them. The role of a sound mentoring program cannot be underestimated but it also needs to be expanded by emphasizing the importance of social networking, program development and student recruitment, which are all interconnected.

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