

Reframing and Advancing Academic Mentorship to Support New and Early Career Faculty Members

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Abstract

Mentorship is critical to fostering professional growth and career development in academia. However, academic mentorship is often an informal activity that is overlooked and under researched. There is much ambiguity and uncertainty surrounding mentorship roles and strategies in academia. This paper provides recommendations and strategies to reframe and advance academic mentorship to support new and early career faculty.

Keywords: Mentorship, Mentor, Mentee, Academia, Scholarship, Productivity

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Introduction

Mentorship is critical to fostering professional growth and career development in academia. More specifically, mentors can provide mentees with opportunities and guidance for skill development, professional networking, and strategic leadership skills necessary for career advancement (Bacsu et al., 2024; Mremi et al., 2023; Slattum et al., 2022). Smith and colleagues (2019a; 2019b) note that mentorship can empower early career faculty by supporting research trajectories, acquiring skills, building research teams, and navigating the nuances of tenure and promotion.

Although mentorship is important to career growth, it is predominantly overlooked

and underrecognized in academia (Bonaconsa et al., 2024). For example, academic mentorship is typically an informal activity that is considerably undervalued in comparison to publication achievements and funding accolades. Waddell and colleagues (2017) assert that mentorship often occurs in an *ad hoc* manner with little institutional guidance, funding, or formal mentorship programs.

Evidence-based research on mentorship in academia is limited. Although a systematic review is beyond the scope of this paper, a PubMed search of the phrase “mentorship of new and early career faculty” identified only 169 articles published between 1997 to 2024. Marino (2021) notes that there is an underlying assumption among academic

leaders that people with advanced degrees such as PhDs instinctively know how to provide quality mentorship. However, emerging research highlights issues pertaining to low-quality mentorship (Montgomery, 2017; Sevelius et al., 2024; Tumi et al., 2021) and the need for mentorship reform (Gangrade & Lambert, 2023). Consequently, there is often ambiguity and uncertainty surrounding the roles and responsibilities of mentors.

There is a growing need to train faculty to be effective mentors in fields such as the health sciences (Mremi et al., 2023) and gerontology (Bacsu et al., 2024; Creber et al., 2019). However, the lack of evidence-based research regarding mentorship makes it difficult to provide “effective” training and mentorship programs. In a 2019 study of geriatric medicine fellows, mentorship was identified as one of the most important factors in one’s decision to pursue a career in working with older adults (Blachman et al., 2019). Creber and colleagues (2019) note that the need for mentorship is increasing, but faculty with expertise are lacking to fill the mentorship roles. Accordingly, more research is needed about mentorship to support new and early career faculty.

Despite the importance of academic mentorship, there is a dearth of literature to guide and support high-quality mentorship. Moreover, there is a great deal of uncertainty and ambiguity related to academic mentorship. In this article, we recommend four strategies to reframe and advance mentorship in academia : 1) using a strengths-based approach; 2) creating a healthy mentee-mentor partnership; 3) mentoring with passion and inspiration; and 4) promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) (see Table 1).

Four Strategies to Reframe Academic Mentorship

A strengths-based approach is needed to empower mentees.

Mentorship must be reframed from using a deficit-based to a strengths-based approach. Too often mentees are subjected to patronizing, power-imbalanced, and deficit-based mentorship that emphasizes weaknesses to highlight the need for self-improvement (Tuma et al., 2021). Deficit-based approaches are often demoralizing and discourage mentee empowerment. Conversely, strengths-based mentorship consists of reframing communication to focus and build on the mentee’s inner strengths, skills, and talents. A strength-based approach to mentorship should include: 1) conducting an initial assessment of mentee’s strengths, and weaknesses; 2) identifying tasks based on the mentee’s skillset and their stage of training taking advantage of the institutional and outside resources; and 3) focusing all interactions on the mentee’s assets, strengths, and accomplishments (Stavropoulou & Protopapa, 2013). For example, a strengths-based mentor may have their mentees identify their ‘wins of the week’ (e.g., what worked well for them - research partnerships, grants, presentations, and publications). This approach enables mentees to have a safe space to develop their self-confidence, self-efficacy, and be empowered by their strengths to accomplish their goals.

A healthy partnership is required for successful mentor-mentee relationships.

Creating a healthy and respectful partnership is critical to successful mentor-mentee relationships (Straus et al., 2013). Lumpkin (2011) asserts that healthy mentor-mentee relationships comprise of: 1) clear goals and expectations; 2) regular

interactions and timelines; and 3) ongoing evaluations to monitor effectiveness and outcomes. Clear goals, timelines, and expectations from the onset can enhance productivity across the life cycle of the relationship (Straus et al., 2013). Regular interaction also is an important driver for accomplishing pre-determined goals, developing trust, and managing expectations throughout the mentor-mentee relationship (Waddell et al., 2017). Furthermore, tracking and monitoring progress over time can help the mentor and mentee identify the tangible and intangible benefits of the relationship (Lyons & Edwards, 2022). Mentors may use formal (memorandum of relational understanding) or informal mechanisms (verbal agreements) to initiate and monitor this process.

Mentors should be open and honest with their mentees about impending deadlines and challenges (Hill et al., 2022). Too often mentors do not disclose their academic challenges and career barriers, which mentees could learn from. Mentors should share their successes and challenges with their mentees so they can observe the “pros and cons” associated with the mentor’s job requirements, roles, and responsibilities.

Passion and inspiration are vital to mentorship.

Inspiration and motivation are essential components of professional and personal growth. Passion for mentorship is defined by a profound love and enthusiasm for the subject or field of study (Ezzat & Maly, 2012). This fervor motivates mentors to invest their time and energy in their mentees' development. A passionate mentor is more likely to engage, inspire, and instill a similar passion in their mentees. Vallerand, Chichekian, and Paquette (2020) emphasize that mentors' passion significantly predicted their mentees' academic self-efficacy and

interest in research, highlighting the contagious nature of passion in the mentoring relationship.

Unfortunately, funding is often used as a key indicator of a “good mentor,” overshadowing other important attributes such as passion, kindness, and motivation (Zulfqar, et al., 2021). This fixation on grant funding may lead to a biased and subjective evaluation of mentorship that is not evidence-based (Shanahan et al., 2015). It is essential to develop comprehensive evaluation metrics that encompass a broad range of mentor qualities beyond funding (Smith et al., 2019b) that can provide insight into the long-term outcomes of mentor-mentee relationships (Mullen & Klimaitis, 2021). For example, studies suggest that effective mentorship may include factors such as mutual respect, reciprocity, personal connection, similar values (Strauss et al., 2013), compassion, honesty, dedication, and cultural awareness (Oloruntoba, et al., 2022). Consequently, reframing the metrics of mentorship and incorporating diverse perspectives in mentorship programs can counteract unconscious bias and subjectivity and promote inclusivity (Blake-Beard et al., 2018).

DEI are essential to creating a thriving and supportive academic environment.

Promoting DEI in mentorship is vital for developing a supportive and empowering academic learning environment (Womack et al., 2020). Diverse mentees include members of groups with historical and/or current barriers to equity including but not limited to First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples, and all other Indigenous peoples; persons who experience discrimination due to ancestry, place of origin, race, colour, religion and/or spiritual beliefs; persons with visible and/or invisible disabilities; persons who identify as women; and persons of marginalized sexual orientations, gender identities, and gender

expressions. Diverse mentees offer unique insight and perspectives to the university community, fostering a rich environment of collective knowledge and exchange (Oloruntoba, et al., 2022). However, academic landscapes may present unique challenges from adapting to new educational systems to navigating unfamiliar cultural norms.

Mentors should implement strategies tailored to the unique needs of diverse mentees. Through open dialogue and actively listening to mentees' backgrounds, goals and, and challenges, mentors can gain valuable insight and provide targeted support to address the mentee's needs (Waddell et al.,

2017). Mentors can encourage mentees to join mentorship programs and peer support networks designed to support diversity and inclusion. These programs can provide valuable resources and networks to navigate academic and social challenges.

Mentors can also advocate for institutional policies and initiatives that promote diversity and inclusion, such as cultural safety training for faculty and staff, inclusive curriculum development, and access to support services for underrepresented groups (Oloruntoba, et al., 2022). By actively engaging in these efforts, mentors can foster an inclusive academic community where all mentees feel valued, respected, and empowered to succeed

Table 1

Four Evidence-Informed Mentorship Strategies and Examples for Execution

1.	Using a strength-based approach to strengthen and empower <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Conduct initial formal assessment of mentee's strengths and weaknesses <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Identify tasks based on the mentee's skillset and their stage of training taking advantage of the institutional and outside resources b. Shift from a deficit- to a strength-based approach in all interactions
2.	Creating a healthy mentee-mentor partnership <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Clear goals and expectations (e.g., memorandum of understanding) b. Regular interactions and clear timelines c. Ongoing evaluations to monitor effectiveness and outcomes
3.	Mentoring with passion and inspiration <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Inspiration, motivation, and passion for the field b. Overcome bias and subjectivity in mentorship with broader metrics <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Mutual respect, reciprocity, honesty, compassion, shared values, personal connection, dedication, and cultural awareness
4.	Promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Foster inclusive environments b. Familiarity with mentee background and worldview c. Provide culturally sensitive support and guidance

Four Strategies to Advance Academic Mentorship

Mentorship is critical to supporting professional growth of new and early career faculty members in academia. However, there is a paucity of knowledge focusing on future directions to support mentorship. We recommend four key strategies to advance mentorship in academia: 1) institutional support; 2) the study of definitions of mentorship types; 3) the creation methods for evaluating mentorship; and 4) research about mentorship productivity.

There is a growing need for more institutional funding and recognition of mentorship.

Some examples of institutional support could include mentorship awards, certificates, course release, dedicated time allocation, or funding to support mentorship. For example, mentors are often expected to provide graduate student mentees with training opportunities related to publications, conference presentations, and research employment with little financial incentives from universities. However, funding opportunities could be provided to support mentees' open access publication fees, conference travel, or hiring mentees as research assistants. Similarly, institutions could provide course releases and mentorship awards. Financial incentives and formal recognition boosts faculty morale to support mentorship initiatives.

Further research is required to examine mentorship definitions.

Inclusive mentorship definitions that recognize the diverse types of mentorships (e.g., groups, one-to-one, peers, dyads, virtual) are needed to effectively evaluate mentorship. Mremi and colleagues (2023)

note existing research focuses primarily on the mentors' points of view with few studies examining mentees' perspectives. Consequently, further research should assess different mentorship types from the perspective of both mentors and mentees.

More research is needed on methods to evaluate mentorship.

While existing reviews assess mentorship (Chen et al., 2016; Ng et al., 2020), there is ambiguity related to which specific evaluation methods (e.g., surveys, interviews, focus groups) and measures (e.g., items, scales, indices, checklists) should be used. Without clearly documented and established metrics, it is difficult to create benchmarks or draw comparisons of different mentorship initiatives which are essential for enhancing academic mentorship.

Further research is required to evaluate mentorship productivity.

Similar to a family tree, tracing academic mentorship can illustrate the connections and exponential productivity of mentorship growth with each generation (Smith et al., 2019b). Smith and colleagues (2019b) provide useful suggestions to monitor the collective impact of mentorship over generations. For example, they use systematic tracking by collecting participants' socio-demographic characteristics and professional activities (e.g., number of manuscripts, grants, professional development, networks expanded, and conference abstracts) over time. Evaluating productivity across generations can provide a more comprehensive and in-depth understanding of mentorship.

Conclusion

Although the benefits of mentorship are well-documented, there are opportunities to reframe and advance mentorship in academia. We suggest that more institutional support and evidence-informed research are needed to facilitate the advancement of mentorship. Moreover, inclusive mentorship definitions, clearly defined metrics, and longitudinal monitoring with evaluation are essential to supporting the evolution of mentorship. Only through more evidence-informed research, institutional support, and evaluation, can we truly begin to advance mentorship to support new and early career faculty members in academia.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest.

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