Vol. 2, No. 1 (August 2006) 1-15

Mentoring Academic Women: Struggles for Advancement and Strategies for Change

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Abstract

Through the centuries, traditional mentorship, a relationship between a respected, accomplished elder and a novice, has been credited for providing the support and know how for career advancement. In academia, mentoring has simultaneously invigorated senior faculty and assisted junior professors in learning the ropes and understanding organizational culture. Nevertheless, women in academia have continued to face barriers in acquiring nurturing mentorship which subsequently appears to have limited the number of women who achieve prominence in their field. In this paper we will review the benefits of mentorship; outline the struggles women including minority women face in scaling the academic career ladder, in finding as well as serving as a mentor; and lastly, present strategies and policy changes designed to overcome some of these challenges.

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Through the centuries, traditional mentorship, a relationship between a respected, accomplished elder and a novice, has been credited for providing the support and know how for career advancement. Mentoring has been proven effective in understanding organizational culture, providing access to informal and formal networks of communication, and offering professional stimulation to both junior and senior faculty members. By supporting professional growth and renewal, mentorship informs and empowers faculty as individuals and colleagues (Boice, 1992).

In academia, mentoring has both invigorated senior faculty and assisted junior professors in learning the ropes. Nevertheless, women in academia have continued to face barriers in acquiring nurturing mentorship which subsequently appears to have limited the number of women who achieve prominence in their field (Hult, Callister, & Sullivan, 2005). In this paper we will review the benefits of mentorship; outline the struggles women including minority women face in scaling the academic career ladder, in finding as well as serving as a mentor; and lastly, present strategies and recommendations for policy changes that can be implemented to overcome some of these challenges.

Status of Women in Academia

The United States Department of Education projects that the percentage of doctoral degrees awarded to women is expected to grow from 37.9% in 1996 to 49.00% by 2006. Although employment for women PhDs has been progressively rising, women, however, are predominantly clustered in the general untenured ranks of assistant professors and lecturers ("The Future", 1997). At first tier universities nationwide, women make up only a fraction of tenured arts and sciences faculty. As noted in a recent survey by the American Chemical Society of the top 50 universities, 6% of full professors are women. The figure escalates to only 8% when all PhD granting institutions are added to the mix (Schneider, 2000). At Harvard, women were among the 19 newly tenured appointments to the faculty of Arts and Sciences last year. Yet women still account for only 14% of the tenured arts and sciences faculty as a whole (Healy, 2001). Additionally, women are much less likely than men to receive tenure (Williams, 1999). Promotion salary

discrepancy between men and women has also been found in every category of United States academic institutions and for colleges and universities with and without unions or collective bargaining agreements. West (1995) documented the fact that female full professors were earning 89% of the salaries of males in 1982 and 88% in 1995; women assistant professors were making 93% of the salaries of their male colleagues at that rank.

Hult et al. (2005) link women's negative tenure and promotion history to "women faculty . . . being left out of collaborations, informal networks, and receiving little mentoring" (p. 54.) With correlation of having a mentor in the academic community to enhanced career success, mentoring, as the vehicle to elevate women to equal status, merits further examination (Chandler, 1996).

Mentoring

Mentoring Benefits for Academic Women

Studies have established that having a mentor assists women in career advancement (Burke, 1984; Dreher & Ash, 1990; Weiss, 1981; Young, MacKenzie, & Sherif, 1982). Supportive mentors who transmit empathy and concern lessen the female protégé's stress level especially if she does not have other women or junior faculty in the department (Chandler, 1996). Riley and Wrench (1985) note that women with one or more mentors achieve a higher degree of career success and fulfillment than women without a mentor, and Reich (1986) affirms that women who are mentored describe themselves as having improved self confidence as well as enhanced professional skills. Additionally, mentoring has proven vital in assisting new female and minority faculty members to feel comfortable with the academic environment (Maack & Passet, 1994). Also, in academia, mentorship relationships have been helpful to both mentor and protégé who collaborate on research (Chandler, 1996). Furthermore, mentoring has been identified as a key factor for women of color interested in becoming administrators. Ramey (1993) notes that women with mentors were more determined to climb the career ladder and aimed at becoming university presidents.

Traditional Mentoring

The research on mentors primarily has focused on the career progression of young adults as they are socialized into the world of academia. In traditionally defined hierarchical models, the mentor, usually a seasoned elder directs, advises, and supports an inexperienced protégé toward career progression (Blake-Beard, 2002, Burke & McKeen 1990; Kram & Isabella, 1985; Levinson, 1978, Noe, 1988a, 1988b; Wright & Wright, 1987). Mentoring relationships can be either informally created or formally supported by institutional organizations (Ragins & Cotton, 1999; Ragins, Cotton, & Miller, 2000).

Mentoring outside of the institutional level develops when two individuals are interested in establishing a connection. The protégé will get the recognition of the mentor through job performance or related work (Noe, 1988b). Similarly, a protégé may search for a more knowledgeable and qualified colleague to answer work-related questions (Blake-Beard, 2001; Kram 1985; Noe, 1988b). Johnson (2002) confirms that in informal mentoring relationships, protégés "receive more career and psychological functions [support] from mentors and report greater effect from, and satisfaction with, the mentorship" (p. 89) than in formal mentoring relationships. More specifically, based on an extensive field study comparing benefits of protégés in informal and formal mentorship, protégés in informal mentorship acknowledged higher salaries (Chao, Walz & Garner (1992).

In institutionally supported mentoring programs, the organization assigns protégés to mentors (Black-Beard, 2001; Kram, 1985; Noe, 1988a, 1988b). Ehrich, Hansford, and Tennent (2004) conducted a review of literature of formal mentoring programs of over 300 research-based articles from all disciplines and noted that in education the two most cited problems in organizationally implemented mentoring programs were "a lack of time" and "professional mismatch" (p. 525). In terms of organizational outcomes, although formal mentoring programs are "good for the professional," the lack of communication and "inadequate funding" (p. 528) prove to be issues which require attention. In conclusion, these researchers note that some formal educational mentoring

programs were implemented without forethought, a planned design, or any concern for evaluation, either formative or summative. Additionally, neither mentors nor protégés received training for role enhancement. They caution organizations to attend to these detractors in developing effective mentoring models.

Mentoring and Women

Research studies disclose a history of bias toward women in both formal and informal mentoring relationships, although formal mentorships have proven somewhat less restrictive (Clawson & Kram, 1984; Grogan & Brunner, 2005; Noe, 1988a, 1988b; Ragins, 1997; Tallerico, 2000). Besides this recognized level of discrimination, and apart from the general challenges associated with formal mentoring programs, it has been noted that feminists respond negatively to "authoritarian, power-based mentorships" and favor collaborative mentoring as a way to foster "diversity by bringing women and minorities into the network" (Mullen, in press).

Mullen (2005) defines collaborative or comentorship as "individuals or groups that proactively engage in reciprocal teaching and learning and transform power structures to honor egalitarianism" (p. 25). In comentorships, the participants form a partnership promoting a deep "connection," "an attitude of equality," and a "social justice agenda" (Mullen, in press). Although McGuire and Reger (2003) argue that comentoring can be particularly valuable for underrepresentative groups, they do not dismiss the benefits of traditional mentoring relationships and note that "high-status mentors can protect protégés and provide them with resources that a peer mentor cannot" (p. 65). Collaborative mentoring can also be effected in mentoring cohorts where there are multiple mentors and protégés. In these larger mentoring configurations, protégés have the opportunity to acquire career–related skills more rapidly as well as receive nurturing from a number of mentors within this extended mentoring network. Mentors also garner emotional support and mentoring assistance which may avoid "burnout" (Mullen, in press).

Academic Women's Struggle for Advancement

Informal and formal mentoring relationships even with their shortcomings have proven for many to be the pathway to professional promotion. Unfortunately, most women in academia have not experienced either a traditional formal or informal mentoring relationship and few have enjoyed collaborative mentoring structures. Women's work lives and priorities coupled with organizational bias have denied women the opportunity to benefit from this mentorship boost (McGuire & Reger, 2003).

Organizational Bias

A "chilly campus climate" and "gender schemas" are factors which "help to account for women's failure to thrive in academia" (Hult et al. (2005). Lawlor (2003) in a Princeton study of women in science notes "nearly a quarter of the women said their colleagues engaged occasionally or frequently in 'unprofessional' behavior and excluded women from professional activities" (p. 33). Today with an eye towards political correct behavior, "gendered assumptions and stereotypes are often buried below the surface" (Hult et al., 2005, p. 52).

In a recent study, in which 42 current and former women faculty members matched with a set of 42 male faculty members were asked to respond to three-questions to compare sources of job satisfaction, dissatisfaction, and obstacles for success, the reseachers found no "significant difference between males and females regarding sources of career success and job satisfaction." On the other hand, women faculty members reported more "negative interactions with colleagues, negative experience with the process of evaluation, promotion, and tenure and being left out of collaborations" (Hult et al., p. 54). Bronstein (2001), in her study of the experiences of older women in academia, recounted stories in which the women she interviewed "spoke of particular ways that they were interrupted or ignored at meetings, and that their ideas were discounted" (p. 192).

Women's Work Patterns

There are various individual and organizational factors that inhibit the prospering of mentoring relationships for women. For instance, women's career patterns often include late career entry, more interruptions, and fewer advancement opportunities all of which are factors that impair the forming of a mentorship (Noe, 1988 b). Also, career interruptions related to family or caretaking roles may impede the formation of relationships according to the traditional mentoring model. Research findings highlight parenting as a critical variable for women in determining their career objectives. Women are apt to divide their time between work and career compared to men who devote more time to their professional lives (Goff-Timmer, Eccles, & O' Brian, 1985). Family responsibilities appear to influence women's career choices where men appear to separate themselves from parenting commitments in favor of a professional focus (Chandler, 1996). Although women may have advanced degrees, they may choose part-time employment to attend to child-rearing responsibilities (Eccles & Hoffman, 1984; O'Connell, Betz, & Kurth, 1988).

Due to a non-linear career path, women may have multiple jobs or even multiple careers in a lifetime and may require different mentoring sources; latecomers to the profession or older women may be dismissed by traditional mentors who conceptualize a protégé as younger (Allen & Finklestein, 2003). Bronstein (2001) further explains, "people don't like to have a subordinate who is older than them" (p. 191). The working mothers' intermittent work cycle and/or attention to career at a later age appears to denote to mentors a lack of interest in professional advancement which seemingly limit mentoring opportunities.

Further Burden on Minority Women

Expectations for academics appear to be correlated to gender and race. Obligations that minority women professors face can be overwhelming. Research conducted on demographic groups reveal the number of hours professors advise students each week. Wiley (1992) found that there is undo pressure for women faculty and even a greater burden for women of color to advise and counsel minority students especially in

universities and colleges that have a less diverse faculty and student body. This additional demand diverts the faculty member's attention from more traditional academic responsibilities required for a tenure appointment and/or promotion (Wyche & Graves, 1992). Chandler (1996) asserts, that women of color are also "pressured to serve on various minority-related committees [and] . . . often become the sole source of support for minority students, yet at the same time, they do not have anyone to mentor them or offer them assistance during the tenure process" (p. 88).

Academic Women Mentors

The female-male mentorship model is historically situated within Greek mythology. In ancient Greece, when Odysseus, the Greek goddess of wisdom, had to fight a war, he left his friend Mentor responsible for the mentoring of his son, Telemachus. Disguised as Mentor, Athene, who was in fact a woman, supports the young man through his educational journey. Thus, originates the English word, mentoring (O'Neil & Blake-Beard, 2002; Stalker, 1994). If interpreted from a feminist perspective, the myth of Athena is indicative of a problem faced by women faculty who find themselves in the role of mentors. "They are regarded for their supernatural wisdom as depicted by the supernatural Athene, but they must in some ways disguise themselves, acting as dominant white men in leadership roles; in this way, women, specifically women of color, are often misrepresented for both their gender and racial identification" (Ernestine, Enomoto, Gardiner, & Grogan, 2000, p. 567).

Schmuck and Schubert (1995) assert "politically, and personally, women administrators are torn between segregated into a culture of women and being integrated into a culture of men" (p. 282). Oakley (2000) characterizes women as in a "double–bind" by attempting to shed men's perceptions of their incompetence, they embody masculine behaviors which other women equate with aggressive behavior and may find distasteful. Nevertheless, for their own survival, "women's presentation of themselves appears to hinder as much as facilitate the promotion intention of other women" (Hall, Gron, Jenkin, Power, & Reynolds, 1999). Another perspective is presented by Twombly (1999) who

reports that “women move up more slowly than men, and women who rise to the top often feel little responsibility to help others” (p.452).

Although some women leaders who may appear to represent more masculine types of leadership may not appeal to younger women as mentors or role models, Christman, McClellan, and Foster (2005) conclude that women “can learn from resilient extraordinary women leaders, but must be careful not to evaluate too quickly using socially constructed norms [for female leadership behavior which emphasizes caring, consensus, and collaboration]” (p. 27). Conversely, as more women attain success in educational leadership positions, they hopefully will represent both diverse and effective leadership behaviors and embrace mentorship to encourage and aid those who follow in their footsteps.

Recommendations for Strategies and Policy Changes

Statistics and research studies reveal women’s experiences in higher education are different than male academics in terms of scholarship, advising assignments, teaching loads, and service to community, profession, and institution. In light of the challenges faced by women in academia in being mentored as well as becoming a mentor, and based on the studies referenced within, we offer strategies and recommendations for policy changes to address the issues previously discussed in this paper. Generally, we support raising campus awareness about the importance of mentoring; establishing a mentoring program with faculty assistance and input; providing recognition to those who participate; and offering assistance through institutional resources.

Formal university mentoring programs are rare, and some that exist fail to determine evaluative outcomes in terms of protégés, mentors, and institutional goals and objectives (Chandler, 1996; Ehrich et al., 2004; Scorcinelli, 1994). Planned mentoring programs should, therefore, include: assessing the organization’s policies; establishing a purpose and related goals; identifying and training participants (both mentors and protégés) as well as developing a process to evaluate and modify the program. Following are

additional policy recommendations for university administration and faculty to create an environment conducive for mentoring women and advancing their careers:

1. As suggested by Chandler (1996), raise awareness as to the particular issues which are indigenous to women including women of color; discuss "work/family time constraints, unique pressure on women of color, and gender-role expectations;" investigate whether there is " hostility in the work environment;" "communicate concerns;" and develop policies to prohibit "sexual harassment" (p. 96-97).
2. Senior faculty should clearly stipulate departmental and university expectations to junior faculty. An effort should be made on the part of tenure and promotion committees to reinterpret tenure appointments to reflect issues pertaining to women, especially those that women of color face. Flexibility in the promotion and tenure schedule should exist, and committee members should be permitted to weigh service, teaching prowess, and scholarship rather than be limited by a rigid set of requirements in evaluating junior faculty (Bronstein, 2001).
3. Alliances should be explored between university administration and faculty committees that deal with issues of affirmative action, equal opportunity etc. Concerns about the status of women and objectives for improving support systems for faculty require discussion and action. "Emphasize teamwork" and "create opportunities for collaboration" for improved "productivity" and "job satisfaction" (Hult et al., 2005). Develop a list of willing mentors to provide necessary support in particularly stressful periods during the academic year. Encourage senior women faculty to serve as mentors. Levinson (1996) found that "barriers to empathy and identification often prevented the development of a fuller mentoring relationship" (p. 270) when a woman's mentor was a man.
4. Administration should explore support systems and child care benefits related to work and work-related travel for women faculty with children (Chandler, 1996).
5. Discuss issues of diversity as it pertains to ethnicity, race, gender, and sexual orientation of faculty. Collect accurate data on appointments, promotion, and tenure to inform policy revision. "Gender schemas that guide our perceptions and evaluations make it harder for women to succeed than men" (Valian, 2005, p.

211). To create equity, these schemas must be confronted, challenges, and changed.

6. Department heads and personnel directors in mentoring overburdened faculty should recommend limiting responsibilities. Turner and Boice (1987) found that chairs who reduced work load, assigned faculty members to courses matched to their interests, acquired funds for travel, and prepared them for the annual review minimized stress for fledging department members.
7. Faculty should be rewarded for efforts to recruit and retain minority faculty to help lessen the burden on existing minority faculty as well as to help meet goals for a diverse campus community (Chandler, 1996; Wyche & Graves, 1992).
8. Mentoring should be "viewed as an investment in staff and the constantly evolving institution" (Barkam, 2005). Administration and senior faculty are urged to facilitate collaborative mentoring programs including peer and co-mentoring as well as nurture traditional mentoring dyads to form professional networks for additional learning opportunities and psychological bolstering for both the junior and senior faculty members. As an example, in our school of education, administration and faculty joined forces to support junior faculty in their research and publication efforts. To ensure a good match between mentor and protégé, they "sought potential mentors and asked them to list their areas of expertise and asked new faculty interested in being mentored to list their research and publication priorities" (Sanacore, 2006). In this way, junior faculty could select a mentor aligned with their research agenda.
9. In formal traditional mentoring programs, flexibility in changing mentors should be a possibility if the relationship between the selected mentor/protégé pair is not conducive to both participants' growth and development and appears to be detrimental to the well-being of either party. Gender, cultural, and ethnic dynamics need to be kept in mind when exploring mentoring possibilities. According to Busch (1985) "high degrees of mutuality, comprehensiveness, gender sensitivity, and congruence produce positive and functional mentoring relationships; low degrees of these dimensions produce dysfunctional mentoring relationships" (p. 258).

Conclusion

Designing comprehensive mentoring programs which address the struggles faced historically by women can provide an opportunity for egalitarianism in institutions of higher education. Revisiting and reframing perceptions of women faculty based on gender schemas, sporadic work cycles, and/or later life interest in career, and mentoring them through child-bearing and rearing periods as well as modifying a timeframe for tenure based on an alternate career path, may permit more talented women, in the long-term, to contribute significantly to academia and serve as mentors for others.

Segregation and discrimination by gender and race for women in higher education points to the continuing need for positive practices and policies that increase the hiring, tenure, and promotion of talented women regardless of color; that sensitize non-minority professors to the needs and challenges that often face minority faculty; and that allow for the active inclusion of minority voices in administrative decisions, be it of curriculum development or campus activities, to name a few. Such policies and practices can serve to engender an inclusive and equitable climate within colleges and universities for women of all races/ethnicities (Rasheed & Sinha, 2002).

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