

Mentorship in Higher Education: Threading the Needle to Tenure

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Mentorship has become an overused term to describe relationships. Mentoring Junior Faculty in higher education from adjunct to assistant to associate to full professor takes energy, creativity, patience, knowledge and empathy. This manuscript will utilize storytelling to illustrate a mentorship program model that is multidimensional; built on collective mentoring. Hispanic females comprised 1% or less of all full-time professors; this illustrates the importance of providing mentorship for BIPOC faculty in predominantly white institutions of higher education. Developing a mentorship community requires scaffolded planning to allow for collective mentoring to support junior faculty in the advancement of university systems. Having collective mentoring that reflects a community of wellbeing built on strategizing, collaborating and debriefing creates a robust pathway for adjunct faculty to gain tenure. These authors are Professors at a University that meets the criteria for being a Minority Serving Institution with the designations of Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) and First-Generation Institution. All authors are anchored in the Social Work Department. One author is the Master of Social Work (MSW) Program Director, responsible for supporting MSW full-time faculty, one is the Associate Chair responsible for supporting adjunct faculty in the Social Work Department, and one is the inaugural HSI Fellow for the Social Work Department. The model's outcome will be shared in the success story of creating an inaugural HSI Fellowship program. The inaugural HSI Fellow will use storytelling to illustrate growth and success reflecting on how mentorship supported them on their journey from student to adjunct faculty, to full-time lecturer, to assistant tenure track professor.

Keywords: HSI fellow, collective mentorship, storytelling, tenure track

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Introduction

When thinking of mentorship, a mentee needs to be introduced to multiple perspectives, ways of knowing and engagement; a mentee needs to have a village of mentors. Some mentors will mirror multiple intersectional identities with the mentee while others will have intersectional touch points that complement the mentee and provide rich learning opportunities while not sharing like identities. Not surprisingly, representation within the academy remains predominantly white, highlighting the importance for collective mentorship for junior faculty, especially faculty of color. Departments need to support Tenured Faculty receiving service for their time commitment to engage in regularly scheduled mentoring meetings with their Junior Faculty mentee. The primary department Tenured Faculty Mentor needs to leverage their relationship with faculty outside of the department to expose the mentee to a myriad mentoring opportunities. Additionally, the mentee needs be introduced to community,

state and national experiences to promote growth.

The problem with the idea that you will find one guru-mentor is that new faculty members have a wide variety of needs, and it is not only impossible but also problematic for all of those needs to be met by one (and only one) person.

(NCFDD, *Monday, Monitor*, Monday April 3, 2023). While an assigned mentor can help navigate the academy, a Junior Faculty should be encouraged and supported to find many informal mentors supporting their growth. Junior Faculty need mentoring that promotes their professional development while providing emotional and psychological support to navigate institutional, departmental and personal challenges that emerge when leaning into one's competence and dispelling imposter syndrome.

Without relying on one person, helping to create and foster a network of mentors is a critical function of the Senior Faculty mentor. Mentors need to elevate their mentees visibility in the department, university and community by recommending

them for committees and introducing them to colleagues. Mentees need to be invited to attend and co-present at conferences; local, national and international and to co-author scholarly manuscripts. Mentors need to value succession and legacy planning, recognizing their mentees expertise and abilities.

Literature Review

Why Mentorship is Important

The academy maintains strong traditions, expectations, and requirements that have not historically been inclusive regarding the intersectional identities of faculty, either at the adjunct, lecturer, or tenure levels. The tenure process itself can be intricate, complicated and isolating as many faculty are the sole hire within their department for the academic year. Therefore, mentorship becomes a critical support for new faculty, whether in a lecturer position or newly on the tenure track. Mentorship provides one way to foster faculty engagement and can intersect behavioral, cognitive, and emotional engagement (Happel et al., 2023). Mentors are seen as valued Leaders within their intuitions by their mentees,

they emphasized the value of knowledge sharing and emphasized that leaders should strive to know people and the history of the people. Another participant emphasized the value of knowing the needs of others: 'I think good leadership is getting to know who you're working with and treating persons [as] valuable (Sharma, et al., 2024, p. 428).

Mentorship provides the mentee: with the experiences of being seen and heard while creating opportunities to promote a sense of belonging.

Successful Mentoring Relationships

Successful mentoring relationships within higher education requires that cultural responsiveness to be scaffolded such that tenure track and instructional faculty feel supported to teach, conduct scholarship, and advise students from a place of authenticity to their positionality. Having effective role models and mentors is of particular importance for graduate students of color, as well as faculty of color, who report qualitatively different experiences within academia (Harris et al., 2019, p.103). Identity and positionality matter in the sociopolitical environment of the academy. Those faculty with a racialized identity face greater challenges navigating their classrooms, departments, and the larger university mired in white institutionalized culture. (Endo, 2020). Therefore, mentorship becomes a critical tool to the recruitment and retention of faculty. However, the mentorship model, itself, must meet the needs of the aspirational diverse faculty by using "alternative paradigms for conceptualizing mentoring as dynamic partnerships with differentiated, equity focused, and multi-tiered systems of support that explicitly center anti-racist

and anti-deficit frameworks as core values" (Endo, 2020, p. 170). Successful mentoring relationships are "characterized by trust, honesty, a willingness to learn about self and others and the ability to share power and privilege" (Stanley & Lincoln, 2005, p. 46).

Collective Mentorship Model

Building the Scaffolded Collective Mentorship Model

Collective mentorship is built from a community of mentors.

"The community family also [has] a significant impact on shaping the leaders' self-concept. Being surrounded by people who provided motivation and inspiration [is] important to the participants. Being inspired, uplifted, encouraged, and empowered participants to move beyond what they could do or be" (Sharma, et al., 2024, p. 423). When building a successful collective mentorship model committed tenured faculty must begin with:

1. An organizational assessment
2. Ask how mentorship aligns with the mission and vision of the university
3. Identify possible committee opportunities at the department, college, university, community and national levels, and
4. Inquire about available funding sources within the university to support the mentee. In a scaffolded process, these four categories provide the foundation, not only for the mentor/mentee relationship, but for the junior faculty to gain a strong footing to start their career within the academic institution. From such a foundation, the mentee can then develop their teaching skills, content expertise, and scholarship.

A successful mentorship model involves Tenured Faculty Mentors (TFM) identifying and offering mentorship to junior faculty; the tenured faculty Mentor needs to be able to share their cultural positionality and mentorship andragogy with their prospective Junior Faculty mentees.

Creating one's positionality statement is a form of telling one's story. Gil et al., (2018) suggest that when we share our stories and listen to others, our brains become engaged in a process that allows us to encode new emotions and memories. As we learn and share our stories and hear others' stories, we are able to suspend unfounded attitudes and beliefs and become receptive to new attitudes and beliefs. Creating and sharing our positionality statements provides an opportunity for us to identify, understand and challenge our implicit biases. This process promotes empathy as we activate our mirror neurons (Zak, 2015). TFM need to be available to provide coaching on how to create an engaging classroom environment for learning and how to manage challenging classroom dynamics. Providing support of keeping

one's teaching portfolio up to date and reviewing narratives prior to submitting for departmental and chair review will help the process be more supportive and successful. Additionally, tenured faculty need to explore funding streams prior to recruiting junior faculty.

Application of the Collective Mentorship Model

In academic year 2023-2024, our department planned for the launched Our inaugural Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) Fellowship. Hiring the first fellow for the 2024-2025 academic year, the inaugural fellow was intentionally mentored by multiple department level Senior Faculty. The fellow gained access to the university Office of Diversity of Inclusion and was able to engage with a Latina tenured faculty for mentorship outside of the Social Work Department. These multi-level mentors throughout the university system allowed for the fellow to leverage relationships with community partners and national partners as the inaugural fellow attended community gatherings, joined other university's diversity communities and attended national workforce development conferences.

Preparing a scaffolded experience has been the key to a successful implementation of the Collective Mentorship model. The Social Work Department has spent many years training the department, focusing on the mission and vision of the department and larger university, and intentionally outlining the goals and objectives of a faculty fellow position. Prior to posting for the fellow position, interfacing with the department and university as a whole was not only considered but advocated for in advance. The inaugural fellow was able to benefit from preparation and planning, which has been a fluid and constant part of the fellowship as it continued through the inaugural year and beyond.

Case Study

The Collective Mentorship Model supports legacy planning. Our Inaugural HSI Fellow shares her journey from undergraduate Social Work student to Assistant Tenure Track Professor. By sharing her journey in a story, she invites the reader into her life as a mentee. By telling her story she shares her successes and challenges while promoting community and evoking empathy (Raymer, 2023).

Dr. M's Story

My name is Marsha Montano, daughter of Brenda Duran. I come from a lineage rooted in Mexico, Spain, and Italy. I am a Hispanic, bisexual, educated woman, and I share my story as both a reflection and celebration of my journey; a journey that led me to become the Inaugural Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) Fellow in the Social Work Department at Metropolitan State University of Denver.

The path to becoming a full-time faculty member

has not been an easy one. It has been paved with hardship, resilience, and most importantly mentorship. Being mentored by women of color who understood my lived experiences has not only guided my steps but has lifted me when I doubted myself and reminded me that I belong in these spaces.

I grew up in a trailer park, raised by my mother, who often worked two jobs to keep us afloat. College was never discussed in my home. The assumed path was high school graduation followed by work to contribute to our household. That was the expectation, and it was the reality for many around me. After being medically separated from the Air Force due to plantar fasciitis just weeks before completing job training, I returned home lost. I had no clear plan. Enrolling in community college felt like my next best step. At Front Range Community College, I took the Myers-Briggs assessment and was told social work might be a good fit. It was the first time I felt a pull toward something that aligned with my values. I graduated with an Associate of Arts and applied to the Bachelor of Science in Social Work program at MSU Denver. What I wasn't prepared for was how isolating the academic journey would feel. None of my professors looked like me, shared my story, or understood my cultural background. I remember being told to rewrite a personal assignment because its honesty made a professor uncomfortable. I resisted until I realized that passing the class meant I had to conform to a standard that wasn't mine. I graduated without feeling connected to any faculty. I paused my education for a year, weighing the financial burden of graduate school on my family before pushing forward once again.

Starting my master's program brought new challenges. I was pregnant. I gave birth mid-year and missed several weeks of classes, despite planning ahead. One professor refused to accommodate me, denied disability support, and penalized my attendance, resulting in a C. It was devastating until I met my first mentor. She validated my experience and encouraged me to appeal my "C", a failing grade in graduate school; I chose not to appeal but her advocacy marked the beginning of a new chapter. Alongside her and my internship supervisor, I finished the program as a new mom, holding onto their belief in me.

This same instructor later invited me to become an off-site field supervisor, and then an adjunct instructor. Each invitation they provided to me opened new doors. Slowly, I began to find a sense of belonging though I still questioned whether I could truly step into academia. When a full-time position opened, I applied and then withdrew. I had doubts about working in academia and imposter syndrome. Later, I applied for a Doctorate in Social Work, fueled by the desire to create a better life for my children and help my mother retire.

In my doctoral program, something changed. For the first time, I had professors who looked like me Latina and Black women who saw me, heard me, and affirmed my story. That kind of

representation wasn't just affirming it was life changing. After graduating, I took the leap and applied for a full-time faculty position. For the first time in my professional life, I was mentored by a faculty member of color. Dr. G., she saw me not just my resume or potential, but my whole self. Her mentorship has been transformational. She loved me through my doubts, connected me with my first Latina Tenured Mentor, and supported my growth in every role I've taken on. L. D. is another invaluable mentor; she helped me navigate institutional systems. Their collective mentorship didn't just help me survive academia it empowered me to thrive; they continue to connect me to opportunities through legacy planning.

This kind of mentorship, deep, culturally grounded, and affirming, is not just beneficial, it's necessary. It allows women of color to move from surviving to leading. Through these relationships, I've found strength, purpose, and a sense of home within higher education.

With their support, I co-created a Voices of Color student group, which provides a space for Latino students to feel seen and supported; it has grown into a thriving community, and we're expanding into a larger model year. I've been invited to co-chair university level campus wide engagement experiences as the co-chair for HSI week celebrations, I collaborate at the community level on our state's leading research one university's HSI team and I participate in Sobremesa a space for Latino clinicians to network and be in community, and at the national level I attended the National Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Office of Behavioral Health Equity Summit in Washington, D.C. Each opportunity has roots in the guidance and encouragement of my mentors.

Mentoring took place on a weekly basis followed by a semester meeting with leadership. This consistent support guided working through tough decisions, supporting other students and faculty of color, discussing microaggression's, bridging connection with other faculty outside of the department, and providing opportunities in community. Perhaps one of the most powerful experiences was being invited into a collective of women of color offering supervision to other women of color pursuing licensure. We held a space to talk about race, culture and survival in professional spaces, it's a reminder that community care is radical and necessary. Towards the end of the mentorship year, the shift in mentoring occurred to prepare to interview for a tenure line. Securing the position was done through multiple meetings with my mentors to understand the expectations of academic, support in interview preparation, practice, and review the lesson plan I had built. My mentors provided feedback and helpful tips that guided me, supported me, and cultivated my confidence. Navigating academia has also meant confronting a culture that rewards self-promotion a challenge for someone taught to be humble, to "be seen and not heard." But with my mentors beside me, I've started to own my

voice. I've learned that speaking my truth is not arrogance, it is advocacy. And I've earned my seat at the table.

Being mentored by women who look like me and have walked similar paths has been one of the greatest gifts of my professional journey. Their legacy lives in me, and I will pass that legacy forward by mentoring, by teaching, by showing up fully and unapologetically. Because when we see ourselves reflected in the spaces we dream of, we don't just survive; we soar.

Findings: What We Learned

Collective mentorship is an important component of a strong faculty community; however, it must be thoughtful, intentional, and create a space of belonging. A thoughtful mentoring program gives consideration to the department's academic discipline, the department culture and relationship to the larger university, while maintaining an ongoing understanding of the faculty's needs, both collectively and individually. Commitment to creating a collective mentorship does require the financial support of a department to include but not limited to trainings/conferences, supplemental pay, and or reassigned time from teaching. Most importantly, collective mentorship requires a scaffolded response from a department and university that allows for implementation of change, specifically around culture and traditions of the academy. If we recognize the predominantly white culture that created the academy, we have to be willing to openly dismantle those aspects of the academy over time that need to adapt to the new culture trying to be created.

Intention addresses the goals of the department to create inclusive spaces for faculty to advance and thrive. The aspirational vision of diversity and inclusivity of the faculty requires training and programming of the entire department and university systems engaging with the faculty. Creating a scaffolded experience for junior faculty requires each aspect of the department to engage and promote that inclusive environment from administrative staff to leadership.

Spaces of belonging are not just created but nurtured through a collective agreement between the faculty, department, and university systems. A program, training, or initiative might help to develop belonging, but it is the ongoing relationships which mentorship fosters that sustain belonging. However, creating spaces of belonging does not come without its difficulty and challenges. Lived experiences of a diverse faculty bring a diversity of ideas, perspectives, and viewpoints into a department which need to be navigated with respect for difference, grace in communication, and humility in participation.

Conclusion

Collective mentorship will continue through tenure and beyond. The Inaugural Fellow (IF)

worked collaboratively with her mentors to develop the recruitment plan for the next HSI/Minority Fellow. The IF will become part of the collective mentorship team as she moves into Legacy Mentorship roles as a departmental committee chair and represents the department on College, University and National level committees. The process will continue as the Collective Mentorship Model grows. Is your university invested at all levels to support Collective Mentorship?

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