

The Influence of Mentoring Networks for Tenure Track Faculty

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This article capitalizes on a current descriptive phenomenological inquiry into the lived experiences of women and minoritized tenure track university faculty. Existing literature suggests members of minoritized populations often experience greater professional difficulty understanding the culture, achieving confidence within their position, and advancing within higher education. There is a demonstrated need for authentic mentorship as a mechanism for professional advancement. Ten participant was interviewed twice through a semi-structured interview process where the researcher began with a list of questions that was flexible and allowed for follow-up questions to be asked based on the participants explanation After the data collection was completed open coding methods were used to identify themes among the provided participant descriptions Participants noted the importance of having many different mentors from different areas of an institution and outside of the higher education setting The possession of multiple mentors described as a mentoring network was identified by numerous study participants as a key component of their success and happiness as a tenure track faculty Some participants noted the importance of developing mentoring networks with other tenure track faculty members creating a system of support among peers

Keywords: Tenure track faculty, informal mentoring, mentoring network

Introduction

Tenure attainment is recognized by many researchers as a difficult and confusing process, especially for faculty of color and female faculty. Additionally, national reports document that the women and other minoritized individuals are leaving university and college academia at record numbers (Liu & Morrison, 2015; Myers et al., 2024). The brain drain among these highly educated, passionate individuals leaving hard-sought positions before achieving tenure suggests there are many lessons to be learned about acculturation that go unsaid. This study aimed to identify the ways in which tenure track faculty create and engage in mentoring networks to support their career advancement.

This study sought to identify the ways in which tenure track faculty purposefully create mentoring networks to support them in achieving tenure. Additionally, the study created an understanding of how these relationships are initiated, or former relationships are redefined, to create a mentoring network. The tenure process is often frustrating for tenure track faculty because it is complicated and there is limited support provided by supervisors or an institution. Existing literature suggests that mentorship is used as a primary solution to this problem, but formal mentoring is rarely extended.

Additionally, the study found that the majority of tenure track faculty are not assigned formal mentors in any way when they first begin at an institution and are rarely provided formalized mentoring throughout their time at an institution. Further, existing literature and study participants

discussed the necessity of multiple mentors to provide a variety of guidance through the tenure process.

Literature Review

A recent doctorate study offers insight into lived experience perspectives that sheds light on the professional and operational challenges newer faculty experience as they maneuver the demands of their professional affiliations. Organizational dynamics, such as the importance of identifying informal mentors and leveraging such relationships, contribute to future achievement and—potentially—institutional longevity. Informal Mentoring within the Tenure Track Faculty Experience: A Phenomenological Study (Silver Rodis, 2025) explored a key area of weakness in faculty acclimation. Despite the acknowledgment that mentorship is a well-established practice that leads to the development of individuals (Rinfret et al., 2023) and can lead to greater satisfaction throughout the professional development and tenure process, informal mentorship is not consistently extended to tenure track faculty.

When mentorship is offered, it is inadequately structured and based on convenience rather than efficacy (Davis et al; 2022; Zambrana et al., 2017). Additionally, faculty who are members of minoritized populations often experience greater professional difficulty within higher education (Myers et al., 2024; Rinfret et al., 2023).

Several barriers also discourage proactive solicitation of mentors. For example, perceptions

of a glass ceiling that impacts faculty advancement and access to networks/collaboration, and ambivalence from senior faculty, contribute to reluctance to find informal mentors (Espino & Zambrana, 2019). These factors contribute to the departure of roughly half of junior level faculty leave their institution within 8 years (Liu & Morrison, 2015; Myers et al., 2024). The situation is even more significant for Black faculty, or those with international educations. Studies show these individuals are at a greater chance of leaving (Myers et al., 2024). Female faculty depart their jobs at a higher rate than male faculty at every age and stage (Spoon et al., 2023). Further, it appears that male faculty are more likely to be granted tenure. Faculty may elect to depart due to a wide range of variables encompassing departmental collegiality, professional opportunities for their spouse/partner, anticipation/receiving a negative tenure decision, or other employment options (Spoon et al., 2023; Trower, 2017).

The belief that mentoring is inaccessible and not supported is an additional factor that impacts tenure track faculty and their ability to find mentors (Espino & Zambrana, 2019; Leary et al., 2016; Zambrana et al., 2017). Espino and Zambrana's (2019) study of 58 underrepresented minority faculty at a United States institution identified a glass ceiling which impacted faculty advancement, and access to social networks or collaborative opportunities. Their study identified how mentors need to provide instrumental and political guidance—which was difficult for some faculty members to acquire (Espino & Zambrana, 2019). Additionally, participants explained that they perceived “disengagement and ambivalence in helping” from the senior faculty members in their department, which kept some participants from seeking an informal mentor altogether (Espino & Zambrana, 2019, p. 458).

Method

The phenomenological study explored and expanded upon the limited research on informal mentoring within tenure track faculty experiences. A key objective of this research was to identify and describe lived experiences among the study participants and to clarify the meanings and structure revolving around the phenomenon under study. The study asked participants to discuss how they engage in informal mentorship as they pursued tenure at their institution. The study specifically aimed to both formulate, and then extend a description of, the state of mentoring within this area of faculty promotion activities.

The Silver Rodis (2025) study built on the framework of informal mentoring as a common experience among tenure track faculty as they engaged in informal mentoring. They reported the inability to engage in formal mentoring due to poor pairings (non-committed or not helpful mentors), a lack of institutional interest in such mechanisms, and the inability to find partners who shared common interests or viable advice. Subsequently,

informal mentoring (often with several people) became a constructive strategy to fill in the gap in process strategy, policy interpretation and cultural navigation through institutional/department social landmines and politics. Kram's (1983) phases of the mentor relationship provided a reliable foundation to address how mentoring evolves through four phases over time: Initiation, where mentors and mentees set expectations; cultivation, or the creation of a relationship that is beneficial for one or both parties; separation, where both parties agree that the purpose of their relationship has been met, and the mentoring ends; and redefinition, when a mentor and mentee decide to continue their relationship, with different expectations/goals and/or changing from the previous mentoring structure.

The study occurred at a Carnegie R-1 university in the western United States. The institution's student population at the time of the inquiry was between 15,000 and 30,000, with a faculty population of between 800 and 1,600 (according to the institution's Human Resources website). Of these faculty, between 400 and 1000 are tenured, with an additional 100 to 400 being tenure track. The target population for this study was any tenure track faculty member at the chosen institution in the college identified for this study who were participating in mentoring at the time of the study, or who had previously participated in informal mentoring, who were in at least their third year of tenure eligibility. Additionally, study participants were faculty from a college with various departments and expectations that vary greatly.

Results

As documented by study participants, within the scope of informal mentorship interactions, redefinition potentially influences peer/reverse/reciprocal interactions. Eight of ten participants noted the importance of having several informal mentors from a range of institutional areas, as well as those outside of the higher education setting. The ability to rely on multiple mentors was identified as a key strength of informal mentoring. All study respondents identified the informal nature of mentoring discussions as a key component of their success and happiness as a tenure track faculty.

Also relevant to the productivity of informal mentoring networks is Bourdieu's (1986) theory of the forms of capital which reflects aspect of society relating to the accumulation of cultural skills and knowledge. Participants acknowledged that their capital—or comprehension of expectations—accumulated throughout time as they engaged with mentor networks to gain insight into how to regulate the social world and achieve benefits. Their mentorship interactions also elevated their sense of belonging, which was of strategic pertinence. This result echoes Yosso (2005) who states that capital allows society to reproduce itself—which may be why the marginalized populations may

have lower academic and social outcomes than those who are “dominant” in a society. Therefore, a case for the identification and application of mentorship networks is further underscored.

Gains in aspirational and navigational capital are associated with informal mentorship, and the specific advice-driven conversations that are elicited. Additionally, frequently long-lasting, benefits include that people may engage in highly productive mentoring without it being formally constructed or mandated. Faculty may identify mentors originating from a variety of places—such as professional associations, conferences, workplace, networks, and there are no limitations on where or how these relationships are initiated (Huseey & Campbell-Meier, 2021). An overarching benefit is there is the capacity for newer institutional members to have multiple informal mentors (Joo & Cruz, 2023).

Study participants in the Silver Rodis (2025) inquiry also reported that mentorship networks might be of higher quality than formal mentoring pairing/structures. Self-selected mentors “feel high obligation” and are more likely to be committed and invests more time/energy (Joo & Cruz, 2023). Other advantages of such relationships are that the conversations support key career and psychological functions instrumental to their professional advancement/pursuit of tenure.

Additionally, there is a need for mentoring networks when tenure track faculty have multiple intersecting identities, as a single mentor is unlikely to fulfill all needs a mentee expresses. Just because a tenure track faculty is of one race, does not mean that a mentor of the same race would be best suited to provide support on all forms of identity-based experiences or expectations that differ based on job duties and department. When tenure track faculty seek support, they may do so because of many different identities and the intersection between how these identities impact their unique experiences. This theme can be drawn beyond the social context of this study, as tenure track faculty job satisfaction, and therefore the likelihood of them remaining in higher education, is impacted not only by the status of these individuals as academics and researchers, but also the intersectionality of various identities.

Discussion

The Silver Rodis (2025) study revealed that while formal promotion and tenure-related programming exists and provides insight into university policies/procedures and networking opportunities, interactions and trainings were frequently general as related to evidence-based performance expectations are department dependent. Therefore, self-selection and structure flexibility were isolated as the greatest strengths of informal mentoring. Specifically, respondents noted that within their networks: Informal mentoring could occur at any time and constructive conversations could address a wide a variety of topics.

There is already trust and respect between

mentors and mentees before informal mentoring is initiated. This foundation reduces the potential for abuse and power differentials.

- Informal mentoring allows for tenure track faculty to have multiple mentors across or outside an institution. The encompassing perspectives that are shared then contribute to more objective and balanced decision-making, and more inclusive reflection.
- Mentoring needs change throughout a tenure track faculty’s time at an institution.
- Peer and step-ahead mentoring is helpful, especially before the third-year review.
- When an individual is in a unique role (such as a shared reporting structure across two academic departments) informal mentors serve as important advocates. Respondents stated there is much pertinence in one-off conversations to seek targeted advice or clarification.
- Informal mentors are more situated than formal mentors to provide social and psychological support.
- Informal mentors helped study participants survive and remain within academia.
- Barriers that exist between formal mentors (such as scheduled meetings, structured agendas, progress documentation) and mentees not prevalent in informal mentoring.
- The informal mentoring function is especially important because of the highly stressful nature of the tenure process.
- Identity impacts mentoring needs of tenure track faculty.
- Affinity-based groups allow for mentoring networks that creates community and helps faculty learn about the institution from others’ experiences. However, the study found that identity was not the important factor in finding an informal mentor to support tenure track faculty.

Silver Rodis (2025) addressed the gap in existing literature on tenure track faculty experiences with informal mentoring as prior research primarily focused on mentoring to support student success. Findings suggest tenure track faculty engaged in informal mentoring even when formal programming was present. This was due to participants stating that even when they were assigned formal mentors—which was a rare occurrence—formal mentors unhelpful and unavailable. Additionally, key weaknesses of formal mentoring are less prevalent in informal mentoring. Compensation for such limitations can be made through the pursuit of mentorship networks.

Tenure track faculty require support from a variety of informal mentors, primarily found through former formal mentoring relationships or through professional events. This is required as it is unlikely that a single individual serving as an informal mentor can provide career-related and psychological support and has enough knowledge of the tenure track faculty’s institution to share navigational capital. As a result of the lack of formalized mentoring programs, and the difficulty

in initiating early informal mentoring relationships, tenure track faculty often have informal mentors outside of the institution or department in which they are employed. These partners are located by tenure track faculty at professional development workshops or academic conferences. Mitch explained their relationship with their formal mentor first began as informal mentoring because they had met at university events and were able to easily form a relationship. Additionally, study participants mentioned finding informal mentors in their former graduate school advisors and committee members. This transformation of a once formal mentoring relationship to an informal one speaks to the flexibility within informal mentoring. In these cases, study respondents shared how they sought advice they would not normally request from formal mentors within their institution. This included career advice on whether they should attempt to find a position elsewhere, as well as personal advice that arose from knowing each other for many years. This sense of connection differs from other relationships tenure track faculty have with informal mentors within their institution. The respondents noted a desire for informal mentors who can share their navigational and aspirational capital. Participants mentioned that this support could manifest as a mentor sharing their third-year review and tenure materials as examples.

Additionally, external informal mentors may not be as helpful to tenure track faculty as internal informal mentors within a department or institution. This is due primarily to their possession of knowledge on specific policies, procedures, and expectations. For example, Lillian explained some of the advice they received from their outside informal mentor is not applicable as they are affiliated at an institution with more funding than the institution at which Lillian is employed. This point speaks to the necessity of tenure track faculty having multiple mentors and building a mentoring network: both a within-institution mentor who can provide navigational capital providing process and procedure insight, and an outside mentor who can extend career-related advice. The need for a mentoring network is further heightened by the unlikelihood of a single informal mentor (within or outside of an institution) to fulfill both the career-related and psychological support functions of mentoring.

Conclusion

The genuine commitment it takes to meet and build trust with other faculty can impact the potential for tenure track faculty to find informal mentors early on in their time at an institution. Academic leadership should, therefore, incorporate formalized programming so that tenure track faculty are adequately supported and able to construct and leverage mentoring networks. A key area of support is the intentional sharing of navigational capital so more seasoned individuals can help junior members in the process of way-finding. Acquiring a variety of informal

mentors, from both within and outside of the professional setting, can provide a myriad of vantage points relevant to career insight and long-term advancement.

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