

Building Community from the Ground Up

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This paper will introduce the audience to mentoring programs that take on multiple approaches. The first approach is the process to support individuals as they enter academia and the second is a program that supports a faculty entering and continuing within the profession. This paper examines a nearly two-decade mentoring partnership between faculty in English and Education in disparate institutions, tracing their collaboration from graduate school through senior academic positions and the mentoring program they developed. Mentoring has many benefits for faculty, including increased collaboration, reduced anxiety, shared responsibilities, work-life balance, moral and psychological support, and career advancement. Both junior and senior faculty benefit from mentoring, and it should be encouraged within and across academic institutions. This mentoring has occurred within the contexts of all stages from graduate student to late-career faculty at doctorate granting universities. The faculty engaged in the formal group activities are still early-career, are successfully moving through the promotion process, and have built collaborative networks among themselves. The faculty engaged in long term individual supportive mentoring have each been promoted to either associate or full professorships and continue to work to support one another. Connections have been built that support the path to promotion and wellbeing in the profession. This paper is an exploration of two faculty who have been supporting each other since 2005 and those they have supported along the way. It is a discussion of what has worked well, what has not, and how both individuals' professional and personal lives have benefited from the collaborations.

Keywords: Faculty mentoring, cross-disciplinary collaboration, research development, academic career pathways

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Introduction

Faculty mentoring programs are crucial for supporting academics throughout their careers, from graduate school to full professorship. This paper, based on nearly twenty years of collaborative experience between faculty in English and Education at different doctoral institutions, examines various mentoring approaches. The paper will focus on two key models: structured, short-term programs for new faculty transitions, and long-term, relationship-based mentoring for sustained career development and wellbeing.

Research consistently demonstrates the positive impact of mentoring on research output, collaboration, reduced stress, work-life balance, and career progression. This paper will present evidence from both formal and informal mentoring relationships that have aided early-career faculty in achieving promotion and sustained the scholarly engagement of senior faculty. These mentoring networks have proven effective in fostering both research and teaching skills, particularly

across disciplines. The discussion will trace the development of these mentoring practices, evaluate their successes and challenges, and consider the long-term professional and personal advantages of such relationships.

Literature Review

In the evolving landscape of higher education, cross-disciplinary faculty mentoring is emerging as a critical strategy for supporting new instructors, particularly in research-intensive contexts. Faculty entering departments such as English and Education often encounter distinct research cultures and expectations, making mentorship across these disciplines both challenging and richly rewarding. Eby et al. (2008) demonstrate that mentored individuals exhibit stronger research productivity and greater institutional commitment than their non-mentored peers. Structured, intentional mentoring that spans disciplines allows faculty to gain broader insights, develop transferable skills, and expand scholarly

networks, all of which are essential to long-term success.

Effective mentoring programs focused on research development must go beyond casual advisement and instead provide targeted guidance in publication planning, grant writing, and navigating institutional review processes. Brady and Spencer (2018) highlight structured mentor-mentee relationships to build pedagogical competence and foster community, a model that can be adapted to foreground research by integrating regular check-ins on scholarly goals and peer-reviewed outputs. In cross-disciplinary contexts, mentorship should explicitly address disciplinary conventions, helping new faculty reconcile differing norms around methodology, authorship, and publication venues.

While research is the primary emphasis, strong mentoring programs also recognize that teaching remains a key part of faculty identity and institutional contribution. Peer mentoring, as described by Schmidt and Faber (2016), can provide a valuable avenue for sharing pedagogical strategies across disciplines. Faculty in English and Education can benefit from exchanging approaches to student-centered instruction, writing-intensive curricula, and culturally responsive pedagogy. Such reciprocal mentoring fosters reflective teaching practices and strengthens a sense of belonging, particularly for new faculty still finding their pedagogical voice.

Institutional culture plays a pivotal role in the success of mentoring programs. As Sheridan et al. (2015) point out, mentoring cultures often fail to align with faculty needs unless they are deliberately assessed and supported. Smith et al. (2016) propose embedding mentoring within a community of practice model, which is especially beneficial in cross-disciplinary settings where informal mentoring may be inconsistent. Creating formal structures—such as interdisciplinary research clusters or mentoring circles—can promote collaborative scholarship and ensure new faculty feel supported as both researchers and educators.

Finally, fostering equity and inclusivity in mentoring is essential, particularly across disciplines with varying power dynamics. Webber and Rogers (2018) emphasize how gender disparities impact job satisfaction, reinforcing the need for mentorship that accounts for identity, rank, and positionality. Cross-disciplinary mentoring should include equity-minded practices such as shared goal-setting, transparent feedback, and attention to invisible labor. By combining structured support with flexibility and cultural responsiveness, institutions can create mentoring ecosystems that nurture new faculty as whole scholars - researchers, teachers, and community members.

Program

Recognizing a lack of support during their graduate studies and early professorships, two

colleagues initiated this program. This mentoring initiative has since supported individuals across all academic stages, from graduate students to late-career faculty at doctorate-granting institutions. Participants in the formal group activities, who are currently early-career faculty, are successfully advancing in their careers and have established collaborative networks. Those who received long-term individual mentoring have all been promoted to associate or full professorships and maintain their supportive relationships.

The following sections outline five key strategies that have proven effective in this cross-disciplinary mentoring program. Each strategy is grounded in lived experience and aligned with evidence-based best practices identified in the literature, offering a model that can be adapted to support faculty development across disciplines and institutions.

Structured Research Development Planning

As the two faculty began working together—one entering their first higher education position and the other transitioning into the associate professor role—they established a structured and intentional framework to guide their collaboration. They began by defining the goals and scope of their mentoring relationship, with a key priority being the identification of a research focus that could bridge their disciplinary differences. Given their mutual engagement with technology in their respective fields of English and Education, they identified this area as a flexible yet fertile ground for long-term collaboration. Rather than waiting for a specific project to take shape, they prioritized building a sustained structure of support that could evolve as their research interests matured. This emphasis on process over product reflects the kind of structured research development Eby et al. (2008) identify as essential for early-career success—supporting mentees in establishing scholarly routines, building institutional knowledge, and developing research trajectories that are both strategic and sustainable.

A second and perhaps more challenging step was establishing a consistent time for weekly meetings—a structural commitment that transformed individual writing efforts into a shared, collegial practice. The associate faculty member had already developed a habit of reserving dedicated time for research but adapted this routine to accommodate and include the junior colleague. Once the time was blocked on their calendars, it was protected throughout the year as a standing writing and mentoring session. These meetings served as a foundation for setting research priorities, discussing promotion requirements, and aligning short- and long-term goals thereby approaching research development not as a series of ad hoc conversations but as a deliberate mentoring practice. Weekly sessions included planning for conference presentations, strategizing article submissions, navigating institutional processes such as IRB review, and

organizing materials for annual evaluations. This structured approach provided accountability, psychological support, and intellectual stimulation—key components of successful mentoring relationships that focus on research productivity and professional advancement.

Disciplinary Literacy and Norm Bridging

In order to fit the needs of each faculty member's discipline, the mentoring relationship was intentionally grounded in ongoing conversations to unpack and clarify their respective tenure and promotion requirements, research expectations, and long-term professional goals. These discussions revealed important differences in disciplinary conventions—such as expectations around authorship, publication types, and methodological norms—highlighting the necessity of what Schmidt and Faber (2016) describe as disciplinary literacy. For example, while one faculty member worked within a field where single-authored publications and theoretical analysis were standard, the other operated in a context that prioritized empirical studies, collaborative authorship, and external grant activity. Rather than treating these differences as obstacles, the mentoring relationship evolved into a space for norm-bridging, where both faculty could learn from and translate across disciplinary cultures. While they frequently sought guidance from other colleagues in their respective departments to meet field-specific expectations, they consistently returned to their mentoring partnership to reflect on these insights, adapt their strategies, and receive support that was both intellectually cross-pollinating and emotionally sustaining. This iterative exchange helped each faculty member not only meet disciplinary benchmarks but also expand their scholarly perspectives—a core benefit of cross-disciplinary mentorship emphasized by Brady and Spencer (2018) and Smith et al. (2016).

Integrated Peer and Reciprocal Mentoring

Early in this mentoring program, the core faculty deliberately established a model of reciprocal knowledge sharing, grounded in the recognition that each brought disciplinary strengths and professional experiences the other did not possess. This mutual respect created a dynamic in which mentorship was not unidirectional, but fluid and collaborative—a hallmark of integrated peer and reciprocal mentoring models (Schmidt & Faber, 2016). Rather than positioning one faculty member as the sole expert, both engaged as co-learners and co-mentors, exchanging ideas, reviewing one another's work, and jointly problem-solving around both research and teaching challenges. This reciprocal approach extended outward as they began to involve master's and doctoral students and early-career assistant professors in their mentoring circle, thereby broadening the mentoring ecosystem. These additional

participants contributed fresh perspectives and questions, while benefiting from the established faculty's mentorship and modeling. The resulting community fostered a culture of collaborative inquiry and mutual support, offering a diverse and evolving network of expertise. As Smith et al. (2016) emphasize, such community-of-practice frameworks not only sustain individual development but also cultivate institutional capacity by diffusing knowledge and reinforcing interdependence. This intentional inclusivity helped ensure that mentoring extended beyond dyadic relationships, building a robust support system for all involved.

Inclusive and Equity-Minded Practices

Over the fifteen years that the two core faculty in this group have been working together, their professional positions and institutional affiliations have shifted. One transitioned from a faculty role into administration, while the other moved between institutions with varying emphases on scholarship and teaching. These evolving contexts provided opportunities to broaden their mentoring impact by supporting faculty within their own institutions and across professional networks. Recognizing that positionality, institutional culture, and personal identity can shape access to mentoring, they were intentional about building a network that valued inclusivity and equity-minded practices. Drawing on principles outlined by Webber and Rogers (2018), the group approached mentoring with a sensitivity to differing workloads, career stages, and identity-based experiences. They began by adding individuals with whom they had shared prior academic relationships—colleagues from graduate school and former mentees—while remaining mindful that long-term collaboration requires mutual investment and trust. Not all participants chose to stay engaged, and the faculty respected these departures as part of an inclusive process that allows for individual choice and evolving professional needs.

Over time, as the original mentoring pair deepened their research focus and began to identify interdisciplinary crossroads in their scholarship, they intentionally sought out collaborators whose expertise could complement and expand their work. This strategy enabled the group to foster diverse scholarly voices and perspectives, reinforcing their commitment to mentoring as a collaborative and inclusive practice. One such faculty member has since remained in the group long-term and successfully earned promotion to the associate rank, demonstrating the positive outcomes of sustained, equity-minded mentorship. Furthermore, recognizing the importance of mentoring across career stages, the group has also welcomed students into their scholarly activities, providing emerging researchers with access to mentorship and modeling inclusive academic practices. By engaging both faculty and students in this way, the group has cultivated a mentoring

culture that prioritizes belonging, transparency, and shared growth—key values identified by Sheridan et al. (2015) and Smith et al. (2016) as foundational to inclusive academic development.

Teaching Integration with Scholarly Identity

As the scholarship of those in higher education is often closely tied to what they teach, the intersection of teaching and research has become a recurring and fruitful topic in the group's weekly mentoring meetings. These discussions frequently explore how scholarly identity informs pedagogical choices and vice versa. Drawing on Schmidt and Faber's (2016) findings, the group recognizes that mentoring centered on teaching can serve as a powerful entry point for scholarly development, especially when faculty feel comfortable sharing classroom challenges and pedagogical innovations. Because members of the group have cultivated trust and mutual respect over time, they are willing to offer and receive critical feedback on both their research and their teaching practices. This openness allows them to navigate difficult but productive conversations—such as how disciplinary expertise must be translated for students who are just beginning their academic journeys. As they examine instructional strategies in specific disciplinary contexts, group members also reflect more broadly on how to design learning environments that are responsive, rigorous, and rooted in their evolving research agendas. In doing so, the mentoring group sustains a space where both teaching and scholarship are seen not as competing demands, but as integrated elements of academic identity.

One member of the group has since moved into an administrative role but remains deeply involved in these mentoring conversations. Their position has enabled them to extend the group's teaching-scholarship integration model by mentoring new and experienced faculty within the college. Monthly meetings with new faculty are intentionally structured not just to orient them to institutional policies and procedures but to connect them with one another and with potential research collaborators across disciplines. This practice aligns with Smith et al.'s (2016) community of practice model, where sustained interaction fosters meaningful collaboration and identity development. These cross-disciplinary conversations frequently evolve into discussions that bridge research and teaching philosophies, helping faculty think holistically about their academic roles. As new faculty engage with a diverse network of colleagues, they are encouraged to align their scholarly interests with innovative teaching approaches, ultimately enriching both their classrooms and their research productivity.

Together, these five strategies illustrate how a thoughtfully designed, cross-disciplinary mentoring model can evolve into a resilient and responsive professional learning community. By grounding their practice in mutual respect, structured

collaboration, and inclusive engagement, the core faculty developed a mentorship framework that supports both individual growth and collective advancement. The lessons drawn from this case not only validate the best practices identified in the literature but also provide a lived example of how mentoring can foster long-term academic success. These insights lead naturally into the broader reflections and implications explored in the paper's final section.

Discussion

This paper offers an examination of the mentoring relationship between two faculty members which began in 2005. It describes what has worked well, what has proven challenging, and how sustained collaboration has shaped their scholarly and professional trajectories both individually and collaboratively. It also includes integrating others into the relationship and how that affected the collaboration and the personal and professional goals of all involved. The effects of these collaborations resulted in at least three graduations, eight promotions, and well over a dozen publications while participants were involved in the mentorship relationships.

Faculty contributions have yielded several successes, but building long-term working relationships has been challenging. Many faculty members engaged in single activities and then discontinued their involvement. While not necessarily a failure, this limits the scope of support that can be offered to all faculty.

As highlighted in the literature, cross-disciplinary mentoring presents inherent challenges due to differing disciplinary norms, expectations, and institutional pressures (Eby et al., 2008; Smith et al., 2016). Nevertheless, this case study affirms the potential of such relationships to provide fresh perspectives, foster creative synergy, and catalyze innovative thinking across teaching and research. An "outsider's eye" can often illuminate assumptions within one's own discipline, prompting reflection and growth that would be less likely in single-discipline mentoring.

The two faculty members at the core of this program have navigated transitions across institutions, academic ranks, and shifting research agendas while continuing to find meaningful common ground. Their ability to adapt the mentoring relationship to evolving circumstances, including the addition of new group members, has allowed the program to remain dynamic and responsive to the needs of early career and established faculty alike.

Conclusion

Teaching has always remained a foundational component of mentoring work. Conversations frequently explored the interplay between instruction and scholarship, with teaching often serving as both a source of inquiry and a testing ground for research-informed practice. This

recursive relationship between teaching and research has enriched the mentoring dialogue and supported the development of integrated academic identities.

Above all, this mentoring community is grounded in mutual respect and a shared recognition that every participant, regardless of rank or institutional title, contributes valuable insight. With members ranging from graduate students to associate deans, the group models a horizontal, inclusive structure in which trust, collaboration, and care are prioritized. In this way, it offers a compelling example of how mentoring—when intentionally cultivated—can transcend disciplinary and hierarchical boundaries to support sustainable, human-centered academic careers.

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