

Distributed Leadership Encourages Sustainable Change in University Departmental Mentoring

Wojton, J., Rohrbacher, C., & Burmester, L.

Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University

The challenge of any mentoring workshop or professional development is follow through concerning implementation and assessment of an intervention strategy. The team relied on the distributed leadership model used by the Faculty Mentoring Initiatives at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University (ERAU) to avoid obstacles and capitalize on the strengths inherent in this approach to avoid stagnation. Our case study will feature how our programming incentivized and supported faculty to become mentoring coordinators who implemented a departmental mentoring plan and assessed it. By relying on mentoring coordinators, distributed leadership (DL), characterized by shared responsibility, trust, and collaborative relationships, was the cornerstone of our program. It provides a foundation for sustainable organizational change, shifts leadership from hierarchical authority to relational engagement and collective action, creating shared ownership of mentoring programs. Sustainable change through DL involves establishing supportive processes, continuous professional development, resource availability, and cultivating networks. The mentoring institute assisted departmental teams to develop intentional mentoring plans. Afterward, they identified a colleague who could take on a leadership role and facilitate implementation and assessment of the plan. Coordinators received guidance and assistance from our Center for Teaching and Learning Excellence (CTLE) and participated in a community of practice with their peers. Data was collected via the mentoring coordinators' reports, an assessment tool, and the data suggests value in using embedded mentoring coordinators within department to implement and assess intentional mentoring plans, while also noting some challenges. The value lies in improving communication, increasing accountability, and creating opportunities for peer learning, while challenges such as scheduling conflicts, inconsistent mentor engagement, and the need for more structure have come to light.

Keywords: Faculty mentoring; distributed leadership; networked mentoring

Acknowledgements: During the preparation of this manuscript, OpenAI's ChatGPT (version 3o) was used for language improvement, idea refinement, and editorial assistance. All substantive content, data analysis, interpretation, and final text revisions were conducted and validated solely by the authors. The authors take full responsibility for the integrity and scholarly standards of the work.

Introduction

After any mentoring workshop or professional development experience, a person is faced with a significant challenge: follow through. Implementation, facilitation, and assessment of an idea, no matter how good or how needed, is often extremely difficult to enact. For a typical academic department with multiple stakeholders, it can be even more complex due to the limited resources, competing interests, time constraints, and varying levels of engagement by faculty and administration (NFDD, 2025). In our case, departments committed to developing intentional mentoring plans, so the real challenge lay in ensuring the plans were

implemented and sustained. The Faculty Mentoring Initiative at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University-Daytona Beach (ERAU-DB) was launched in 2021 as a Provost-directed effort to enhance faculty mentoring. The Center for Teaching and Learning Excellence (CTLE) spearheaded the program by appointing a Faculty Mentoring Coordinator and establishing a Director of Faculty Mentoring. Together, they identify needs, plan, deliver, and assess mentoring initiatives. Now in its fourth year, the program supports mentoring across various contexts and career stages, guided by its mission to promote, support, and facilitate intentional and inclusive faculty mentoring (Wojton and Rohrbacher, 2024). The facilitation and assessment

of formal mentoring plans for faculty in higher education can be a daunting, labor-intensive task that may not be recognized in a way commensurate to the labor at hand (O'Meara, et.al., 2022). This is a serious obstacle to the development and maintenance of intentional mentoring plans in the context of departments within a university. It can be very difficult for chairpersons to prioritize this work and pass it off to faculty members in their department, since faculty focus on teaching and research is likely to take precedence over labor/time intensive service work that is uncompensated. In addition, relying on professional development personnel can cause distinct challenges because they may lack insight into the way particular departments function to get the necessary buy-in from participants, since the most impactful mentoring plans are tailored to meet the unique needs of different cohorts rather than one-size-fits-all. To bypass these challenges, the Faculty Mentoring Initiative at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University has put in place a distributed leadership model for developing, facilitating, and assessing formal mentoring plans within departments. The reliance on distributed leadership (Bennet et al., 2004) is recognized in the establishment of a mentoring coordinator to oversee the mentoring program in their own department, which shifted the full responsibility for establishing, maintaining and assessing a mentoring plan from chairpersons to their designee.

The mentoring plans explicitly outline how leadership roles are shared. For example, AS's plan lists distinct roles: the Department Chair assigns appropriate senior faculty for different mentoring areas, the Mentor Coordinator administers the program and directs mentees to the right contacts, the Associate Chair observes teaching and gives feedback, experienced faculty act as promotion and tenure mentors, Course Monitors advise on specific courses, and other professors advise on work-life balance and research. By allocating mentoring tasks across different people, both departments ensure that no single individual is solely responsible - a hallmark of distributed leadership and network mentoring. This shared approach also means new faculty receive diverse perspectives and support.

This exploratory case study shares preliminary data concerning the implementation of mentoring coordinators in Aviation Science (AS) and Aeronautical Engineering (AE) as part of a distributed leadership model to implement and assess a departmental mentoring plan to support sustainable change.

Literature Review

Distributed Leadership

Distributed Leadership (DL) represents a shift from traditional, hierarchical leadership approaches toward more collaborative and shared leadership practices. DL offers a powerful framework for rethinking how mentoring is organized and

sustained, emphasizing shared responsibility, peer collaboration, and the co-construction of leadership practices. It relies on the core principle that leadership is not person-centered but task and practice oriented (Zaghout and Harrison 2025). A study by Caterino et.al. (2020) shows that distributed leadership plays a key role in shaping a collective vision for change, helping to ensure that leadership efforts promote transformation rather than reinforce existing practices. Where the practice of faculty to faculty mentoring in a university setting is concerned, especially one in which network mentoring is being championed, distributed leadership makes sense to both diversify the input that mentees receive and to spread the mentoring labor among more individuals in a systematic way. Kezar and Holcombe (2017) emphasized the need for collective leadership in mentoring initiatives, particularly for equity-focused outcomes. DL enables institutions to embed mentoring within organizational structures. Bolden et al. (2009) showed that DL can foster a mentoring culture by empowering faculty across ranks to take initiative. Bryman (2007) stressed the importance of supportive leadership climates that distribute leadership functions, such as mentoring coordination, across departments. Research suggests that distributed leadership facilitates sustained change by embedding leadership practices into the organizational culture, rather than centralizing them in a few individuals (Harris, 2008). This approach allows for more adaptive and responsive decision-making, as leadership is exercised by those closest to the issues at hand. In the case of the departmental mentoring that was assessed as part of this case study, distributed leadership is applied in two ways: 1) mentoring coordinators oversee and assess departmental mentoring plans and 2) network mentoring models were utilized in departmental mentoring plans.

Hybrid and Networked Mentoring Models

Both departments designed mentoring models that distribute mentoring duties among multiple faculty members rather than relying on a single mentor. Traditional mentoring in higher education typically involves a one-on-one, hierarchical relationship between a junior faculty member and a more senior mentor within the same institution. This model is often fixed and expected to meet a wide range of professional needs through a single connection. In contrast, networked mentoring emphasizes multiple mentoring relationships that are collaborative, reciprocal, and often span different ranks. Rather than being static, these networks are fluid and evolve alongside the faculty member's career. Networked mentoring provides more targeted and specialized support by drawing on the strengths of various mentors—such as research guidance, teaching development, or personal identity affirmation—offering a more holistic and adaptive approach to faculty development (DeCastro, et. al., 2013).

In our case, the Aeronautical Science (AS)

department adopted a hybrid “networked + traditional hierarchical mentoring” model with a central mentor coordinator as the hub and various networked mentoring spokes who were faculty mentor volunteers with expertise in particular areas. In this model, the mentoring coordinator is the main point of contact who connects new faculty (mentees) to different mentors or resources for specific needs (teaching, research, service, etc.). At the same time, mentees engage with a network of seven mentoring partnerships, each responsible for a particular area of development, promoting collaboration and relationship-building by requiring mentees to interact with multiple colleagues. In the Aeronautical Engineering (AE) department, a fully networked mentoring model was chosen. The department chair or mentoring coordinator works with each mentee to create a personalized “mentoring map,” essentially a community of mentors tailored to the mentee’s needs. This networked approach gives faculty autonomy to identify multiple mentors and provides flexibility to match the department’s wide range of expertise with the varied needs of new faculty. Both models demonstrate shared responsibility, as mentoring duties (guidance on teaching, research, tenure, etc.) are divided among several faculty members instead of one person.

Methodology and Assessment

Site and Participants

Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University (Daytona Beach Campus) is a small (8700 students), private, STEM-focused university with roughly 450 faculty, and shares a strong departmental commitment to innovation and collaboration. Five departmental faculty teams which included the chairperson and faculty at every rank represented in that department participated in a one-day retreat in which they worked through 10 modules with facilitators to document an intentional mentoring plan and assessment strategy for their department. One member from each team was designated as the department’s Mentoring Coordinator. Mentoring coordinators were charged with implementing the mentoring plan that was approved by their department and to assess its effectiveness. To aid in these endeavors, Mentoring Coordinators attended a community of practice that met twice during the implementation term. This community of practice allowed coordinators to share strategies for facilitating and assessing their different mentoring plans and allowed the Faculty Mentoring Initiative coordinators to share their expertise, as well. Mentoring Coordinators were compensated with a \$500 stipend. For context, the Mentoring Institute was a two-year process that included:

1. Individual department chairs elect a team (including themselves) of professors at differing stages in their career to attend a two-day workshop retreat. This retreat guides participants through 10 modules

designed to support the development of a departmental mentoring plan (for additional information see Wojton, J. and Rohrbacher, C., 2024).

2. Two weeks after the retreat, each team turns in a mentoring plan, receives feedback from facilitators, and finalizes their plan for implementation next year.
3. Mentoring coordinators handle the logistics of implementing and assessing their department’s mentoring program.
4. Mentoring coordinators meet in a community of practice with mentoring coordinators from other departments to share and refine their assessment strategies.
5. Mentoring coordinators turn in a Coordinator Report that details the extent to which they met the goals they established for their department’s mentoring plan.

While five departments participated in the overall process and implementation, this case study will focus on AS and AE because they completed the full cycle of programming which includes participating with their team in the mentoring retreat and implementing and assessing their departmental mentoring plan. After faculty teams completed and submitted their Mentoring Plans and received facilitator feedback, mentoring coordinators implemented and assessed their department’s faculty mentoring plans. The research utilized both quantitative and qualitative data collection methods across two distinct stages.

Stage One

Data was collected at the department level by the Mentoring Coordinators, who gathered feedback from faculty mentors and mentees through surveys, informal interviews, direct observation, and meeting notes. The Mentoring Coordinator analyzed the data using a mini-ethnographic approach, which focuses on understanding the cultural norms, values, and roles within a specific social group (White, 2009). The Mentoring Coordinator’s role was both as an observer and participant (Holloway, 2010), engaging with the mentoring process to interpret faculty behaviors, interactions, and feedback then share those insights with those outside of the culture (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2010). Descriptive statistics and frequency distributions were used to analyze the quantitative data.

Stage Two

The Faculty Mentoring Initiative leadership team collected additional qualitative and quantitative data from the Mentoring Coordinators. This stage aimed to assess the overall effectiveness of the departmental mentoring plans and their alignment with the initiative’s overarching goals. Descriptive statistics and frequency distributions were again used to analyze the quantitative data. The Mentoring leadership team conducted two rounds of descriptive coding, separated by a calibration session, to identify key themes in the qualitative

data provided by the Mentoring Coordinators.

A template was provided for the Mentoring Coordinator Report (see appendix A). The template was developed with careful consideration of best practices in program evaluation and goal-setting, particularly drawing on the principles of SMART (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic, Timely) goals to ensure clarity, measurability, and actionable outcomes. The criteria were designed to align with the mentoring program's objectives, allowing for flexible documentation while ensuring systematic tracking of progress and challenges.

Results

The team used the coordinator reports as the main artifact for reflecting on the implementation of the departmental mentoring plans. Data generated from the coordinator reports informed coordinators of their department's strengths within the plan and identified potential opportunities for refinement. The coordinator reports worked well for two very different departments with different mentoring plans, providing some anecdotal evidence for the facility of the data collection tool.

Discussion

After reviewing and comparing the responses to the two coordinator reports collected, it was evident that improved communication and clarity on where to get support was noted as a strength in the mentoring programs for both departments. Both coordinators shared that the faculty knew who to contact and explained how that benefited mentees. One coordinator shared in their coordinator report, "New faculty now know what they should be doing their first year and where to get the information. Having a central point of contact streamlines the process," highlighting the new efficiency. Another coordinator mentioned that regular check-ins were integral to mentee development because mentees often identified too many goals or the goals were too aggressive, and the regular meeting allowed them to reflect and refine their goals as necessary.

Increased accountability was another benefit in the program, and it allowed for coordinators to identify weaknesses or gaps in service and adjust as necessary. In AS, mentees completed a pre-survey in the beginning of the Fall semester, and a post-survey at the end of the Spring semester, which allowed the coordinator to make slight adjustments in the plan because they were aware of the issues. This process also helped encourage mentees to stay engaged.

Lastly, the peer learning opportunities were extremely beneficial for the coordinators. These discussions allowed coordinators to share successes, problem solve, and goal set. The value of this practice was apparent with one coordinator saying "I found the scheduled meeting with the other coordinators to be extremely insightful, so continuing those next term would be beneficial" and the other saying "Continued discussion with

other mentoring coordinators is always helpful, as we can all improve from best practices." This cross-coordinator collaboration enhanced the effectiveness of the distributed leadership model by providing support and meaningful feedback on the issues the individual faced.

Some challenges that were identified by the coordinators include scheduling and time commitment, inconsistent mentoring engagement within individual networks, and refining the process for more structure and check-ins or milestones. Scheduling and time constraint issues posed a significant hurdle to both the coordinators and the mentees. In AS, for example, the coordinator highlighted mentees running into several scheduling conflicts that impacted the program. Other recommended mentors were responsive to requests for meetings due to time constraints and other priorities taking precedence. In AE they had a similar situation with mentors responding to certain requests and not others, particularly if the mentee was asking for guidance on something complex like reviewing a proposal.

These scheduling issues directly feed into the inconsistency in mentor engagement. To some degree these challenges are not surprising. The networked mentoring approach puts the onus on both the mentee and mentor to proactively manage their time and commitments and prioritize their commitment to developing a thriving mentoring relationship. With multiple mentors involved, mentees must coordinate with several individuals and schedules. Mentors, while willing to help, may have competing demands that limit the time they can devote to mentoring. While this model is more appropriate for faculty needs at ERAU-DB, it can lead to inconsistent engagement for some faculty members.

By completing this process, both coordinators were able to identify areas within their plans that needed refinement, and both identified structure as being key. For example, in AS the coordinator posited that the program might be "too flexible" and need more guidance for both the mentor and mentee in setting expectations and completing tasks. The AE coordinator said that they needed more frequent "formal" meetings for first year faculty to identify potential issues early and brainstorm possible alternatives.

Conclusion

The distributed leadership model implemented in the Aeronautical Science and Aeronautical Engineering departments has been instrumental in supporting the development of new faculty members while fostering a collaborative leadership environment based on early reporting from the Coordinator Reports. The mentoring coordinators were central to the success of this initiative, acting as facilitators who ensured that mentoring responsibilities were evenly distributed across faculty members, promoting peer-to-peer support, and leveraging the expertise of multiple

mentors. While this is only preliminary findings, the basic structure of using a distributed leadership model that utilizes mentoring coordinators in generalizable to other cohorts, even if the departmental mentoring plans vary widely.

While the approach has been successful in many ways, particularly in terms of improving communication, increasing accountability, and creating opportunities for peer learning, challenges such as scheduling conflicts, inconsistent mentor engagement, and the need for more structure remain, as noted in both Mentor Coordinator Reports. Both coordinators have gained valuable insights into how to better support their departments, with plans for more frequent check-ins and clearer expectations in future iterations. Ultimately, the distributed leadership model has proven to be a sustainable approach to mentoring, one that not only supports the professional development of new faculty but also cultivates a collaborative culture within the department. However, sustainability beyond the year in which CTLE has provided oversight and funded a small stipend for mentoring coordinators, will be up to the individual departments. The hope is that with assessment data and feedback from faculty in those departments on their mentoring program, sustaining it will become a part of the culture of the department, ultimately continuing to support the development of their mentoring program and providing the resources like course release or service recognition) that will help to sustain a thriving mentoring program for their faculty.

References

- Bennet, N., Harvey, J. A., Woods, C., & Woods, P. A. (2004). Variabilities and dualities in distributed leadership. *Educational Management Administration and Leadership*, 32(4), 439-457.
- Bolden, R., Petrov, G., and Gosling, J. (2009). Distributed leadership in higher education: Rhetoric and reality. *Educational Management Administration and Leadership*, 37(2), 257-277. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143208100301>
- Bryman, A. (2007). Effective leadership in higher education: A literature review. *Studies in Higher Education*, 32(6), 693-710. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075070701685114>
- Canterino, F., Cirella, S., Piccoli, B., & Shani, A. B. (. (2020). Leadership and change mobilization: The mediating role of distributed leadership. *Journal of Business Research*, 108, 42-51. doi:10.1016/j.jbusres.2019.09.052
- DeCastro, R., Sambuco, D., Ubel, P. A., Stewart, A., & Jagsi, R. (2013) Mentor networks in *academic medicine*: moving beyond a dyadic conception of mentoring for junior faculty researchers. *Academic Medicine*. r;88(4), 488-96. doi: 10.1097/ACM.0b013e318285d302. PMID: 23425990; PMCID: PMC3610810Gronn, P. (2002). Distributed leadership as a unit of analysis. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 13(4), 423-451.
- Harris, A., Leithwood, K., Day, C., Sammons, P., & Hopkins, D. (2007). *Distributed leadership and organizational change: Reviewing the evidence*. *Journal of Educational Change*, 8(4), 337-347. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10833-007-9048-4>
- Holloway, I., Brown, L., & Shipway, R. (2010). Meaning not measurement: Using ethnography to bring a deeper understanding to the participant experience of festivals and events. *International Journal of Event and Festival Management*, 1(1), 74-85. <https://doi.org/10.1108/17852951011029315>
- Jones, S., Harvey, M., Hamilton, J., Bevacqua, J., Egea, K., & McKenzie, J. (2017). *Demonstrating the impact of a distributed leadership approach in higher education*. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 39(2), 197-211.
- Kezar, A. J., & Holcombe, E. M. (2017). Shared leadership in higher education: Important lessons from research and practice. American Council on Education. <https://www.acenet.edu/Documents/Shared-Leadership-in-Higher-Education.pdf>
- National Center for Faculty Development & Diversity (NCFDD). (2025). *Redefining mentoring: Challenges and opportunities in the academy* [White paper]. https://web.ncfdd.org/hubfs/NCFDD-COACHE_Redefining_Mentoring_Whitepaper.pdf
- Onwuegbuzie, A. J., Leech, N. L., & Collins, K. M. T. (2010). Innovative data collection strategies in qualitative research. *The Qualitative Report*, 15, 696-726. <http://nsu-works.nova.edu/tqr/vol15/iss3/12>
- O'Meara, K., Culpepper, D., Misra, J., & Jaeger, A. J. (2022). Equity-minded faculty workloads: What we can and should do now. American Council on Education. <https://www.acenet.edu/Documents/Equity-Minded-Faculty-Workloads.pdf>American Council on Education+5advance.umd.edu+5advance.umd.edu+5
- Raelin, J. (2011). From leadership-as-practice to leaderful practice. *Leadership*, 7(2), 195-211.
- White, K. L. (2009). Meztizaje and remembering in Afro-Mexican communities of the Costa Chica: Implications for archival education in Mexico. *Archival Science*, 9, 43-55. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10502-009-9102-5>
- Wojton, J. & Rohrbacher, C. (2024). Leveraging department teams to plan and implement

Strategies for Mentoring”. Trube, M. B., Martinez, W., & Dominguez, N. (Eds.). Inclusive Developmental Networks: Building Transformative Communities Through Effective Mentoring [Special Issue], *The Chronicle of Mentoring and Coaching*, 8(3) 464-469. doi.org/10.62935/4p5cxu

Zaghout, B., & Harrison, C. (2025). Distributed leadership: A systemic literature review. *Strategy and Leadership*, 53 (3) 299-320. <https://doi.org/10.1108/SL-10-2024-0119>

Appendix A

Appendix A: Template Mentoring Coordinator Report

Please fill in the following table. You may share up to 3 goals. You can add context or share insights in the notes section.

6.	7. 1 (EXAMPLE)	8. 2	9. 3	10. 4
Goal (a measurable objective you identified)	Faculty will create and implement individual goal-setting plans and engage in quarterly discussions with assigned mentors			
Accomplishments (concrete achievements in the area)	-85% of faculty completed goal-setting plans -92% held initial mentor meetings -Created standardized goal-setting template			
Critical Issues or Obstacles (describe any barriers to implementation or success)	-Schedule conflicts for some mentor-mentee pairs -Need for additional mentor training on goal-setting guidance -Some resistance to formal documentation process			
Next steps (planned actions or interventions)	-Provide follow-up mentor training -Collect feedback on goal-setting template -Plan spring semester matching adjustments			
Notes (Include relevant context, observations, or additional information)	-1 of the 3 mentees struggled with identified mentored and was reassigned. This person is now working toward the goal setting -mentors may need some training on goal setting and asking right questions			