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Circles of Support: Lessons from a Peer Mentoring Initiative

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Traditional mentorship has been criticized for its hierarchical arrangement, the underrepresentation of mentors from diverse backgrounds, and a lack of attention to the experiences of female and underrepresented minority (URM) faculty. In contrast, co-mentorship or peer mentorship models have been shown to facilitate inclusion, create space to share experiences, and support career advancement. To foster faculty wellbeing, a teaching-intensive institution adopted a peer mentorship model to support full-time faculty, especially underrepresented faculty. This study draws on a conceptual framework that positions peer mentoring as a key driver of faculty engagement with colleagues, psychosocial support, and career development. The peer mentoring program was established to enhance support for faculty who reported experiencing heavy, invisible, and inequitable workloads. Across three iterations, mentoring circles targeted early and mid-career faculty, women faculty, and faculty of color. Sample topics included mentoring maps and strategies to say "no" to service. Across three cohorts, most of the faculty who participated were women and untenured. Of those, most faculty were in the early career mentoring and women faculty circles. Participants rated their program satisfaction and identified the most helpful aspects of the peer mentoring circles. After the first iteration, faculty reported acceptable satisfaction but suggested improving program structure and faculty participation. After improvements were made, cohorts 2 and 3 experienced increased satisfaction and reported "meeting colleagues outside of my discipline" and "navigating institutional policies and procedures" as the most helpful components of the program. Peer mentoring circles can increase faculty belonging and navigational capital.

Keywords: Peer mentoring, mentoring circles, affinity groups, faculty support

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Introduction

There are ongoing concerns about the "leaky pipeline," which means losing women and underrepresented minority (URM) faculty before they successfully advance to higher academic ranks, especially in STEM disciplines and administrative positions (e.g., department chair, dean). Women and URM faculty are more likely to leave before achieving tenure or stall at the associate rank due to bias, lack of mentorship, work-life balance challenges, exclusion from networks, and unequal access to resources or opportunities (Greska, 2023). Access to different forms of mentoring can provide women and URM faculty a sense of belonging, validation of lived experiences, and collective support for their retention and advancement (Turner Kelly & Fries-Britt, 2022). In this study, we evaluate and improve an affinity-based peer mentoring program to expand mentor networks, and psychosocial and career development among women and URM faculty.

Literature Review

Formal mentoring programs typically assign an early career faculty member to an experienced faculty mentor, often in one's discipline or department (Etzkorn & Braddock, 2020). Colleges and universities have relied on this model as a formal, structured process to onboard and support new faculty. The mentor/mentee relationship is premised on the ability for the mentor to socialize, share expectations, and guide mentees' career advancement (Zeind et al., 2005). The dyadic model positions the mentor as a point person who provides formal meetings and informal interactions to a new faculty member as an intermediary to a department chair and dean. More structured mentorship programs establish a contract formalizing mentor/mentee roles and responsibilities, and follow a regular meeting schedule. Mentors typically discuss career advancement, such as expectations for teaching, scholarship, and service, as well as review, promotion, and tenure requirements (Zeind et al., 2005; Waddell et al., 2016).

However, traditional mentorship has been criticized for its hierarchical arrangement, the underrepresentation of mentors from diverse backgrounds, and a lack of attention to the experiences of female and URM faculty (Espino & Zambrano, 2019). For example, Black and Latinx women experienced barriers in finding suitable mentors and receiving quality mentorship (Davis et al., 2021). Others described their senior mentors showing "disengagement" in the relationship (Espino & Zambrana, 2019). The mismatch may occur because faculty mentors who are white, male, or socioeconomically privileged may be more likely to share their knowledge based on their specific experiences without considering the distinct challenges facing women and URM faculty (Etzkorn & Braddock, 2020). For example, women and URM faculty routinely face implicit biases and microaggressions as well as organizational barriers such as disproportionate service workload. While well-intentioned, the mentorship may fail to acknowledge these barriers or provide the necessary advocacy to support women and URM's professional growth and wellbeing (Bath et al., 2022; Espino & Zambrana, 2019). This oversight not only limits the effectiveness of the mentoring relationship but also reinforces existing disparities within academic and professional environments.

Given the potential limitations of finding a single mentor within a department or program, alternative mentoring approaches have emerged to complement traditional one-to-one mentoring in order to diversify mentoring networks and address psychosocial belonging among women and URM faculty. Some examples of alternative mentoring models include co-mentorship (Turner Kelly & Fries-Britt, 2022), near-peer mentorship (Rider et al., 2023; Williams et al., 2020), and identity-based community of practice (Sotirin & Goltz, 2023). These peer mentoring approaches broaden faculty's access to peer mentors across the university, externally, and even among faculty of the same rank (Haines & Popovich, 2014). Peer mentoring models provide faculty access to more than one mentor. Specifically, faculty participants collaborate as mentors and mentees by exchanging knowledge and support in a reciprocal, rather than top-down manner. These peer mentoring approaches broaden faculty networks and increase access to diverse mentors who may reflect their experiences (Rider et al., 2023). For example, Fraiman et al. (2002) highlighted the value of hearing from others with similar experiences of discrimination or impostor syndrome. These innovative peer mentoring models offer more inclusive support systems that better address women and URM faculty's diverse needs and experiences in academic settings.

While peer mentoring circles offer valuable support and shared experiences, they also present several limitations that can affect their effectiveness and sustainability. Peer mentoring groups may be less structured than a dyadic mentor-mentee relationship (Espino & Zambrana, 2019). Peer mentoring programs effectiveness may be influenced by the composition of its participants and the extent of their engagement. For example, the topics discussed may emerge more organically and depend on the faculty's willingness to disclose the challenges they face. Likewise, if all participants in an assigned circle lack institutional knowledge and experience to offer career navigation and advancement strategies, the mentorship will be less effective.

Despite these limitations, peer mentoring circles hold significant potential and can be strengthened through clear goals and intentional design to enhance their impact on faculty development and support. This paper examines a peer mentorship program over three iterations, focusing on development and sustainability to increase the retention and career advancement of women and URM faculty. The program combined career and psychosocial support, similar to other peer mentoring programs (Waddell et al., 2016).

Program Description

The authors developed peer mentoring circles as part of a project funded by a National Science Foundation (NSF) ADVANCE award #2204389 to the Principal Investigators (last two co-authors). This programming served faculty employed at a primarily undergraduate, teaching-focused institution where tenure-track faculty teach 12 instructional units (four courses) per semester. Although the institution's publication requirements for tenure are low, high teaching and service loads hinder many faculty, especially women and URM, from successfully meeting scholarship expectations. Participants were recruited from all faculty, but the aim was to increase support for early career faculty, women faculty, and faculty of color.

During the project, the authors oversaw three peer mentoring cohorts. Faculty participation was voluntary, based on interest, and meetings were held virtually to decrease barriers to participation. Programming focused on supporting topics related to career advancement and sense of belonging, and evolved over each iteration based on participant feedback (see Table 1). The primary improvements were moving from a participant-led to a facilitator-led model (by the first author) and adding more structure to the monthly meetings, including activities and discussion.

Table 1
Summary of Peer Mentoring Components by Cohort

	Cohort 1 (2022-2023)	Cohort 2 (2023-2024)	Cohort 3 (2024-2025)
# of Meetings	5	7	6
Group Assignments	Early career faculty Women faculty Faculty of color	Early career faculty Women faculty Faculty of color	Early career faculty Mid-career faculty
Facilitation	Participant-led	Facilitator-Led	Facilitator-Led
Structure	Participants select topics and rotate leading a meeting.	Facilitator organizes a schedule of topics.	Facilitator organizes a schedule of topics from an assigned book.
Topics	Challenges associated with gender, URM status, and early career.	Work/life balance; imposter syndrome; tenure and promotion expectations; determining service roles. mentoring networks.	Teaching, scholarship, and service workload. P&T requirements. career trajectory planning; mentoring networks

Note. Early career faculty are tenure track; mid-career faculty are tenured.

Method

Participants

Over three academic years (2022–2023 to 2024–2025), 62 faculty and staff members participated in peer mentoring circles (see Table 2). The majority of participants were women and untenured. Program evaluation response rates varied by year, with a total of 40 respondents completing the survey (a 65% overall response rate). There was a decrease in participation in cohort 3 due to reduced ability to recruit at in-person, all campus in-service events. Instead, cohort 3 was recruited primarily with email campaigns and digital announcements. The program evaluation survey was approved by the institution's review board, faculty consented to anonymous survey participation, and we collected faculty self-reported responses and demographic information to track program cohort changes and make improvements.

Table 2
Sample Demographic (N=40)

	2022-2023	2023-2024	2024-2025	Total
Early Career	7	12	7	27
Mid-Career	--	--	6	6
Women Faculty	13	8	--	21
Faculty of Color	5	3	--	8
Untenured	16	17	8	41
Tenured	5	3	2	10
Other (PTI, Staff)	3	4	2	9
Man	4	4	3	11
Woman	22	19	11	52
Total Faculty	26	23	13	62
Survey respondents	18	11	11	40
Response Rate	69%	48%	85%	65%

Evaluation Survey

At the end of the academic year, participants completed an evaluation survey that solicited their program satisfaction, perceived usefulness of the program, and feedback for improvement. First, participants responded to a question about their satisfaction with the monthly mentoring meetings (1 = extremely dissatisfied to 5 = extremely satisfied). Next, they responded to closed-ended items about what elements they found useful about the mentoring circles (1 = not at all useful to 5 = extremely useful). Respondents in Cohort 1 rated six items (e.g., connecting with peers of a similar affinity; feeling validated about experiences), and Cohorts 2 and 3 rated a total of ten items (six new items; e.g., navigating institutional policies and procedures). Finally, all cohorts responded to open-ended questions about what they liked most about the mentoring circles and what could be improved.

Results

Program Satisfaction

We conducted a one-way ANOVA to examine differences in satisfaction with the peer mentorship program across three program cohorts. The analysis revealed a significant effect of cohort on satisfaction, $F(2, 35) = 5.24$, $p = .01$, indicating that satisfaction ratings differed by cohort. Cohort 1 reported the lowest mean satisfaction ($M = 3.63$, $SD = 1.15$), while both Cohort 2 ($M = 4.55$, $SD = 0.69$) and Cohort 3 ($M = 4.64$, $SD = 0.67$) reported higher levels of satisfaction. The overall mean satisfaction across cohorts was 4.18 ($SD = 1.01$). Post hoc comparisons using the LSD procedure revealed that the Cohort 1 reported significantly lower satisfaction than both Cohort 2 ($M_{difference} = -0.92$, $p = .014$) and Cohort 3 ($M_{difference} = -1.01$, $p = .008$). There was no significant difference between Cohort 2 and Cohort 3 ($M_{difference} = -0.09$, $p = .816$).

Program Usefulness

Table 3 reports the descriptive statistics for the usefulness of peer mentoring circles across various support outcomes across all three cohorts. Items that were only completed by Cohorts 2 and 3 are denoted by N = 22. Among all respondents (N = 39), the most highly rated aspect was 'feeling validated about experiences,' $M = 4.26$, $SD = 1.16$. The lowest rated aspect was 'boosting morale,' $M = 3.79$, $SD = 1.32$. Among Cohorts 2 and 3 (n = 22), the most highly rated aspect was 'meeting colleagues outside of my discipline,' $M = 4.82$, $SD = 0.50$. The lowest rated aspect was 'career navigation and advancement,' $M = 3.95$, $SD = 1.05$.

Table 3

Descriptive Statistics for the Usefulness of Peer Mentoring Circles

Mentoring Support Outcomes	N	M	SD
Meeting colleagues outside of my discipline	22	4.82	0.50
Navigating institutional policies and procedures	22	4.41	0.80
Feeling validated about experiences	39	4.26	1.16
Belonging in the workplace	22	4.23	1.07
Connecting with colleagues of a similar affinity	39	4.21	1.03
Talking through issues or concerns	39	4.21	1.22
Increased career satisfaction	22	4.00	0.93
Activities that support my professional growth	22	4.00	1.15
Career navigation and advancement	22	3.95	1.05
Boosting your morale	39	3.79	1.32

Note. Total N = 39 (all three cohorts). Cohorts 2 and 3 N = 22.

We conducted independent samples t-tests to compare participants' ratings of the usefulness of peer mentoring circles across the original (Cohort 1) and revised cohorts (Cohort 2 and 3) on four support outcomes. Participants in the revised cohorts reported that the mentoring circles were significantly more useful for connecting with colleagues of a similar affinity ($M = 4.59$, $SD = 0.73$) than those in the original cohort ($M = 3.71$, $SD = 1.16$), $t(37) = 2.91$, $p = .006$. Similarly, participants in the revised cohorts reported feeling more validated about their experiences ($M = 4.59$, $SD = 0.85$) than those in the original cohort ($M = 3.82$, $SD = 1.38$), $t(37) = 2.14$, $p = .04$. Participants in the revised cohorts also rated boosting morale higher ($M = 4.41$, $SD = 0.91$) than original cohort participants ($M = 3.00$, $SD = 1.37$), $t(37) = 3.86$, $p < .001$. While ratings for talking through issues or concerns were also higher in the revised cohort ($M = 4.45$, $SD = 1.10$) than in the original cohort ($M = 3.88$, $SD = 1.32$), this difference did not reach statistical significance, $t(37) = 1.47$, $p = .15$.

Discussion

The goal of establishing the peer mentoring program was to offer faculty support for traditional career professional development and psychosocial support. Perceptions of increased satisfaction and usefulness reflect the programmatic adjustments of a group facilitator and more structure via defined discussion topics and related activities and resources. As discussed in Rider et al. (2023), Cohort 1 participants described the lack of structured meetings and inconsistent participant attendance as primary areas for improvement in their qualitative comments. With this feedback, the authors developed a more structured calendar of topics for peer mentoring meetings and added formal facilitation. In Cohorts 2 and 3, participants found the space to be an inclusive community and felt comfortable sharing problems and providing each other support, which related to increased solidarity. Participants appreciated the structured program topics and guidance from facilitators. Finally, participants discussed wanting more frequent meetings (e.g., bimonthly), more in-person meetings, and an increased number of faculty who participate regularly. These insights underscore the program's evolving responsiveness to participant feedback.

Overall, participants found the peer mentoring circles useful for both emotional and instrumental support. For example, participants found the affinity-based connections, opportunities to meet faculty outside of their discipline, and validation about their experiences particularly valuable. Faculty in Cohorts 2 and 3 found the circles useful for navigating heavy teaching and service workloads. For example, in the peer mentoring circles, faculty expressed burnout from heavy service demands and the inability to decline service requests due to being "voluntold."

Some faculty were worried they would not make sufficient progress in meeting scholarship requirements for promotion and tenure. In sharing their experiences, faculty learned that their dean or department chair's approach to teaching and service assignments can differ. The facilitator encouraged faculty to share their concerns with their department chair or dean, and when given permission, the facilitator reported these concerns to campus leadership. However, faculty in units with less transparency about assignments also received guidance on advocating for themselves if processes did not change. This example highlights how interdisciplinary mentoring groups can validate common experiences and lead to collective problem-solving in navigating challenges. It also underscores that effective mentorship involves recognizing when certain institutional processes are unlikely to change and making recommendations that help faculty adapt or function within those constraints to achieve career advancement.

Program evaluation findings illustrate that the peer mentoring circles played an essential role in providing psychosocial support and fostering collegial connections among faculty, mainly when thoughtfully structured and refined over time based on participant feedback. While faculty rated the program positively, there were some ongoing challenges to the peer mentoring circle programming. Recruitment and participation were based on faculty interest. Only a small portion of the total faculty at the institution opted to participate, limiting our ability to generalize the results to other institutions. Another challenge involved finding and scheduling a mutual time for mentoring circles to meet. Even when mutual meeting times were identified, faculty's schedules became busier throughout the academic year, and faculty struggled to attend all sessions. To address these challenges, future program iterations might consider implementing targeted outreach strategies and offering professional development incentives or other recognition to broaden participation. Embedding peer mentoring within other established development programs may further support program scalability and consistent participation.

Conclusion

As higher education continues institutional strategizing to support retention of faculty, efforts to broaden mentoring models for URM and women faculty are needed. While one-to-one formal mentoring programs are common, this model does not always adequately address marginalized faculty's unique experiences and needs. Peer mentoring models serve to balance the roles of mentor and mentee by giving ownership to the mentee's influence in the mentorship space and expanding their access to a mentor network.

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