

Strategic Mentoring by Design: The Real Mentors Networks Framework for Program Success

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This paper presents a case study of the pilot application of Real Mentors Network (RMN), an online mentoring platform for professionals, mentoring program design framework. The pilot study was conducted to deliver a formal mentoring program for SIETAR USA (SUSA). SUSA is a professional association for an interdisciplinary community in the field of intercultural communication that wanted to offer mentoring as a benefit to its members to enrich both individual and organizational growth, sustainability and wellbeing. RMN created its program design framework utilizing the research and practices outlined in *Making Connections: A Handbook for Effective Formal Mentoring Programs in Academia*. The handbook is a “one stop shop” for program coordinators and proved to be a comprehensive resource to design, implement, evaluate, and sustain a formal mentoring program. This paper presents RMN's program design framework, citing the contributing research used to inform the framework including its design processes, training programs and guide. RMN created its unique mentoring program design framework to inform the necessary support materials for its platform. While RMN primary function is to provide a network of mentors for individual users, it also offers matching and program support services for small to mid-size organizations. Its unique program design framework is essential to developing resources and services for both its individual and organizational users, ensuring that our services have an impact on individual and organizational performance and growth. RMN pilot application of its mentoring program design framework proved to be successful. Data was collected from participant evaluations, discussion groups, and member engagement. SUSA program participants, both mentors and mentees, identified benefits they gained from their participation. Data also demonstrated enough appetite to continue the program with a second cohort. This case study will present both qualitative and quantitative data on the program design process, outcomes, challenges and sustainability for both cohorts.

Keywords: Online mentoring, program design, mentoring framework

Introduction

Real Mentors Network (RMN), launched in 2023, is an online mentoring platform designed to increase accessibility and equity in mentoring for professionals. While the majority of companies listed in the Fortune 500 have mentoring programs, the reality is that the majority of professionals do not have a mentor. In a study conducted by Olivet Nazarene University, where they surveyed 3,000 professionals in the US, only 37% reported having a mentor (Gotian, 2020). In the same report, 76% of the participants believe mentoring is important, and in another study, 97% of the participants who had a mentor said it is a valuable experience (Mentoring FAQ's, 2025). However, most mentoring relationships happen organically, only 14% begin by someone asking, which indicates a barrier for people to make mentor connections (Comaford, 2019). The research also indicates

that in existing mentoring relationships the selection or identification of mentees is prone to affinity bias. In a report by Coqual, they found that 71% of executives choose to mentor employees who are of their same gender or race, and with the majority of CEO's being white, cis-gendered, able bodied men, this excludes a significant portion of the workforce from developing a mentoring relationship naturally with executive leadership (Demographics, 2025).

Professional women and people from less represented communities face unique challenges in the workplace that include a lack of support from managers, barriers to career advancement and promotion, and workplace challenges related to their identity including microaggressions, bias, and discrimination (Zanoni et al., 2010). These experiences have an impact on their own sense of identity and belonging and require psychosocial support that mentors can provide. Research has consistently found that high quality mentoring

relationships help professionals improve their confidence and satisfaction and help with their identity development and belonging. It can also increase their opportunities and readiness for advancement (Lewis et al., 2016).

RMN strives to offer self-directed and professionally committed individuals the space to access impactful mentoring relationships. The web-based application enables users to build a profile to be matched with mentors using three core criteria: identity, developmental goals, and time commitment. The unique matching algorithm uses these criteria to provide matches for both individual and group users. In addition to matching, RMN offers organizational users mentoring program design and implementation services, using its mentoring program design framework that will be outlined in this paper. RMN also offers program support that includes mentor training, resource materials, an online Discussion Board, additional learning and community building activities to promote participant belonging, initiative, goal setting, and follow-through.

RMN's collaboration with SIETAR USA (SUSA) provided invaluable feedback for the development and improvement of RMN's approach to program design and support. SUSA is a professional association for an interdisciplinary community in the field of intercultural communication, offering mentoring as a benefit to its members to enrich both individual and organizational growth, sustainability, and wellbeing. This case study outlines the program design framework that RMN developed and implemented with SUSA, and its effectiveness in delivering an impactful mentoring program for professionals. This case study also presents both qualitative and quantitative data on the program design process, outcomes, challenges, and sustainability.

Literature Review

While there is an abundance of literature on the benefits of mentoring and the impact of formal mentoring programs, there are fewer resources available on mentoring program design. *Making Connections: A Handbook for Effective Formal Mentoring Programs in Academia* was written to provide primarily novice program coordinators with the knowledge and tools needed to design an intentional and effective mentoring program. Edited by David Law and Nora Domínguez (2023), this handbook offers an in-depth exploration of developing, implementing, evaluating, sustaining, and funding formal mentoring programs.

Making Connections: A Handbook for Effective Formal Mentoring Programs in Academia includes both retrospective and prospective research in the mentoring field from scholars and practitioners in higher education and business consulting. Law and Domínguez (2023, p.2) defined this resource as a "one-stop shop" providing program coordinators a comprehensive guide to design and implement an effective mentoring program for adult learners. It

amalgamates insights from over fifty mentoring scholars across the United States and the United Kingdom. Through its four-part structure, it addresses the evolution of mentoring, practical strategies for program development, case studies across various academic roles, and future directions for networked mentoring approaches. This literature review aims to present the handbook's contributions to the design of the RMNs mentoring program framework that was used and tested for this case study.

In Part 1, the literature focused on the foundational elements of mentoring and their impact on program design. In chapter 1, Garvey begins with the origins of the term mentor, but more importantly, emphasizes the value of defining mentoring within a program to align with its program objectives and goals. Garvey (2023, p.21) says, "...all participants in your program will need a common understanding of what is meant by mentoring in their context." so that program participants, both mentors and mentees, have clarity on what is expected of them.

Additionally, contributions emphasized the importance of structure, beginning with a defined purpose and objectives for a mentoring program. A mentoring program is likely to be most effective when the institution or organization is clear on the function of the program and how its functions align with the organization's mission, strategy, and institutional culture (Murrell & Onosu, 2023). Mentoring can take on various forms and functions. Hager, Hales, and Domínguez (2023) laid out the theoretical frameworks that program designers can use to help identify their programs' needs. Authors suggest that a deeper understanding of mentoring frameworks enables program coordinators to more effectively design a program that aligns with their specific needs.

Chapters in Part 2 played an essential role in RMN's program design framework. In this section, authors focused on how to design, implement, and evaluate mentoring programs. There was a general consensus that it is best to start with the end in mind. Legler (2023) suggests that it is best to begin by assessing the need for mentoring and to use those results as a guide for determining what and how to evaluate a mentoring program. While Taylor and Dart (2023) in chapter 6 outline how aligning the mentoring program purpose with the organizations mission and vision helps gain institutional buy-in, reducing common institutional barriers and pitfalls organizations face with implementation and sustainability.

The following chapters provided various frameworks, logic models, and tools to help define the role of program participants, including the program coordinator. Christiansen and Busenbark (2023, p. 156) emphasize the value of the program coordinator's role and offers a 6-Phase Model to help program coordinators with the "design, execution, evaluation, funding, and sustainment". Next authors define the characteristics of an effective mentor and mentee and discuss delivering training activities

to help mentors and mentees develop and apply these skills. Specifically, in chapter 10, Mickel (2023) discussed personality traits and characteristics for mentors, such as empathy and active listening, and their impact on developing effective mentoring relationships. While in chapter 11, Clabaugh (2023) described mentees as self-directed learners, and the role mentors play in activating mentees' willingness to take initiative in the mentoring relationship. In chapter 12, Zerai and Lopez (2023) addressed cultural competence as a core skill for mentors and the need for mentors to be culturally responsive in their mentoring relationships. This is particularly important in cross-cultural mentoring relationships and mentoring programs where the desired program outcomes and goals are tied to the mentees' identity and their experience as a member of a community that has been historically disenfranchised.

Chapters also reinforced the importance of communication and building communication plans and strategies into the program design (Fain & Crites, 2023; Hernandez, Busenbark, Hales, Law, 2023). In chapter 8, Fain and Crites (2023) introduce a logic model connecting program outcomes, goals, objectives, and activities, demonstrating their interdependence, which supports and aligns with the assertions made in earlier chapters. Additionally, Fain and Crites (2023) presented the theory of change as a methodology to define program outcomes and goals, which offers program coordinators a practical and useful process.

Chapter 13 offered insights into formative and summative evaluation, offering various tools for assessment. Lunsford (2023) discusses the impact of formative evaluation to improve the mentees' learning experience and effectiveness of the mentoring relationship. In contrast, the summative evaluation focuses on program outcomes and measures how well a program achieved its goals and objectives.

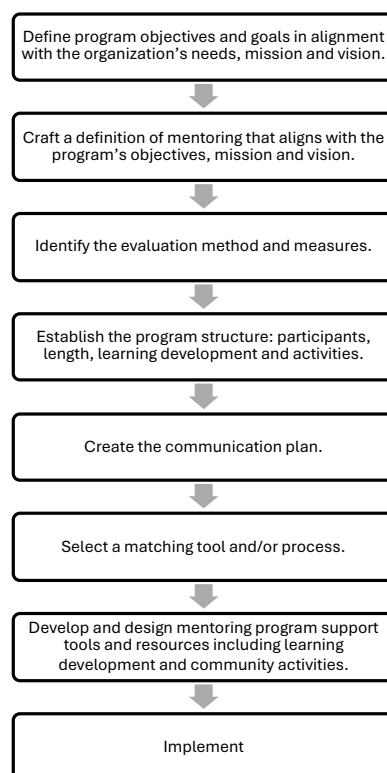
The remaining chapters provided supporting insights and case studies on the core elements of mentoring program design. For example, in Chapter 14, David Law, Nicole Vouvalis, Andy Harris, and Jim LaMuth (2023) reinforced the value of theoretical frameworks to define mentoring and evaluating at different stages of a program to a program's effectiveness. However, the chapters specified in this literature review had the most significant impact on the RMN's program design framework

Project

In collaboration with SIETAR USA (SUSA), Real Mentors Network (RMN) facilitated the design and implementation of their formal mentoring program. RMN was able to pilot their mentoring program design framework with their inaugural cohort in 2023 and conduct a second pilot in 2024. The program was designed and implemented using the RMN's 8-step mentoring program design framework as shown here in Figure 1

Figure 1

Real Mentors Network Program Design Framework



Method

Program Design

To take the first step, RMN worked with SUSA to define the program objectives and goals using a process to define the theory of change. Equally important was to align with the organization's mission and current needs. This process was grounded in the organization's mission and needs assessment. The mission of SIETAR USA

is to provide an interdisciplinary community of educators, trainers, and researchers that nurtures and supports transformational growth, intercultural understanding, and professional interchange with a commitment to diversity, equity, inclusion, belonging, and social justice.

Step 1

In collaboration with SUSA, mentor program needs, goals, and objectives were defined, and listed here in Table 1.

Table 1

SUSA Organizational Needs Assessment

Organizational Needs	Mentoring Program Goals	Mentor Program Objectives
Professional Development	Increase members' knowledge and skills in the intersectionality of Diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB) and intercultural communication and competence	Increasing participants' intercultural communication and competence skills and knowledge
Membership Decline	Membership recruitment and retention of early career professionals	- Create a sense of belonging within the SUSA community - Increasing DEIB skills and knowledge
Engagement Decline	Strengthen the pipeline of conference scholarship recipients to members	- Support early career talent in navigating industry and careers - Support members in navigating careers and careers transitions

Step 2

For the next step, the SUSA program coordinators worked with RMN consultants to create the following mentoring definition:

- Mentoring is defined as an intentional developmental relationship between seasoned intercultural and DEIB professionals and professionals who are early in their career or in transition. The mentor nurtures and supports the mentee's personal and professional growth, providing insights, guidance and support as they navigate our industry and association.
- SUSA mentoring relationships to be entered with mutual respect and reciprocity, where both mentor and mentee expect to learn from one another. Both will apply cultural competence in relationship with one another, mentors and mentees will acknowledge one another's identity, validate their backgrounds and accomplishments, and accept and embrace their differences.

Step 3

Then the team outlined the following to assess and evaluate the program's effectiveness and impact:

- Short-term measures:
 - Mentees achievement of personal and professional goals
 - Membership retention of program mentees and mentors
 - Increase in program participation from year to year
- Long-term measures:
 - Improved retention and recruitment of early career professional members
 - A10-15% recruitment of scholarship recipients to members
- Evaluation Methodology:
 - Formative: Mid-point virtual session for mentors and mentees to provide feedback.
 - Summative: Closing virtual session and survey to collect feedback and data.

Based upon their goals and objectives, the program is structured to run for a full year to maximize opportunities for the growth and development of the mentoring relationship and the mentee's professional development. The expectations are that mentors and mentees meet at least once a month or have a minimum of 12 one-hour mentoring sessions.

Understanding the importance of communication at every stage of the program, the team agreed to use email as primary channel of communication. The team outlined which communications need to be sent at the beginning, throughout and at the end of the program. Additionally, the RMN platform includes a Discussion Board that enables program coordinators, mentors and mentees to share information and communicate throughout the program. RMN also facilitated the next step, matching, with its unique matching technology.

Step 4

The final step before implementation was to develop the mentoring program support resources and learning development and activities. RMN created a Mentoring Program Guide that includes the program definitions, role specific expectations, program structure, code of conduct, and conversation topics and starters.

Step 5

Program activities also include a program orientation to help both the mentor and mentee understand the program goals and structure as well as their role and responsibilities and develop community with their peers. Activities also include a separate mid-year check-in to conduct a formative evaluation and further support the development of the community connection and bonds. Mentors and mentees are also encouraged to attend and present at the annual SUSA conference. Mentors are encouraged to support their mentees' participation in the conference by either co-presenting with them or guiding them through the presentation submission process. The program coordinators also invited mentors and mentees to participate in a panel discussion at the conference. The last activity is a closing session as part of the summative assessment where participants reflect on their experience and offer feedback for future programs.

Results

The 2023–24 SUSA Mentor Program collected evaluative data from both mentors and mentees with a role specific feedback session and program survey. Participant reported primarily positive experiences. Most respondents indicated they achieved their goals either fully (60%) or somewhat (40%). Common goals included mutual professional growth, gaining career insights, and navigating new roles. Nearly all pairs met at least once per month and described their counterparts

as prepared for meetings. All respondents agreed that their mentoring relationships were characterized by mutual respect and cultural competence. Additionally, training sessions, the program guide, and the mid-point check-in were rated as helpful by all participants. Qualitative feedback highlighted learning related to cross-cultural engagement, professional perseverance, and the value of shared lived experiences.

The suggested improvements were primarily for the RMN platform which included enhanced digital engagement, more demographic-based matching, and a more dynamic community platform. Overall, the program appeared to have fostered meaningful mentoring relationships and personal development among participants. As a result, SUSA launched a second cohort to run from 2024 to 2025, and RMN enhanced its digital community platform.

Discussion

The results of the 2023–24 SUSA Mentor Program evaluation and the progress of the 2024–25 Mentor Program demonstrate strong organizational commitment to developing inclusive, impactful mentoring relationships. The organization's investment in the program—from leadership buy-in to sustained participation—was evident in the consistency of meetings, the quality of engagement, and the positive feedback from both mentors and mentees. The program's success also reflects the effectiveness of the 8-step program design framework, which provided a clear, intentional structure for participant recruitment, orientation, engagement, and evaluation. Respondents cited meaningful learning, growth, and mutual respect—hallmarks of a thoughtfully designed mentoring initiative. Additionally, the support provided by the RMN platform and consulting services was a critical factor in the program's success. These external resources offered expert guidance, streamlined tools, and a scalable infrastructure that helped SUSA ensure equity, accountability, and alignment with best practices.

Together, these elements contributed to a mentoring experience that was both culturally competent and professionally enriching. The findings affirm that knowledge and tools offered in *Making Connections: A Handbook for Effective Formal Mentoring Programs in Academia*—when supported by committed leadership and expert consultation—can foster meaningful mentoring outcomes.

Conclusion

While *Making Connections: A Handbook for Effective Formal Mentoring Programs in Academia* focused on formal mentoring programs in academia, the contributions have proved effective in non-academic settings. Using the authors expertise, RMN created a mentoring program design framework that proved effective

in a professional setting. There is an opportunity for RMN and other professional consultants to apply and further test the knowledge and tools to design an intentional and effective mentoring program in professional and corporate settings.

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