

Enhanced Belonging and Retention Through Blended Mentoring and Reflective Protocols

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A new mentoring program was designed to support faculty in their first year of teaching at a faith-based, liberal arts college. The program paired new faculty with experienced faculty mentors from outside their department. In addition to monthly pair meetings, the entire cohort gathered each month to learn about the mission and culture of the institution, as well as best teaching practices. The program blended both a cohort and dyad mentoring structure to deliver the benefits provided by each of these models. Because the institution is faith-based, it was also important to develop an understanding of the campus culture and provide organizational socialization. Finally, reflective protocols structured the cohort meetings as they have been noted to more quickly build a sense of community and provide equity in participation. Mixed methods were used to gather and analyze data from four years of program implementation. Post-program surveys measured self-reported levels of sense of belonging and commitment to colleagues, the institutional mission, and the institution. Retention of faculty from the four years prior to the mentoring program was compared to the four years during the mentoring program. Individual interviews were conducted with mentors and mentees to further explore important themes in the experience. Analysis revealed that the mentoring program did increase a sense of belonging and commitment to the institution, the institutional mission, and colleagues, though the increase was greater for new faculty participants than for mentors. Retention rates demonstrated an increase of 49 percentage points during the four years of the program. These outcomes support the continued use of a blended mentoring structure with the integration of reflective protocols and suggest new opportunities for providing continued faculty support.

Keywords: Blended mentoring, faculty belonging, faculty retention, developmental network

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Introduction

A new mentoring program was designed at a small, faith-based liberal arts institution as a way to improve new faculty socialization, sense of belonging, and retention. New teaching faculty met twice a month, once with an assigned faculty mentor and once as the entire cohort of mentorship pairs. This meeting structure was designed to create a deep relationship with one person while also extending the network of known individuals across campus. Each cohort meeting was shaped by the principles of adult learning and supported by reflective discussion protocols. These protocols provide clear guidelines for sharing experiences, listening, and reflecting deeply. The intention was to develop multiple strong points of connection across campus, leading to increased faculty

retention, a confident sense of belonging, and a strong commitment to the institution.

This research investigated how combining dyad and group mentoring might meet the needs of both new faculty and experienced faculty mentors by exploring the following research questions:

1. Does the blended mentoring approach increase a sense of belonging and institutional commitment for new faculty and their mentors?
2. Does the blended mentoring approach increase faculty retention?
3. Which learning activities best support a sense of belonging and commitment?

Literature Review

Research suggests that mentoring programs are more successful when there is trust, mutual

benefit, clear organization, and incorporation into existing campus processes (Strowser et al., 2021; Etzkorn & Braddock, 2020). These principles guided the development of a mentoring program for new teaching faculty. Most mentoring programs are organized as dyads or groups; each model offers different benefits. Group mentoring can be more efficient because a single event can support many or all individuals participating in the program. Group mentoring also lends itself to building community as participants converse and engage in activities together (Simon et al., 2003). In contrast, dyadic mentoring offers individual attention that builds a trusting relationship and addresses unique individual needs. However, pair mentoring requires more time to find and train mentors, and each mentor will need to make time for conversation, listening, and other social activities (Simon, et.al., 2003). Combining both group and dyad mentoring into the same program allows all participants to receive the benefits of both models while minimizing the disadvantages of each.

Additionally, as a faith-based institution, it is important to socialize new faculty to the commonly accepted expressions of faith and values that shape the campus community. New faculty are often unfamiliar with the distinctive faith expression of an Anabaptist Mennonite denomination in the Christian tradition. Trowler & Knight (1999) argue that the socialization theory developed by Van Maanen & Schein (1979) does not fully represent the complexity of identity development or the need for individual agency in the socialization process. Trowler and Knight (1999) suggest that institutional socialization requires a less formal structure where tacit knowledge can be gained.

They recommend that socialization programs acknowledge the changes new hires will make to the existing culture, while also establishing the boundaries of change as directed by institutional mission and values (Trowler & Knight, 1999). Their research suggests a blended mentoring model may support improved socialization. Sharing multiple perspectives and experiences around campus culture can best occur in a group setting, and then further deep conversation with a mentor partner can address individual questions. As a faith-based institution that is hiring faculty from diverse backgrounds, institutional socialization is especially important for building understanding.

To make the most of these individual and group learning opportunities, adult learning and dialogue education principles can be incorporated. Adult learners are independent, intrinsically motivated, and bring a wealth of life experience, so new information and skills must connect to their prior experiences and be focused, relevant, and practical. Dialogue education provides a system for supporting adult learners that incorporates thoughtful reflection and group facilitation (Vella, 2008). Reflective discussion protocols provide a clear, highly structured framework for “listening, noticing, thinking, speaking, planning, and reflection” (Center for Leadership & Educational

Equity, 2025, Resources section). The strength of protocols is derived “from the constraints they impose...they constrain participation in order to heighten its effect” (McDonald, et al., 2013, p. ix). In open conversation, the discussion can wander, be dominated by a few individuals, or have a predetermined goal. Protocols, on the other hand, build trust because the constraints insist on careful listening, transparency, and authenticity. These boundaries prevent a rush to judgment and allow more innovation in a safe and equitable environment (McDonald, et al., 2013 Adult learning theory and reflective discussion protocols, therefore, can be important tools in generating significant learning and relationships in a faculty mentoring program.

Methods

The blended mentoring program began in fall 2020 as a required program for newly hired teaching faculty. From 2020-2024, 28 new teaching faculty participated in the program. Each of these individuals was paired with a faculty member with at least five years of experience who was outside of their department. New teaching faculty were given a 3-credit hour course release to participate, while mentors were provided a small stipend and a half-day training session on mentoring dispositions and best practices. Each mentoring pair met monthly to discuss provided prompts or engage in recommended activities. Additionally, the entire cohort of mentors and mentees met monthly for group discussions. In the fall semester, these conversations focused on the college mission and core values, general education curriculum, faith history and culture of the institution, and demographics of the student population. In the spring semester, the focus shifted to best teaching practices in structuring the classroom environment, grading, mentoring students, and lesson planning. Reflective protocols were used in all cohort meetings, with the Microlab, Seed Conversation, Save the Last Word For Me, and Tuning protocols used most often (Center for Leadership & Educational Equity, 2025, Resources section). The selected protocols enhanced community building, text discussions, and classroom work critique.

Mixed methods were used to collect quantitative and narrative information about the impact of the blended mentoring model. Voluntary completion of an anonymous post-program survey was offered to all participants. The survey used a Likert scale (1-5) for self assessment where a score of 3 was equivalent to no change in the measure; higher values represented an increase in the measure, while lower numbers represented a decrease in the measure. The four measures of change were: in a sense of belonging at the institution, commitment to colleagues, commitment to the mission and core values, and commitment to the institution. The survey also included open-ended questions for key ideas taken from the experience, the strengths of the program, and recommended areas

for change. Thirty-four participants completed the survey, and the survey was omitted in one year. The range, mode, and mean of responses to the Likert questions were determined for both mentors and mentees.

Following approval from the Institutional Review Board, all participants in the program were invited to share their experience of the cohort and pair meetings with a student researcher who was not part of the mentoring program. Twelve participants, comprised of four mentors and eight mentees, signed consent forms and participated in individual interviews. These interviews were recorded, transcribed, and explored for common themes. Faculty retention was calculated for new hires from academic years 2016-2019 and compared to the retention of participants in the mentoring program (2020-2024).

Results

In the four years prior to the start of the mentoring program, 24 new faculty were hired, but only eight remained for at least four years (33% retention). In the four years of the mentoring program, 28 new faculty were hired and 23 (82% retention) currently remain at the college. This represents a retention increase of 49 percentage points during the first four years of the mentoring program. Only the first two mentoring cohorts have completed four years of employment, so it is helpful to look at cohort retention as well. Six of ten new faculty in the first two cohorts of the mentoring program remained employed at the college after four years (60% retention). In the third cohort, six of seven new faculty remain employed at the college for three years (86% retention). This high level of retention may drop by the time all program participants have been employed four years, but it seems unlikely to reach the very low level of retention experienced prior to program implementation.

Thirty-four end-of-program surveys were submitted (61% response rate) and analyzed. The reported change in the sense of belonging, and commitment to colleagues, the institution, and mission ranged from 2 (small decrease) to 5 (large increase). Average rankings for all measures were higher for new faculty than for mentors (Table 1). The measure indicating the greatest change for mentors was an increased commitment to colleagues (4.1 average), while the greatest change for new faculty was in their commitment to colleagues and the institutional mission (4.7 average) (Table 1). The new faculty did indicate an increased sense of belonging (4.2 average), but the average score was lowest of the four measures in the survey.

Interviews highlighted the different roles played by the cohort meetings and dyad meetings. Participants indicated the large group meetings provided relevant information and extended the campus network for new teaching faculty, while the pair meetings provided a deep relationship where participants felt more truly mentored

(Table 2). Multiple participants indicated that they still meet their partner for occasional meals, walks, or conversations, even though the official requirement of the relationship has ended. Those joining the campus during the Covid-19 lockdown were especially grateful for an opportunity to connect with someone in a time of extreme isolation. Beyond the relationships formed with mentors and across campus, a strong relationship also formed within each newly hired cohort. New teaching faculty frequently noted the attachment they felt to others in the mentoring program due to the same shared experience. A few also noted a desire to continue meeting as a cohort beyond the first year as there is ongoing adjustment to the faculty role (Table 2).

Of all topics discussed in the cohort setting, the discussion of faith traditions and practices was most often remembered as being helpful. A few participants also highlighted the importance of using reflective protocols to ease conversation together and to model techniques beneficial to the classroom (Table 2).

Discussion

Based on the data, the blended model of mentoring did provide the benefits of both the dyad and group mentoring models. The blended model also benefited both mentees and mentors, though it was more impactful for new teaching faculty. The development of multiple, strong relationships was a key outcome of this program.

Traditional onboarding of new hires focuses on policies and processes, but acclimating to a new culture and becoming a contributing member of a community requires a different experience. The outcomes of this research align with the developmental network model proposed by Higgins and Kram (2001) which suggests that strong relationships, frequent communication with mentors, and a wide diverse network are most beneficial for developing greater personal learning and institutional commitment. Though there is a high institutional investment in program leadership, course releases, mentor stipends, and coordinating multiple individuals over multiple months and events, the rewards in high faculty commitment and retention are invaluable.

The fact that discussion of faith tradition and expression were most memorable to program participants suggests that conversations around campus culture are important for thoughtful identity development and socialization. New faculty need to know "the difference the institution expects its Christian context will make in teaching, informal faculty-student interaction, scholarship, and service, as well as what weight each of these areas is given in evaluating faculty performance (Simon, et al., 2003, p. 43)." The importance of institutional socialization is relevant for all higher education institutions as each has a unique set of values, traditions, and implicit norms. More transparency around culture can guide new faculty

into a better sense of belonging to the community.

The strong cohort connection and need for ongoing mentoring and guidance were important insights gained from this research. In response, a new program was piloted to bring the four cohorts of the mentoring program together in a learning community to focus on career planning and leadership development. Twelve of the eligible faculty participated in this learning community with initial positive feedback. Participants highlighted the benefits of becoming more aware of and confident in their leadership skills, expanding their network of relationships, and having an opportunity for individual career planning. Additional study will be needed to determine whether this model serves the ongoing needs of new faculty while supporting the cohort relationship.

The current study was limited by the small number of participants, making it challenging to draw broad conclusions. Though blended mentoring was successful with fewer than ten new hires in a year, it may be more challenging to coordinate and sustain at larger institutions with greater numbers of new faculty in each cohort. This research would also benefit from more objective and validated survey instruments in addition to self-reported measures. Future research should include a further investigation into the importance of sharing the faith history and current expressions of faith identity with new faculty. It would also be helpful to more clearly understand the role of reflective discussion protocols in supporting the development of strong connections between colleagues.

Conclusion

The blended mentoring model was successful in improving retention, a sense of belonging, and a commitment to the institution among newly hired teaching faculty. Participants developed deep personal and cohort connections as well as an expanded network across campus. Multiple connections across disciplines relieved a sense of isolation and created an important community of trust. Conversations about campus mission, culture, and faith identity were noted to be particularly important for organizational socialization at a faith-based institution.

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Appendix

Table 1:

Range, Mode, and Mean of Self-Reported Change in Measures Using Likert Scale (1-5) in Post-Program Survey (n=34)

Mentors (n=18)				Mentees (n=16)			
Measures	range	mode	mean	Measures	range	mode	mean
Commitment to institution	3-5	4	3.7	Commitment to institution	3-5	5	4.6
Commitment to mission/core values	3-4	4	3.7	Commitment to mission/core values	4-5	5	4.7
Commitment to colleagues	3-5	4	4.1	Commitment to colleagues	3-5	5	4.7
Sense of belonging	3-5	4	3.8	Sense of belonging	2-5	5	4.2

Table 2:

Themes from Mentor and Mentee Interviews (n=12)

Theme	Evidence
Cohort meetings functioned to provide information and extend one's campus network.	"So, a lot of us are asking the same questions or have the same doubts, and it was refreshing to hear, and to be in a community where I knew people were going through the same thing." "It's good to feel like you know a lot of people and that you have friends at your workplace. That's a big part of this sense of belonging." "I like that I wasn't only getting access to my mentor in those meetings. I could get to hear from other mentors and even experiences from the other first years." "But anybody coming to a new faculty wants to know - who's important? What are the debates? Where can I find support? It's not just teaching, but it's like, how am I going to be a member of this body? And so, the group meetings were important in that way."
Pair meetings functioned to build a strong relationship and provide individualized guidance.	"I continue to see her as my mentor. We don't cross paths as often anymore. But I know that if I needed something, she would make time to do that." "I was able to really ask questions. I was able to really talk about things. And it's good that the partnership is outside of your department, because you can really ask or say something you don't like." "[My mentor] just made that time. She answered my questions. She was always positive. She pushed me and challenged me as a young faculty member."

Discussions around faith identity were especially important.	"I also was curious about how [the institution] talks about faith. Are you allowed to talk about faith among the faculty? If you do, what are the words to avoid? What's valued? How do you talk about it in class? And I remember the gatherings being important for me in that way." "We learned some things like Anabaptist culture, and what does it mean to be in a Mennonite place in this modern time? I like being reminded, even as someone who's been here for a lot of years, like why do we have SST? Why is that important to us? So, I think it's a great place to talk about some of those things." "I think as our faculty continues to diversify in terms of religious backgrounds and affiliation, there's more people who are not familiar with an Anabaptist Mennonite framework. And there's a very specific culture that goes with it.... So, I mean, it can be really helpful to have somebody navigate that as they're trying to figure out where to go and who to talk to." "It's feeling a part of the community. It's feeling a longtime connection to this campus and to its history. And just, you know, deep seated commitment to the students that I have, and the work that is education."
A strong cohort identity developed among new teaching faculty..	"And not only that it connects us, it's like you're the cohort of whatever year you come in, [and] you kind of stay connected with those people." "The other thing I particularly appreciated was being able to start this job with a cohort.... I would never have known some of the other faculty members as well as I was able to, without that faculty mentoring program." "There are new faculty who I still feel much more comfortable around and able to share with because we went as a cohort through that faculty mentoring program together.... With that cohort, it felt like a really safe space to talk about those things together." "There is a genuine feeling of support between departments. Sometimes academic environments are weirdly competitive when they don't need to be.... it feels like we are all looking out for each other and cheering for each other to succeed." "And honestly, if we could, like, [get the cohort together], yeah, once a semester for a few years, that would be nice, even if just for social time or something. Just so you know how things are going, because it's an ongoing adjustment."
Reflective discussion protocols were helpful.	"What I have appreciated about that, is that if you have a mentee who is quieter, or less confident, or less willing to ask questions, it gives you very structured things to talk about and to think about." "These [protocols] take a strengths-based approach, not a deficit approach." "I very quickly started integrating some of those protocols into my classroom. And I have had feedback from students that they have really appreciated some of those structured discussions and processes."