

A Pilot Program for Forming an Instructional Faculty Peer Mentoring Group

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This paper will discuss the creation, current outcomes, and next steps of a pilot peer mentoring program dedicated to creating effective mentoring spaces for instructional track faculty at a large R1 institution. A campus-wide needs assessment conducted via diverse focus groups (i.e., faculty of all ranks and tracks) in combination with input from a learning community of faculty with mentoring expertise identified a gap in structured faculty mentoring practices. Supported by the associate provost for faculty, two faculty members convened a peer mentoring community in collaboration with the campus Center for Teaching to address this gap by focusing on instructional-track faculty as a pilot population. The two faculty co-facilitators are experienced instructional faculty members with diverse disciplinary backgrounds (science and humanities) who had recently gone through the institutional promotion process. The primary goal of the faculty-led peer mentoring group was to build a community that provides peer support in diverse areas potentially including teaching, service, promotion processes, and faculty life more generally, depending on participant needs. Feedback on the pilot semester was generally positive, with faculty reporting an increased sense of social belonging on campus, a gain of practical information such as C.V. structure or teaching strategies, and more. A second semester iterating on this feedback will take place, with the onboarding of a new faculty co-facilitator and a second peer community for clinical track faculty.

Keywords: Faculty peer mentoring, instructional faculty, pilot program

Introduction

In alignment with the University of Iowa's 2022–2027 strategic plan—which prioritizes faculty mentorship and retention—a Strategic Plan Action and Resource Committee (SPARC) was convened to support and develop initiatives related to faculty mentoring. The committee conducted a series of focus groups with department chairs, associate deans, and faculty across all tracks (tenure-, clinical-, research-, instructional) and ranks (lecturer through full professor). Findings from these discussions highlighted institutional gaps and informed the formation of a Faculty Learning Community (FLC), composed of faculty who had completed extensive mentor training to help refine ideas for structural change. A key theme that emerged from both the FLC and the focus groups was the lack of consistent, accessible spaces where mentorship relationships could form. Many departments relied on informal or dyadic models of mentoring, which often led to tensions around issues like promotion and service assignments. As a low-cost, scalable response, the SPARC committee proposed a semester-long pilot of a peer mentoring circle, following the model described by Darwin & Palmer (2009): "Mentoring circles typically involve one mentor working with a group of mentees or groups of people mentoring each other. They often have a facilitator

to keep conversations focused and productive. Circles generate many different perspectives, with group members combining energies and experiences beyond what individual members know or contribute." Facilitator roles also created new leadership opportunities for faculty with mentoring expertise—another area identified as underdeveloped during the assessment phase. Instructional-track faculty (ITF) were selected for this pilot based on recent institutional changes in promotion processes and their potential to benefit from cross-departmental connection. Non-tenure track faculty previously designated as instructors or lecturers were recently grouped under the titles of assistant, associate, or full professor of instruction. However, formalized promotion processes and evaluation criteria for these roles are in early stages of adoption. Furthermore, ITF are often employed in small numbers within their departments, which can lead to professional isolation. The ITF Pilot Cohort was designed to address these challenges and build community, with the intention of expanding to other faculty tracks based on the outcomes of the pilot.

Literature Review

At large, research-intensive institutions, faculty mentorship can be uneven across departments and colleges and may lack the structure, support,

and investment needed for lasting impact. A global 2023 survey of 457 early- and mid-career faculty (including many from R1 institutions) found almost half reported no formal mentoring scheme or mentor availability issues (Sarabipour et al., 2023). When structure does exist, its focus is often on task-specific mentorship related to attaining tenure or grants (Etzkorn & Braddock 2020; Crites et al., 2023). While these are critical milestones, such a narrow focus can unintentionally undermine broader aims like faculty retention, belonging, and success, particularly for faculty from minoritized groups (Thomas et al., 2023; Crites et al., 2023). It also leaves out precarious faculty who hold instructional, visiting, or adjunct positions, and don't have access to mentoring structures intended to help faculty progress on the tenure track (Lee et al., 2023). At R1 universities, approximately 51% of faculty appointments are non-tenure-track, reflecting a major segment of the academic workforce excluded from traditional mentoring supports (Colby, 2024). This lack of faculty mentoring support is not due to a lack of understanding about effective mentorship practices (NASEM, 2019; Johnson & Miller, 2024). Many models with evidence of success exist and often include factors like matching based on some shared affinity (identity, personal interest, career stage, etc.), (Byars-Winston, et al., 2015) clarity in expectations and goal setting (Branchaw et al., 2020), the integration of peer mentoring alongside hierarchical mentoring (Fleming et al., 2015; Nokkala et al., 2022), and the cultivation of mentoring networks beyond individual dyads (Montgomery, 2017; Hernandez et al., 2023).

Grounded in the broader mission of an institution of higher education is to ensure that disciplinary values, standards, and practices are effectively transmitted from one generation to the next, preparing learners of all types and levels for future careers and life-long learning. Mentoring, in addition to supporting knowledge transmission, is recognized as key to helping individuals develop and sustain satisfying careers (Feldmen et al., 2010; Shen et al., 2022). Mentors achieve this through role-modeling, networking, sponsorship, and supportive psychosocial behaviors, among others (reviewed in Jacobi, 1991; NAS, 2019) and mentoring structures—ranging from dyads to teams to peer networks—are increasingly recognized for their adaptability across career stages and institutional contexts (Mullen & Klimaitis, 2021). These examples provide a compelling blueprint for how similar approaches might be more fully applied to support faculty, especially those in positions outside the traditional tenure track.

Efforts to expand mentoring for faculty, particularly those in non-tenure instructional roles, frequently encounter barriers rooted in institutional culture. Organizational change around faculty effort and reward structures is often slow to occur, and when new efforts are implemented, they sometimes fail to flourish if they cannot be incorporated into local university cultures, e.g. within colleges or departments

(see meta-review from Hoover et al., 2014 for an enumeration of the various cultural factors that make higher education particularly challenging for organizational change). In this context, peer mentoring offers a promising solution to these challenges. Peer mentoring communities consist of individuals who share some characteristics (in the case of our community, non-tenure instructional track) but are diverse in rank, discipline, and other characteristics (Darwin and Palmer, 2009).

This diversity can foster the strength and utility of an individual faculty's mentoring network (Waddell et al., 2016), making such approaches an important complement to the dyadic mentoring structures often typical at the departmental level. This voluntary, community-based model allowed mentoring efforts to grow organically and adapt to local cultural dynamics—conditions that increase the likelihood of sustainability and impact (Zellers et al., 2008).

Program Design

When considering whether and how to design formal mentoring structures within an academic institution, it is important to recognize mentoring relationships can, at times, seem to lack clear boundaries around functions and support roles (Mullen & Klimaitis, 2021). Further, since labor in this area often does not “count” officially toward annual review, promotion, or tenure, faculty often experience confusion about its value and the motivation for engaging in mentoring. These dual factors underscore the benefit of operating within a mentoring education framework.

One of the most well-studied approaches to mentorship education in STEMM is through the facilitation of the Entering Mentoring curriculum (Pfund et al., 2006; Pfund et al., 2014). We used approaches that have been successful in implementation of Entering Mentoring, including education in evidence-based practices for mentors, a cohort-based approach to engagement in mentoring education, and a formal pathway to recognition of effort might all be useful components of campus-specific mentoring structures.

The faculty co-facilitators of the pilot peer mentoring cohort are experienced instructional-track faculty from the Departments of Rhetoric and Biology. Both have held leadership roles in shared governance and have extensive familiarity with the promotion process, both as candidates and as reviewers at the departmental and collegiate levels. One facilitator is a trained mentor-trainer, and the other previously served as director of the Conversation Center, an experiential learning unit focused on fostering informal and intercultural communication skills and relationships on campus.

We solicited participation in the faculty peer mentoring group via a direct email to all campus ITF sent prior to winter break with a follow-up email during the winter break. The invitation, co-sponsored by the Office of the Provost and the Center for Teaching, introduced the program as

a peer mentoring community designed to foster connection, professional growth, and discussion among ITF across ranks and disciplines. From a pool of 44 survey respondents, a cohort of 20 faculty was selected, based on availability and stated intention to participate in all biweekly meetings during Spring 2025. Care was also taken to include a range of experience levels (assistant, associate and full) and no greater than two from a specific discipline. On average, 12-15 faculty representing 13 departments across 4 colleges attended each session throughout the semester.

Facilitators of the faculty peer mentoring groups took a structured, relationship-centered approach that emphasized commitment, consistent communication, and participant-driven agendas. They created inclusive spaces by opening sessions with reflective prompts, fostering small-group dialogue, and encouraging participants to share teaching practices, set goals, and reflect on their growth. Throughout, facilitators celebrated achievements and modeled strategies that promote trust, engagement, and professional development.

List of topics covered:

- Building a supportive teaching community

- Aligning projects with professional trajectories
- Documenting and reflecting on effective teaching practices
- Sharing student feedback and teaching artifacts
- Navigating service expectations across career stages
- Preparing CVs and leveraging peer observation (e.g., teaching squares)
- Reflecting on inclusive teaching environments and planning future goals

Results

A Qualtrics survey was sent to participants, receiving 12 responses. The Center for Teaching assisted in interpreting the feedback. A summary of these is provided below in Table 1. Overall, feedback indicated that the primary benefits of the group included an increased sense of social belonging, the ability to share experiences and knowledge across disciplinary boundaries, and improved ability to navigate university structures. Participants also cited an increased sense of readiness to seek promotion or other professional advancement opportunities.

Table 1.
Impacts and Benefits from Faculty Peer Mentoring Group

Theme	Description
Community, Connection & Belonging	Participants felt less isolated, noting the group “provided a space for camaraderie and support” through shared experiences as ITF.
Identity, Self-Advocacy & Confidence	Participants gained confidence in their roles, learned to “more confidently advocate” for themselves, and reflected on their professional identity as ITF.
Professional Development & Promotion Preparation	The group “learned how to better prepare” for the promotion process, gaining insight from peers on CV development, and career advancement processes across departments and colleges.
Reflective Practice & Teaching Development	Participants valued opportunities to reflect on teaching, set personal goals, “gained inspiration” and improved instructional strategies through peer exchange of ideas.
Increased Awareness of Institutional Resources	Participation increased “awareness of university resources and institutional expectations”.

Discussion

The session structure for the faculty peer mentoring pilot program was grounded in complementary theoretical frameworks several of which are briefly described here. Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977) asserts that individuals learn by observing others and emphasizes the importance of engaging in interactive environments where modeling and feedback take place. In the peer mentoring sessions, participants shared

teaching artifacts, reviewed each other’s CVs, and offered peer feedback on professional practices. These activities created rich opportunities for observational learning and reinforced adaptive professional behaviors. Building on the foundation of social interaction, the group also functioned as a Community of Practice (Wenger, 1998), where mutual engagement and shared goals fostered professional identity, connection, and ongoing collaborative learning. Participants built relationships across disciplines and career stages,

exchanged practical strategies, and explored collegiate and departmental systems and norms. The consistent meeting structure, participant-driven agenda setting, and collaborative dialogue contributed to an evolving group identity and sense of mutual accountability.

With a strong sense of connection and shared purpose in place, the group was well-positioned to take a strengths-based approach to growth—one that aligns with the principles of Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987). Appreciative Inquiry supports change by focusing on strengths, successes, and positive possibilities. Sessions encouraged faculty to explore what was working well and how to build upon those strengths to enhance their academic roles and identities.

Relational cultural theory (Jordan et al., 1991) offers a compelling lens through which to understand the outcomes of the faculty peer mentoring group, particularly in terms of connection, validation, and mutual empowerment. The group created a space where instructional faculty could engage authentically—sharing professional challenges, teaching practices, and career uncertainties. This environment supported the development of growth-fostering relationships, where participants not only felt heard and affirmed but also gained insight and encouragement from peers with shared experiences. As the sessions progressed, the sense of isolation commonly reported by ITF faculty gave way to a deeper sense of community and belonging. Participants described feeling “seen,” better understood the value of their roles, and found renewed energy for their work. The emphasis on mutual respect, shared learning, and inclusive dialogue reflects the heart of RCT: that connection is not a peripheral benefit, but a central driver of professional development and wellbeing.

Conclusion

Mentorship of faculty in all tracks and ranks remains a critical issue in higher education. Developing sustainable structures, that balance faculty needs with administrative support is challenging. Our peer mentoring community model based on robust faculty input from multiple perspectives with a variety of institutional ties (in this case the provost's office via faculty fellows, the Center for Teaching, and current mentorship training) will position this effort for sustainability. Other positive features of this approach have also enabled us to create long-term programming and change. For example, being connected in departments, in the provost's office, and in central support units has resulted in all potential stakeholders staying connected via regular communication; this helped us early to triangulate what would be financially and administratively possible for a new mentoring program. Moving forward, long-term success will depend on clearly defined roles for program oversight, facilitator support, recruitment, communication, and assessment. Embedding these responsibilities

within institutional frameworks will help maintain community momentum and ensure the program's evolution continues to reflect faculty needs and values.

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