

Cultivating a Culture of Mentoring Through an Innovative Facilitator Development Model

Sytha, S., Harlin, J., & Patterson, C

Texas A&M University

Supporting effective mentoring within institutions of higher education remains a complex issue. At a large R1 university, Mentoring Academies were created to provide graduate community stakeholders with a formal mentoring program, utilizing a curriculum from the Center for the Improvement of Mentored Experiences in Research (CIMER). To expand the Mentoring Academies, a facilitator development model was initiated to increase program capacity and allow for continued engagement by program completers to stay engaged in mentorship training. According to a 2019 National Academy Report, despite the importance of mentoring in academia, this relationship is not as appreciated as other facets such as research and teaching. CIMER provides an evidence-based curriculum shown to improve mentoring outcomes for mentors and mentees. This curriculum provides the foundation for the mentoring initiatives at the institution, creating a common vocabulary to improve mentoring relationships within and across the institution. Capacity is a logistical issue that affects many large R1 universities, creating obstacles for professional development programming. The Mentoring Academy facilitator team was expanded through a new facilitator development model. Program completers are invited to attend training to become facilitators in offering in-person and virtual sessions. Facilitators who have engaged long-term may engage as Master Facilitators and lead sessions. Through these efforts, capacity was expanded and session offerings were increased. Within a four year span, this model has increased capacity from a three-person team to a team of over 100 facilitators across different affinity groups of faculty, staff, and graduate students, from nearly every college. Upon completion of training and shadowing sessions, facilitators engage in as many sessions as they are interested. Sessions were provided more frequently, extending the reach of the mentoring program and increasing overall engagement with over 60 sessions each year to meet the growing demands. This case study offers insight into the cultivation of a mentoring program and how fostering a team of skilled facilitators can expand mentoring training capacity to fit the growing demands of training.

Keywords: Train-the-trainer, culture of mentoring, facilitation, capacity management

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Introduction

The importance of mentoring on personal and professional development has been well-documented throughout the years (NASEM, 2019). Mentoring experiences can impart lasting impacts for the mentors and mentees, with many citing mentorship as an important facet of their success in faculty appointments (Murphrey et al. 2022). Many in higher education have opted for formal mentoring experiences to ensure this aspect of professional development is being cultivated sufficiently. These formal mentoring programs can benefit not only the student or trainee but the mentor as well, focusing on the development of mentoring skills and competencies (Arocho and Johnson, 2023).

While institutions have sought out formal mentoring programs, many face issues that hinder

the implementation of such programs. One such issue is capacity. Mentoring programs that cater to large communities often require more manpower than institutions may have to offer. Therefore, a train-the-trainer (TTT) model was implemented to effectively expand the mentoring team to successfully and efficiently offer formal mentoring training to a large R1 institute, spanning multiple campuses. The TTT model has allowed the team to facilitate over 50 sessions each year, increasing facilitator numbers each semester to keep up with the demands for mentoring training.

Literature Review

Train-the-Trainer (TTT) models have long been recognized as effective frameworks for scaling education and professional development, particularly in resource-constrained environments.

Originally popularized in the medical and public health fields, TTT models rely on a cascading approach: experts train a core group of individuals, who then go on to train others, thereby multiplying the reach of the original instruction while maintaining fidelity to the content. This model has proven especially useful in mitigating cost and personnel limitations, allowing institutions to expand programming without proportionally increasing staffing or expenses (Nexø et al., 2024).

In recent years, TTT models have been adapted for use in academic and professional development settings beyond healthcare to secondary and higher education settings (Darling-Hammond, et al., 2017; Suhrheinrich, 2011). Harper et al. (2024) argue the flexibility and scalability of TTT frameworks make them well-suited for higher education environments, where training needs are diverse and often decentralized. The Center for the Improvement of Mentored Experiences in Research (CIMER; Handelsman, et al., 2005) has been a leader in this space, advocating for TTT approaches to disseminate mentorship training across institutions. CIMER offers a range of resources, including facilitator guides, workshops, and online modules, many of which are designed to be implemented by trained facilitators within their own institutions (CIMER, 2025).

The benefits of TTT models extend beyond logistical efficiency. Two key outcomes frequently associated with these programs are leadership development and capacity building. By empowering individuals to become facilitators, TTT models foster a sense of ownership and professional growth, particularly among faculty, staff, and graduate students who may not otherwise have access to leadership roles in training environments. Additionally, the model supports institutional sustainability by creating a distributed network of trainers who can adapt content to local needs while maintaining alignment with core competencies and institutional goals (Servey et al., 2020).

Moreover, research on effective professional development highlights several design elements that align well with TTT models, including active learning, collaboration, and sustained engagement over time. These elements not only enhance the quality of training but also contribute to a culture of continuous improvement and peer-supported learning. As institutions seek to expand mentoring and professional development initiatives, TTT models offer a replicable and adaptable strategy for building capacity, promoting leadership, and embedding a culture of mentorship across diverse academic settings.

Program

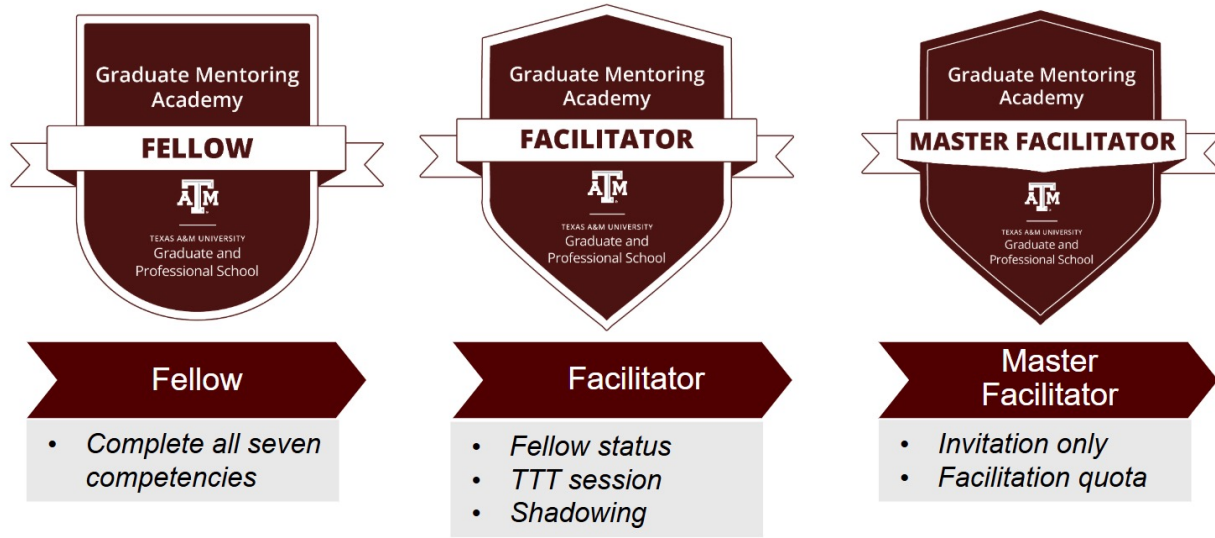
In 2019, the university leaders of an emerging mentoring initiative determined there was a need to improve the mentoring culture at their institution. The institution, located in the southwest US, is a large, R1, Hispanic Serving Institution

where creating a large mentoring program required increased capacity and innovation. Therefore, in 2019, 24 faculty members from the institution attended mentoring training facilitated by CIMER. The CIMER programming utilizes TTT sessions on mentoring, allowing individuals to learn the material and disseminate it at their home institutions. The competencies selected to share with the institution were: Addressing Equity and Inclusion/Supporting Well-Being, Aligning Expectations, Assessing Understanding, Cultivating Ethical Behavior, Enhancing Work-Life Integration, Fostering Independence, Maintaining Effective Communication, Promoting Professional Development, and the capstone, Articulating Your Mentoring Philosophy and Plan.

At its inception, the Mentoring Academy focused exclusively on faculty development. A mentoring advisory committee, composed of faculty, staff, and students, was created to ensure the mentoring needs of the graduate community were being met. Thus, in fall 2021, the mentoring academy program expanded to include graduate and professional students as well as staff, broadening its reach across the academic community (Patterson et al., 2021). The sessions were designed to be inclusive, serving individuals from all disciplines, career stages, and departments across the institution's various colleges and campuses. Initially, the mixed-affinity Mentoring Academy was facilitated by a small team consisting of two full-time staff members and two student workers.

Participants who complete all seven mentoring academy competencies earn the designation of Fellow and become eligible to attend the train-the-trainer facilitator session. This one-hour training is done periodically throughout each academic year. The TTT facilitator training reiterates the role each fellow plays in the institution's ever-evolving culture of mentoring by reminding participants how they reached this stage and the hours and effort they committed to this cause. The training goes in-depth into the logistical behind-the-scenes work that occurs to bring each session to fruition. In addition to the TTT facilitator training, potential facilitators are required to shadow at least one pre-session meeting and one full session, either virtually or in-person. Once shadowing is completed, each facilitator can sign up to facilitate as many sessions as they prefer (Fig 1.). Each mentoring session requires one master facilitator to plan and lead, one student assistant for logistics, and one to two facilitators to conduct the activities and discussions. Facilitators who engage long-term are invited to serve as master facilitators, earning a stipend for each semester they lead. Each master facilitator is required to lead one full set of mentoring competencies; however, they are free to select the days/times that work best with their schedules. These master facilitators allow the Mentoring Academies to offer more sessions each semester. Furthermore, each master facilitator brings their own perspective, making each session and team unique.

Figure 1
Facilitator Pathway



Results

The preliminary results of this case study implementation show that increasing capacity allows for program growth and expansion. Over time, the academies have adjusted the CIMER curriculum to fit the mixed-affinity group makeup of the Mentoring Academy and adjusted its internal capacity. To date, the Mentoring Academy has designated over 600 fellows, totaling over 6,500 hours of engagement. Currently, the program is now supported by three full-time staff members and two to four student workers at any given time, in addition to the TTT facilitators. The 600+ fellows of the Mentoring Academies are indicative of the value increased capacity brings to a professional development program that caters to such a large community. Furthermore, the preliminary data show the interest in contributing to a culture of mentoring is not dependent on the career stage, as evidenced by Figure 2. Those who choose to facilitate come from all career stages, much like the Mentoring Academy fellows (fig. 2B). To date, over 100 of the fellows have taken the next step and completed their TTT facilitator training. Through the assistance of facilitators, the Mentoring Academy program has grown immensely since its inception, averaging almost double the number of offerings per semester compared to the pilot year (Fig. 3).

Figure 2
Mentoring Academy Fellows (A) and Facilitators (B), by role/career stage

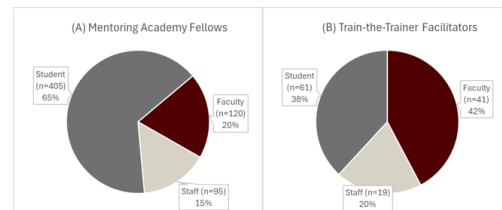
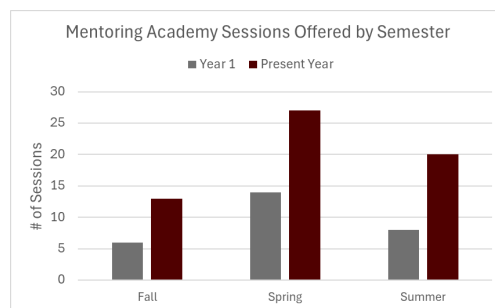


Figure 3
Mentoring Academy Session Offerings



Another innovative and recent experience of Mentoring Academy TTT occurred when the institution's animal hospital offered a unit-wide mentorship development Mentoring Summit. The Summit implemented the Maintaining Effective Communication and Aligning Expectations competencies. Facilitation occurred in-person with fifty attendees. Faculty TTT sessions were embedded within small groups (n = 10-12) to complement the large room facilitation. Based on the session feedback form data (n = 29), 86% of respondents perceived the facilitation and design to be effective for the competency session.

Discussion

Lessons Learned

As part of a forward-looking strategy, the institution should continue to invest in building a robust network of departmental mentoring initiatives that are rooted in core competencies, aligned with institutional priorities, and strengthened through cross-unit collaboration. A key insight from the case study institution is the demonstrated effectiveness of the Train-the-Trainer (TTT) model in expanding the capacity of Mentoring Academies. What began as a small, three-person team has grown into a dynamic network of over 100 trained facilitators, significantly broadening access to mentoring education across the university. This diverse group, comprising faculty, staff, postdoctoral scholars, and graduate students, creates new opportunities for tailored programming, such as half-day or full-day "Mentoring Summits" designed to meet the specific needs of different academic units. These summits, supported by the scalable and replicable TTT framework, have the potential to evolve into a signature model for cultivating a more connected, mentorship-centered academic culture that can be sustained and adapted across institutions. This approach is supported by the work of other researchers in diverse fields (Darling-Hammond, et al., 2017).

Limitations

While the TTT model has proven effective for capacity building at a large R1 university, it may not be a one-size-fits-all solution for every institution. Its success in this context is partly due to the strong commitment of master facilitators who are motivated by both their dedication to fostering a culture of mentoring and the incentive of a financial stipend. However, the authors acknowledge that offering stipends may not be feasible for all institutions, particularly those facing budget constraints or limited resources. As such, while the TTT model offers a scalable framework, its implementation may require adaptation to fit the financial and structural realities of different institutional contexts.

Recommendations and Future Directions

As the Mentoring Academy continues to

develop, its strategies must undergo ongoing assessment and refinement to remain effective and responsive to evolving needs. This case study serves as a foundational step toward exploring the long-term impacts of implementing a TTT model in professional development programming. Early findings suggest the master facilitator program successfully cultivates a more diverse and skilled pool of facilitators, which holds significant promise for expanding the program's reach and capacity.

However, as with any educational initiative, continuous evaluation is essential to ensure both quality and effectiveness. While the TTT model may enhance scalability and accessibility, future research should focus on assessing the outcomes of sessions led by trained facilitator teams. This will help determine whether the model maintains its effectiveness as it grows and adapts to new contexts.

Conclusion

The institution's culture of mentoring continues to grow in both depth and reach, reflecting a sustained commitment to fostering meaningful developmental relationships across campus. As this culture expands, so too does the need for increased capacity to support and sustain high-quality mentoring experiences. The implementation of the TTT model significantly strengthens the Mentoring Academy's ability to meet this demand.

By equipping a broader and more diverse group of facilitators with the skills and tools needed to lead mentoring programs, the TTT model enables scalable, consistent, and responsive training delivery. This approach is especially well-suited to the dynamic environment of a large R1 university, where the volume and diversity of mentoring needs are continually evolving. As the institution advances its mentoring initiatives, the TTT model will remain a vital mechanism for ensuring that growth is matched with quality, accessibility, and long-term sustainability.

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