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A Motivation Framework to Enhance Wellbeing Through Mentoring

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In the U.S. today, wellbeing discussions often highlight its decline. The Gallup National Health and Well-Being Index reported that U.S. thriving ratings dropped below 50% for the second consecutive time since the pandemic, revealing "an erosion in hopefulness." Higher education also faces disruption fatigue from nonstop, uncertain change. Does mentorship enhance faculty wellbeing despite challenges? This paper explores how motivation and mentorship might improve faculty wellbeing and success. Deci and Ryan developed Self-Determination Theory (SDT) to explain how intrinsic motivation leads to wellbeing when the psychological needs of competence, autonomy, and relatedness are supported. The authors theorized that these motivations are associated with benefits for wellbeing, including personal development, improved health, enhanced self-esteem, and increased productivity. When these needs are met, individuals experience vitality, which is crucial for navigating life's challenges. Researchers have examined wellbeing through SDT to identify how factors like administrative support and teaching satisfaction predict faculty wellbeing. Researchers found that clarifying the promotion and tenure process increased faculty wellbeing, and mentorship "emerged as a significant predictor of job satisfaction" for some faculty. Other researchers recommended using faculty communities, such as mentorship, to build multiple networks of support that "lead to greater social capital, rewards, and recognition." This paper reassesses mentorship program pre- and post-test data (n=20) to examine how the SDT framework could be used to measure the satisfaction of faculty members' psychological needs. For example, Autonomy can be achieved by identifying career interests and collaborating with research partners; Competency can be met by sharing promotion and tenure procedures and giving feedback; and Relatedness can be satisfied through network development and cross-disciplinary connections.

Keywords: Self-determination theory, mentoring, higher education, faculty, wellbeing, motivation

Introduction

The Wellbeing Challenge in Higher Education

Higher education is experiencing a time of uncertainty and change with issues such as enrollment declines, funding shortages, political pressures, and concerns about the value of a college degree (Clark et al., 2025). Faculty are facing what Adams (2025) described as disruption fatigue, or a "response to constant and unpredictable change," where endless challenges can make it difficult for faculty to see how their work in higher education contributes to sustainable solutions (para 3). Unlike burnout, which results from continuous overwork and stress, disruption fatigue stems from unpredictable changes that leave faculty feeling as if they have lost control over their work (Adams, 2025).

The consequences of these impacts are evident in national trends. The Gallup National Health and Well-Being Index reported that U.S. thriving ratings dropped below 50% for the second consecutive time since the pandemic, revealing "an erosion in hopefulness" (Witters, 2025, para. 7). According to a national study by Employee Benefit Research Institute & Greenwald Research (2024) employees' emotional wellbeing has decreased significantly since 2022.

Within higher education, Gay (2025) identified both positive and negative factors that have the highest impact on faculty mental health and wellbeing. The top ten factors included support from leadership (44%), work-life balance (37%), flexible work arrangements (33%), relationships with colleagues and students (32%), burnout (30%), autonomy (29%), workload (29%), institutional culture (25%), workplace fairness (25%), and a sense of belonging (24%).

Mentoring as a Potential Intervention

Some universities have established mentoring programs to help mitigate the problems and barriers to wellbeing (Chambers et al., 2023).

Literature on faculty mentoring and wellbeing has focused on diverse topics, including relationships, self-efficacy, development, retention, and identity (Larson et al., 2019; Lunsford et al., 2018; Mitra, 2024). In fact, in research where job satisfaction was used to measure faculty wellbeing, Larson et al. (2019) found that mentorship "emerged as a significant predictor" of wellbeing (p. 170). Lunsford et al. (2018) also found that faculty who rated their mentoring relationships as higher quality also reported higher levels of job satisfaction.

While there is no doubt that wellbeing in higher education has been negatively impacted, this paper explores how motivation and mentorship could serve as potential solutions to improve wellbeing and faculty success.

Literature Review

Defining Wellbeing

Literature defines wellbeing in many ways, depending on the author's research context. The paper adopts Noble and McGrath's (2015) broad definition of wellbeing, which encompasses positivity, relationships, outcomes, strength, purpose, engagement, and resilience. These components align well with SDT, which posits that wellbeing results from satisfying three psychological needs: relatedness, autonomy, and competence.

Self-Determination Theory Framework

SDT explains how motivational types impact performance and wellbeing, distinguishing between autonomous motivation (participation by choice) and controlled motivation (participation driven by external rewards, punishment, or power dynamics) (Deci & Ryan, 2008). Intrinsic motivation is autonomous; extrinsic is controlled (Deci et al., 2017).

Three basic psychological needs—competence (mastery), autonomy (choice), and relatedness (belonging)—mediate environmental influences on motivation. Need satisfaction produces autonomous motivation and positive wellbeing; frustration produces controlled motivation. In academia, competence includes field expertise recognition, autonomy involves research freedom and course control, and relatedness occurs through mentoring and collaboration (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Deci et al., 2017).

Conversely, unmet needs lead to controlled motivation or "external indicators of worth" (Deci & Ryan, 2008, p. 183). Diminishing performance may be observed in punitive evaluations (thwarting competence), restrictive funding (undermining autonomy), and departmental conflicts (eroding relatedness).

Methods

Data Collection

In 2023, a large southwestern university launched the Faculty Mentorship Academy (FMA) to reduce faculty success barriers (Chambers et al., 2023). Faculty mentees applied to join circles of 5-7 participants, facilitated by two faculty mentors, for a nine-month academic year. After a beta test in Spring 2023, two cohorts were completed: Year 1 (2023-2024) and Year 2 (2024-2025). Participation requirements include attending six circle meetings, eight workshops, and completing a faculty development plan. For each cohort, mentee pre- and post-surveys assess growth, effectiveness, and satisfaction from the FMA program. Year 1 had 22 mentees with 18 completing both pre- and post-surveys. Year 2 had 23 mentees, with 20 completing both surveys.

Applying the SDT Framework

While not originally designed to measure autonomous motivation, survey items for Years 1 and 2 were re-assessed using the SDT framework (competence, autonomy, relatedness) and existing literature to identify psychological needs that contribute to wellbeing. Mean changes were calculated at the item and category levels. The following analysis examines: 1) Year 2 overall satisfaction, 2) Year 2 pre-post results, 3) Years 1 and 2 cohort comparisons, and 4) Year 2 changes in understanding.

Results

Year 2 Overall Growth and Satisfaction

Figure 1 shows Year 2 satisfaction improved (+0.39, M = 4.38 to 4.77) despite declines in personal growth (-0.07) and minimal professional growth (+0.08). In Figure 2, program requirements show positive gains: faculty development plans (+0.55), workshops (+0.30), and mentoring circles (+0.18), suggesting the importance of addressing all SDT dimensions for overall wellbeing.

Figure 1: Five-point Likert-type scale assessed agreement with wellbeing, 5=Strongly Agree; Figure 2: Five-point Likert-type scale required benefit, 5= Extremely Beneficial

Year 2 Pre- and Post-Survey Results

Year 2 pre- and post-program surveys were

Figure1.
Overall Well-Being Outcomes

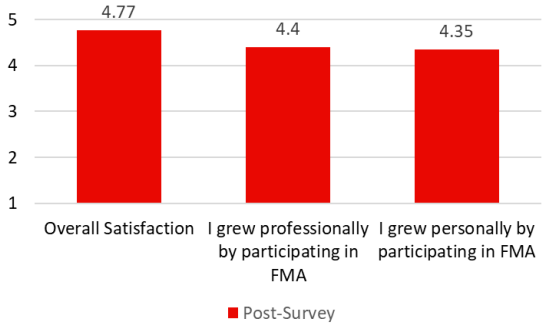
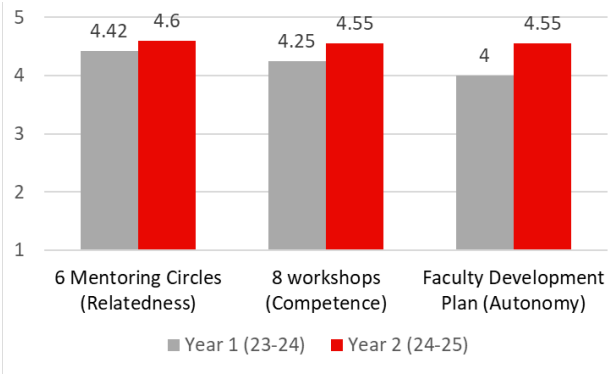


Figure2.
FMA Program Requirements



analyzed using the SDT framework, with items categorized by psychological needs dimensions and examined at both category and item levels.

Autonomy Dimension Results

The greatest improvement was in "I understand the barriers to achieving my professional goals" (+0.93, from M = 3.42 to M = 4.35), the highest gain among autonomy items, demonstrating FMA's effectiveness in helping faculty identify career obstacles. Similarly, "I understand the barriers to achieving my personal goals" increased by +0.87, reflecting FMA's holistic approach to work-life integration challenges.

Table 1
Year 2 SDT Dimension Overview

SDT Dimension	# of Items	Category Mean Change	Item Themes
Autonomy	6	+0.81	Goal clarity, understanding barriers, identifying personal and professional resources
Competence	5	+0.59	Self-efficacy, goal confidence, and network development

Competence Dimension Results

The top improvement was "I am confident I can achieve my personal goals" (+0.72), followed by "I am confident I can achieve my professional goals" (+0.68). These parallel gains demonstrate how mentoring fosters confidence and self-efficacy in both personal development and professional growth.

Relatedness Dimension Gap

Relatedness was not measured in Year 2 pre- and post-surveys. While the pre-survey's focus on baseline skills makes intuitive sense, this gap will be addressed in future cohorts with items such as "I feel a sense of belonging to the university" or "I feel close to my department."

Summary of Year 2 Pre-Post Results

FMA demonstrated substantial autonomy gains, particularly in understanding barriers and achieving goal clarity. Growth in both professional and personal domains suggests FMA promotes healthy work-life integration rather than developing professional skills at personal expense.

Years 1 and 2 Cohort Comparisons

Cohort data for Years 1 and 2 were analyzed based on post-survey results (see Table 2). Each item was assigned to a specific SDT psychological need dimension.

Table 2
Years 1 and 2 Post-Survey Cohort Comparison

SDT Dimension	# of Items	Category Mean Change	Item Themes
Autonomy	11	+0.63	Goal clarity, resource identification, work-life balance, and faculty development planning
Competence	8	+043	Self-efficacy, goal confidence, and network development
Relatedness	14	+0.36	Connection, belonging, mentor/mentee relationships, supportive environments, and community building

Autonomy Improvements Between Years 1 and 2 Cohorts

The strongest survey item improvement was in the autonomy category for "I gained ideas for achieving work-life balance" (+1.55, M = 2.92 to 4.47). This reflects intentional efforts of FMA leaders to address work-life integration. The second highest was "I can identify/locate TTU resources for overcoming barriers to achieve my personal goals" (+0.98), indicating increased awareness of university personal development support, with possible contributions from university campus mental health and wellness resource promotion

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Competence Development Between Years 1 and 2 Cohorts

The top competence improvement item was "My confidence increased about successfully navigating the promotion process," which showed a +0.65 item-level mean change. This is relevant since FMA participation is open for all full-time ranks and positions.

Relatedness Gains Between Years 1 and 2 Cohorts

The top relatedness item, "I feel I am not alone on this journey" (+0.78), indicates crucial improvement in reducing academic isolation. Isolation in higher education has been shown to lead to declines in retention and faculty wellbeing (Minnotte & Pedersen, 2021). Mentoring circle structure items also improved: discussion quality (+0.70) and quantity (+0.53), validating the effectiveness of the circle format to create meaningful dialogue and connections among circle members.

Year 2 Change in Understanding

The third analysis used different measures than previous findings, comparing baseline understanding ("How much do you currently understand?") with perceived change ("How much has your understanding changed after the program?") to identify where the program best addressed knowledge gaps. See Table 3.

Pre-Survey Initial Understanding: How much do you understand? ** Post-Survey Program-Induced

Table 3
Initial Understanding v. Program-Induced Understanding Changes

SDT Dimension	# of Items	Category Mean Change	Items	Pre-Survey*	Post-Survey**
Autonomy	6	-0.35	Departmental teaching expectations	4.67	4.00
			Departmental service expectations	3.95	3.90
			Departmental research or practice expectations	3.89	3.55
Competence	4	+0.25	Tenure, continuing appointment, and/or promotion requirements	3.53	3.35
			Institutional resources available for professional development	3.67	4.35
Relatedness	4	+0.68	Effectively balancing professional and personal life	3.21	4.10
			Department culture, climate, and structure help me achieve professional goals	3.63	4.10

Understanding: How much has your understanding changed?

Relatedness Understanding Improvements

Relatedness showed exceptional improvement (+0.68). The top item, "I am effectively balancing my professional and personal obligations," had the program's most significant impact on work-life integration (+0.89, M = 3.21 to 4.10).

Competence Understanding Results

Competence growth (+0.25) was led by "I am confident that I can identify/locate TTU resources for achieving my professional goals" (+0.68, M = 3.67 to 4.35), demonstrating improved institutional resource awareness.

Autonomy Understanding Concerns

Table 3 shows a concerning autonomy decline (-0.35 average) across three items measuring understanding of faculty success factors in teaching, service, and research. This may reflect unrealistic initial confidence, insufficient FMA programming attention, or the program's multi-disciplinary, unstructured nature, where departmental expectations are not explicitly discussed. Since workshops are preference-based and circles may focus on other topics, such as work-life integration, success factors may be overlooked.

Discussion

As with any research, there are limitations to consider. First, this research is based on a small, nonrepresentative sample of faculty and is not generalizable to broader populations. Due to the small cohort size, a social desirability bias may be present. Despite this, the feedback is valuable as FMA leaders prepare for a new cohort.

Overall, the Faculty Mentorship Academy has made positive strides in the two years since its inception. With any new venture, there are expectations that course correction may sometimes be necessary for continued success. The SDT framework provides a map for making this adjustment to ensure the program meets the needs of both mentees and mentors and provides an optimal environment for achieving performance success and positive wellbeing.

Relatedness Recommendations

High relatedness scores were observed throughout the data, ranging from reducing feelings of isolation to increasing perceptions of work-life balance and fostering positive rapport. It is important to identify activities that contribute to these gains and ensure they are continued in future cohorts. Mentoring Circles provide the foundation of the community-building effort. This could be used to make gains in other dimensions. For example, the Faculty Development Plan, which emphasizes autonomy, could be expanded to include a Mentoring Network Map. This would enable a mentee to utilize the Mentoring Network Map as an additional tool when making decisions about goals to pursue and identifying the competencies required to reach them. Faculty should take advantage of these opportunities to build multiple networks of social support so they can experience more wellbeing and job satisfaction as they develop strong and consistent relationships, which can "lead to greater social capital, rewards, and recognition" (Mitra, 2024, p. 143).

Autonomy Recommendations

Autonomy scores showed gains throughout the data; however, these also created gaps between knowledge and understanding of the factors that contribute to faculty success, such as teaching, research, and service. Because FMA is currently structured to work in a multidisciplinary group setting, specific department expectations may not be discussed unless a mentee brings it up in the circle. In future cohorts, mentors could make it a practice to encourage mentees to explore departmental expectations independently and bring them into the discussion circle. These findings could then be applied in the Faculty Development Plan. Mentors could even use conversation cards during circle meetings to periodically spark conversations about these critical factors.

Competence Recommendations

There were modest gains in competence in the data; however, further improvement is needed. The data shows that mentees may understand what to do (autonomy), but their confidence in doing it (competence) does not exceed their understanding. Another way to close the gap between knowledge and understanding is to gain confidence in applying knowledge effectively. One way this can be addressed is to ensure that options for faculty development workshops include both skill-building and knowledge-building outcomes. Future cohorts should also strike a balance between personal and professional development. The benefits of work-life integration are excellent, but professional development competencies

must also receive attention to promote career advancement.

Key Takeaway and Future Research

The biggest takeaway from this research is that high program satisfaction does not guarantee understanding or action. High satisfaction can mask outcome gaps, so programs should focus on implementation quality rather than activity completion and avoid assuming satisfaction equals effectiveness. Performance and wellbeing depend on meeting the psychological needs of competence, autonomy, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2008). Future research should include separate measures for program satisfaction and implementation quality as well as measures to determine wellbeing based on the satisfaction of psychological needs.

Conclusion

Self-Determination Theory's basic framework is helpful for faculty developers in both planning and assessing the effectiveness of mentoring programs. The basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness provide criteria that can be used to ensure that mentoring programs effectively meet each of these needs, which autonomously motivates participants to contribute to high performance and positive wellbeing (Deci et al., 2017).

While mentoring directors typically design programs based on logistical constraints, such as available time, budget, and volunteer resources, this resource-driven approach may overlook the psychological factors that determine program effectiveness. Self-Determination Theory provides planners with a practical framework that shifts the focus from 'what can we deliver?' to 'how can we motivate genuine engagement?'

By using SDT's three basic needs as a planning checklist, program designers can systematically evaluate whether proposed activities will foster autonomous motivation and wellbeing. This involves satisfying participants' needs for choice and volition (autonomy), confidence and effectiveness (competence), and connection and belonging (relatedness) to foster the autonomous motivation necessary for meaningful participation and positive outcomes (Larson et al., 2019).

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