

Mid-Career Mentoring Programs in Academia: A Literature Review

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This literature review examines mentorship programs targeting mid-career faculty in academic settings. While mentoring initiatives for early-career and tenure-track faculty are prevalent across institutions, structured support for mid-career faculty remains notably scarce. This review synthesizes existing research on mentorship programs that target or include mid-career faculty to identify effective models, outcomes, and implications for institutional implementation. The literature reveals diverse mentoring approaches for mid-career faculty including traditional dyadic relationships, peer group mentoring, and multiple-mentor models. The literature indicates significant improvements in knowledge, skills, and attitudes among mid-career faculty engaged in structured mentoring programs, as well as enhanced faculty retention, scholarly productivity, teaching effectiveness, and career advancement opportunities. This review focuses on studies conducted across a broad range of academic disciplines synthesizing findings from diverse fields to provide a comprehensive understanding of mid-career mentorship. The analysis examines formal mentoring structures identifying common challenges mid-career faculty face post-tenure including diminished institutional support, career stagnation, and work-life balance concerns. Findings demonstrate that effective mid-career mentorship programs yield substantial benefits for individual wellbeing including clearer career goals, better work-life balance, reduced job stress, and enhanced professional satisfaction while simultaneously improving organizational wellbeing through increased grant applications, enhanced scholarly productivity, improved teaching practices, and strengthened institutional commitment. This review identifies best practices for implementing sustainable mentoring initiatives for mid-career faculty and provides recommendations for institutional policies that support these efforts.

Keywords: Mid-career, post-tenure, dyadic mentoring, peer-group mentoring, multiple-mentor

Introduction

The academic career trajectory traditionally follows a well-defined path starting from graduate school through postdoctoral positions to assistant professor roles, and then onwards towards tenure and promotion to associate professor and, finally, full professor. The definition of “mid-career” varies across institutions and disciplines but generally encompasses faculty who have achieved tenure and are beyond their initial years of post-tenure adjustment. This population typically includes associate professors seeking advancement to full professor status, as well as full professors in the middle phases of their academic careers.

Generally, academic institutions offer substantial support for early-career faculty concentrated during the pre-tenure phase. Many institutions have formalized mentoring programs to support new and early-career faculty to help them adjust to academic life and prepare for the tenure review process; however, once faculty achieve tenure and enter their mid-career phase, formal mentoring and developmental support often diminishes dramatically (Gerke et al., 2023; Sarabipour et al., 2023; Sotirin and Goltz, 2023). The decline

in institutional support occurs precisely when faculty face new challenges related to evolving professional identities, career advancement, and work-life integration.

Adult development theories provide important context for understanding mid-career faculty needs. Levinson's (1978) concept of life structure transitions suggests that individuals experience predictable periods of stability and change throughout their careers, with mid-career representing a particularly complex transition period characterized by reassessment and potential redirection. Similarly, Super's (1990) career development theory emphasizes the importance of career maintenance and potential career renewal during mid-career phases. In the academic context, these developmental transitions are complicated by the unique structure of academic careers, including the tenure system, disciplinary expectations, and the tri-fold mission of research, teaching, and service.

Research consistently demonstrates that mid-career faculty members face unique challenges that differ markedly from those faced by early-career academics, including concerns about career plateaus, increased service burdens,

family caregiving responsibilities, and questions about professional purpose and direction (Pifer et al., 2024). On the one hand, the mid-career phase may be characterized by intensified career ambition, responsibility, and stress. On the other hand, the achievement of tenure, while providing job security, can paradoxically lead to decreased motivation, career stagnation, unclear goals for future development, and quiet quitting whereby mid-career faculty check out and withdraw from anything beyond the bare minimum required to maintain their jobs (Bhardwaj et al., 2019; Terwilliger et al., 2019).

Effective mentoring programs for mid-career faculty can address the challenges and revitalize and reinvigorate faculty for continued development, retention, and, potentially, advancement to leadership or administrative roles (Baldwin & Chang, 2006; Baldwin et al., 2008; Terwilliger et al., 2019; Welch et al., 2019).

The significance of institutional support during this phase extends beyond individual faculty development to encompass broader institutional success. Mid-career faculty represent a substantial portion of the academic workforce and serve as the backbone of university research, teaching, and service activities (Baker et al., 2019; Strage and Merdinger, 2015; Welch et al., 2019).

Despite the necessity for structured support during this career phase, there is limited implementation of structured mentoring programs for mid-career faculty across higher education institutions. As a result of this limited implementation, systematic examination of mid-career mentoring programs also remains limited. While extensive literature exists on mentoring for graduate students and early-career faculty, comparable attention to mid-career academic development has been notably absent from scholarly discourse. The existing literature on mid-career academic mentoring reveals a fragmented but growing field of inquiry. Much of the research emerges from specific disciplinary contexts with limited cross-disciplinary synthesis which has hindered the development of generalizable principles for mid-career mentoring program design and implementation.

Literature Review

This literature review addresses the knowledge gap by synthesizing existing research on mentorship programs specifically designed for or inclusive of mid-career faculty to identify effective mentoring models, document outcomes of mid-career mentoring programs, and provide evidence-based recommendations for institutional implementation of mid-career mentoring initiatives.

This review employed a search strategy across multiple databases including Academic Search Complete, EBSCO EDS, JSTOR, and Google Scholar using search terms that included combinations of “mid-career faculty,” “tenured faculty,” “mentoring,” “mentorship,” and related

terms. The search encompassed peer-reviewed articles and books published between 2010 and 2025 if they: (a) focused specifically on mid-career faculty or included mid-career faculty as a distinct population within broader mentoring initiatives; (b) examined mentoring programs in academic settings; (c) provided program outcomes.

The search resulted in relatively few studies that focused specifically on mid-career mentorship (Baker et al., 2019; Baldwin and Chang, 2006; Baldwin et al., 2008; Bhardwaj et al., 2019; Campion et al., 2016; Gerke et al., 2023; Lunsford et al., 2018; Pifer et al., 2024; Rees and Shaw, 2014; Sotirin and Goltz, 2023; Strage and Merdinger, 2015; Terwilliger et al., 2019; Welch et al., 2019), though mid-career mentorship was sometimes discussed in broader studies of mentorship and coaching in academia. Studies were analyzed by identifying common themes related to program design, implementation strategies, and outcomes.

Mentoring Models for Mid-Career Faculty

Based on the analysis of the existing literature, three distinct approaches to mid-career faculty mentoring were identified: traditional dyadic mentoring, peer group mentoring, and multiple mentor models. Each of these approaches come with particular strengths and implementation considerations.

Traditional Dyadic Mentoring: The most widely documented approach to structured mid-career mentoring involves pairing mid-career faculty with senior colleagues who provide guidance, support, and professional networking opportunities. Structured dyadic mentoring relationships can significantly improve mentees’ knowledge acquisition, skill development, and professional attitudes among mid-career faculty (Campion et al., 2016).

Peer Group Mentoring

Peer group mentoring typically involves small groups of faculty who meet regularly to discuss career challenges, share resources, and provide mutual support. Peer group mentoring can provide opportunities for shared understanding of mid-career challenges and collaborative problem-solving. Participants report high levels of satisfaction with peer mentoring relationships and improved confidence in career decision-making (Lunsford et al., 2018; Pololi & Evans, 2015; Rees & Shaw, 2014; Sotirin & Goltz, 2023).

Multiple-Mentor Models

Multiple-mentor models involve mid-career faculty working with multiple mentors for different aspects of their professional development. For example, one mentor for research advancement, another for teaching improvement, and a third for service and leadership development. Participants can gain specialized support from senior colleagues with expertise in various areas, thereby

gaining knowledge and confidence in those areas (Higgins & Thomas, 2001).

Outcomes of Mid-Career Mentoring Programs

Studies of mid-career mentoring programs have consistently documented positive outcomes both for individual participants and their institutions.

Individual Outcomes

Mid-career faculty participating in mentoring programs report significant improvements in career clarity and professional satisfaction. Participants frequently describe gaining new perspectives on career goals and feeling renewed enthusiasm for their academic work (Lunsford et al., 2018; Walensky et al. 2018). Others report enhanced well-being including reduced stress levels and improved work-life balance (Orsini, 2023). Professional development outcomes include improved research productivity, enhanced teaching effectiveness, and increased confidence in pursuing leadership opportunities (Rockquemore, 2014; Cassese and Holman, 2018). Cross et al. (2019) highlighted improved retention rates among mentored faculty, suggesting that effective mentoring programs can address the career stagnation and dissatisfaction that sometimes lead mid-career faculty to consider leaving academia.

The benefits of mid-career mentoring can be particularly profound for women and faculty of color who often face distinct challenges and cumulative disadvantage in academia. For example, research has consistently found that women faculty members spend a disproportionate amount of time on non-research activities and carry heavier service loads making them less likely to be promoted to full rank (DeWilde and Stepnick, 2015). Similarly, research suggests that faculty of color also encounter numerous barriers to professional success (Zambrana et al. 2015; Bernal and Villalpando, 2010; Peguero 2018). Mid-career mentorship programs can help these faculty members more effectively navigate their unique challenges so that they can continue to progress on their career trajectories.

Institutional Outcomes

Institutions implementing mid-career mentoring programs have experienced various organizational benefits. Mid-career mentoring has resulted in increased grant application rates and enhanced scholarly productivity among program participants (Campion et al., 2016). Additionally, mentored faculty have become even more engaged in service activities and demonstrated stronger institutional commitment. The development of mentoring relationships also contributed to improved institutional culture, with participants often becoming mentors themselves and contributing to a more supportive academic environment.

This multiplier effect suggests that mid-career mentoring programs can have sustained positive impacts beyond their immediate participants.

Findings

The findings of this review demonstrate that mid-career mentoring programs represent a valuable but underutilized approach to faculty development. The evidence consistently supports the effectiveness of structured mentoring initiatives in addressing the unique challenges faced by mid-career faculty while generating benefits for both individuals and institutions. The diversity of mentoring models documented in the literature suggests that effective programs can take various forms, depending on institutional context, disciplinary culture, and participant needs. However, successful programs share common elements.

Research indicates that common characteristics of successful mid-career mentoring programs include: (a) clear program goals and expectations so that participants understand the structure and purpose of the mentoring relationships; (b) flexible program design to accommodate the diverse needs and schedules of mid-career faculty; (c) regular program evaluation to ensure continuous improvement of mentoring programs; and (d) institutional support that includes not only financial resources but also administrative support, recognition of mentoring activities in promotion decisions, and integration of mentoring programs with broader faculty development initiatives.

The gap between the documented benefits of mid-career mentoring and its limited implementation across higher education institutions represents a significant opportunity. Given the substantial investment universities make in faculty hiring and development, the relatively modest cost of mentoring programs offers an attractive return on investment through improved faculty satisfaction, productivity, and retention.

Conclusion

This research indicates several important implications for institutional practice. First, universities should recognize mid-career faculty development as a strategic priority requiring dedicated resources. The assumption that tenured faculty no longer need developmental support is contradicted by substantial evidence of mid-career challenges and the benefits of structured mentoring interventions. Second, institutions should consider implementing diverse mentoring approaches rather than relying on single models. The varying needs of mid-career faculty suggest that multiple options—including dyadic, peer, and multiple-mentor models—may be necessary to serve different populations effectively. Third, successful program implementation requires genuine institutional commitment. Sustainable

programs need ongoing administrative support, integration with existing initiatives, and recognition within institutional reward systems.

This literature review demonstrates that mentoring programs for mid-career faculty represent an evidence-based approach to addressing a significant gap in academic career development. While early-career mentoring has received substantial attention and resources, the unique challenges faced by mid-career faculty, including career stagnation, work-life balance concerns, and diminished institutional support, require targeted interventions. The available literature clearly documents positive outcomes associated with mid-career mentoring programs. These benefits extend beyond individual participants to encompass broader institutional advantages, including improved faculty retention, increased scholarly productivity, and enhanced institutional culture.

Despite these documented benefits, mid-career mentoring programs remain relatively uncommon across higher education institutions. The evidence suggests that modest investments in structured mentoring programs can yield substantial returns. As higher education continues to evolve and face new challenges, supporting mid-career faculty development becomes increasingly important for institutional excellence.

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