

Mentorship, Burnout, and Balance: A Study of Mid-level Leaders in Academia

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Mid-level academic leaders play a pivotal but under-recognized role in higher education; not only managing operational tasks but also serving as mentors, emotional supports, and relational anchors for faculty, staff, and students. While the strategic responsibilities of these roles are well documented, the mentoring dimension remains largely informal, emotionally taxing, and structurally unsupported. This qualitative study is an exploration of how mid-level leaders experience the emotional and relational labor of mentoring and what sustains them in the process. Drawing on responses from a sample of academic leaders across the United States and Canada, and analyzed through reflexive thematic analysis, three key themes were identified: the emotional and invisible labor of leadership; leading with purpose, not policy; and informal networks as lifelines. These findings are interpreted through an integrative theoretical lens including the Job Demands-Resources model, Compassion Satisfaction and Fatigue theory, Boundary and Role theory, Developmental Network theory, and Wellbeing Science. Results suggest while mentoring is a core leadership practice for these professionals, its sustainability depends on a mix of personal capacity and systemic support. The resultant call is for institutions to reframe mentoring not as an extra responsibility but as essential, emotionally complex work deserving of formal recognition and resourcing.

Keywords: Mentoring, mid-level leadership, emotional labor, academic leadership, burnout

Introduction

Mid-level academic leaders like department chairs, program directors, associate deans, and associate vice presidents stand at a complex crossroads in higher education. Tasked with executing institutional strategy while fostering faculty and student success, they navigate a space where managerial oversight meets deeply human work. These leaders frequently serve as mentors, sounding boards, and emotional first responders for their colleagues and students. At the same time, they are often expected to ensure administration not only functions smoothly but also appears cohesive, responsive, and competent; both internally and externally. In this way, they help sustain the institutional image and legitimacy.

While their administrative duties are widely acknowledged, their mentoring efforts often remain hidden in plain sight (Holcombe et al., 2021; Gmelch, 2004). Mentorship in this context is not incidental. It is foundational. It creates the trust, connection, and resilience needed to navigate increasingly complex academic environments.

But mentoring is also emotionally labor-intensive. It often demands deep listening, psychological insight, and consistent emotional availability, all while balancing competing

institutional demands. When this labor goes unsupported or unrecognized, it can become a source of exhaustion, or even burnout.

In this study, the sustainability of mentoring in mid-level academic leadership is examined through five complementary frameworks: the Job Demands-Resources model, Compassion Fatigue and Satisfaction theory, Boundary and Role theory, Developmental Network theory, and Wellbeing Science. Together, they provide a multidimensional lens on the emotional, structural, and relational dynamics of mentoring. These frameworks inform both the interpretation of leaders' lived experiences and the guiding question: How do mid-level academic leaders experience the emotional and relational dimensions of mentoring, and what sustains them in this work?

Literature Review

The Relational Core of Mid-Level Leadership

Relational work is central to mid-level academic leadership. Beyond enforcing policy, these leaders often act as mentors, emotional supports, and mediators (Holcombe et al., 2021; Gmelch, 2004). This labor, especially its emotional and relational aspects, is typically informal, undervalued, and difficult to sustain. While some scholarship

acknowledges this complexity, research still tends to prioritize managerial and policy roles over human-centered practices. As a result, the emotional sustainability of mentoring remains largely under-theorized. This gap underscores the need to understand mentoring not just as support, but as emotionally intensive leadership work that shapes identity, capacity, and long-term wellbeing.

Theoretical Frameworks

To examine the sustainability of mentoring leadership, this study draws on five intersecting frameworks addressing its emotional, structural, and relational dimensions. The Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007) links high emotional demands with burnout, especially when institutional support is limited. Compassion Fatigue and Satisfaction theory (Garnett et al., 2023) further highlights mentoring as both meaningful and emotionally taxing. Boundary and Role theory (Ashforth et al., 2000) explores the blurred identities leaders navigate (mentor, manager, peer) often without clear institutional boundaries. Developmental Network theory (Higgins & Kram, 2001) reframes mentoring as a reciprocal, networked process, emphasizing informal relationships as key to leadership resilience. Finally, Wellbeing Science (e.g., Seligman, 2019; Goleman, 1995; Wells, 2024) underscores internal capacities like purpose, emotional intelligence, and positive affect in sustaining leaders' emotional balance.

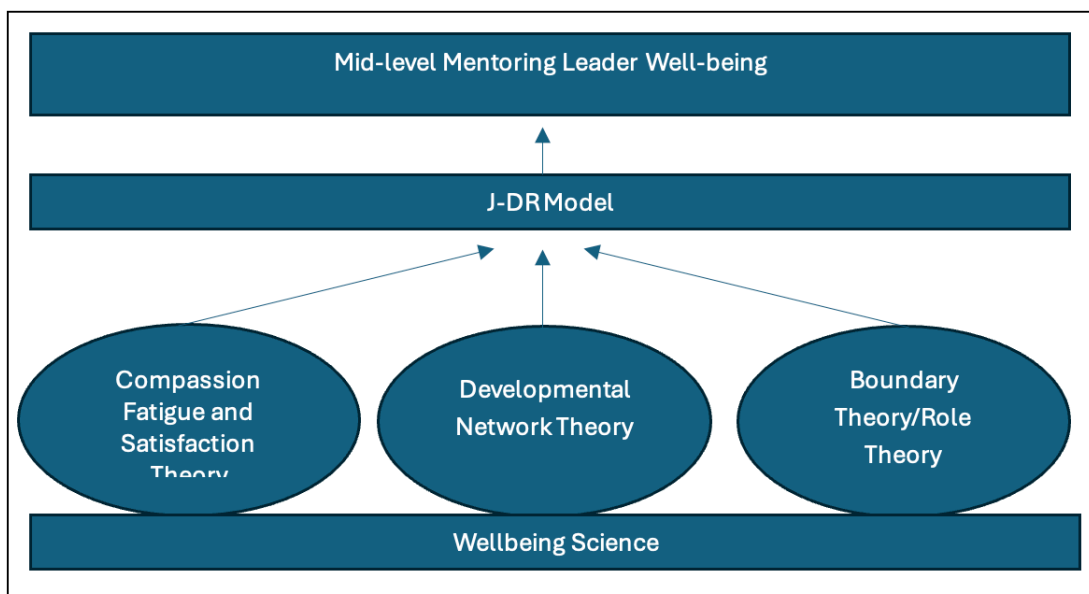
Although job descriptions for chairs and associate deans often reference emotional intelligence

and faculty development, these are typically embedded in broader leadership categories rather than defined as distinct mentoring responsibilities. When mentoring is mentioned, it is usually framed as supervision or professional development, not as the emotionally intensive, identity-shaping work it often is. This disconnect reveals a critical gap: mentoring, though widely expected and enacted, remains under-theorized and largely invisible. These frameworks thus illuminate mentoring as a complex, relational labor central to leadership identity, role negotiation, and long-term wellbeing – yet frequently unsupported.

Extending Practice-Based Research

The value of mentoring networks in academic leadership has long been acknowledged. Sorcinelli and Yun (2010) noted that informal, peer-based relationships often offer more meaningful and lasting support than formal programs. Since then, the emotional and structural complexities of mentoring have become more evident. Knight (2023) shows how mentoring responsibilities often fall to mid-career women, making their contributions vital yet underrecognized. More recent work (Orsini, 2023; Prummer et al., 2024) highlights the emotional duality of mentoring as both fulfilling and exhausting. These studies reveal mentoring's enduring challenges and evolving significance, especially in shaping leadership identity. Building on this foundation, the present study centers mid-level leaders' experiences with mentoring in complex institutions. A synthesized conceptual model (Figure 1) integrates emotional, relational, and organizational dimensions to guide both study design and interpretation.

Figure 1
Integrative Model for Sustaining Mentoring Leadership in Mid-Level Academic Roles



Note: Layered conceptual framework integrating complementary lenses to explore the sustainability of mentoring leadership among mid-level academic leaders. Adapted by author.

This model informed the development of the data collection instrument, the coding process, and the interpretation of findings, as described in the following section.

Method

In this qualitative study, mid-level academic leaders were asked how they navigate the emotional and relational dimensions of mentoring. A custom-designed, open-ended online questionnaire collected narrative data, allowing participants to share experiences in their own words and on their own time. The instrument included 12 qualitative prompts and 7 demographic questions on topics such as emotional labor, burnout, mentoring practices, informal support, and resilience. Developed in alignment with the study's conceptual framework, the questionnaire was refined through informal testing with experienced academic leaders to ensure clarity and emotional accessibility. After Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, participants received email invitations with informed consent and a link to complete the questionnaire via Typeform. Participation was voluntary, anonymous, and uncompensated.

Participants were recruited through targeted outreach to professional networks and institutional contacts. Eligible individuals currently held or had recently held (within the past 12 months) a mid-level leadership role such as department chair, associate dean, program director, or associate vice president at an accredited institution in the United States or Canada. Of the 29 who accessed the survey, 13 completed it fully and 5 submitted partial responses. Demographic data (e.g., gender, institution type, leadership tenure) were collected for context but not used for comparative analysis.

Data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. Both inductive and deductive strategies informed theme development: codes emerged from the data while being interpreted through established theoretical lenses. To ensure rigor, the researcher maintained an audit trail, engaged in reflexive journaling, and conducted peer debriefing throughout the process (Nowell et al., 2017).

Results

The emotional and relational dimensions of mentoring, as experienced by mid-level academic leaders within complex institutional contexts, were the central focus of this study.

These contexts include environments marked by shifting institutional priorities, resource constraints, increased accountability pressures, and evolving diversity and inclusion mandates; all of which intensify the emotional demands placed on mid-level leaders. In such settings, mentoring often extends beyond formal faculty development to include emotional support, conflict mediation, and identity negotiation. Initial coding revealed common patterns across participant responses, including emotional exhaustion, mentoring as identity work, blurred role expectations, and a reliance on peer or informal support. These patterns were then refined and synthesized into three overarching themes: (1) the emotional and invisible labor of leadership, (2) leading with purpose, not policy, and (3) informal networks as lifelines. These themes reflect the layered intersection of personal motivation and systemic constraints that define the mentoring landscape in mid-level leadership roles. Table 1 presents an overview of these themes, summarizing their conceptual focus and how each contributes to understanding mentoring sustainability in academic leadership.

Table 1
Summary of Final Themes

1. Theme	2. Description
The Emotional and Invisible Labor of Leadership	The taxing, often-unseen emotional work leaders perform, particularly around mentoring and support.
Leading with Purpose, Not Policy	A values-driven approach to leadership that often misaligns with institutional systems and expectations.
Informal Networks as Lifelines	The critical role of informal support systems in sustaining emotional wellbeing and leadership resilience.

The sections that follow explore each theme in depth, drawing on direct participant responses and linking them to the study's theoretical framework.

The Emotional and Invisible Labor of Leadership

This theme highlights the institutional invisibility and systemic undervaluation of the emotional

work leaders perform. It underscores the disconnect between organizational expectations and the unseen support that sustains academic communities. Participants described the emotional demands of mentoring as central to their roles yet largely unrecognized in formal structures. Many reported investing significant time and

energy in supporting others, mediating conflict, and navigating team challenges; efforts excluded from formal metrics or evaluations. One leader noted, “the most emotionally taxing interactions... are with faculty who frequently complain about their work but show little interest in finding or implementing solutions,” describing these moments as “frustrating and draining” (Participant 1). Another shared, “The metrics we report up rarely focus on team or individual satisfaction... I feel like no one in the wider organization really cares about employee satisfaction or all of the work that I do to keep people feeling heard and appreciated” (Participant 4). A third reflected, “The relational aspects of my role - supporting others, listening, advising - are expected but go unacknowledged and unsupported... I regularly encounter a lack of alignment and backing from leadership” (Participant 9).

These accounts reflect the emotional weight of unseen labor in academic leadership. According to the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007), such a mismatch between high relational demands and low institutional recognition elevates burnout risk. Similarly, Compassion Fatigue theory (Garnett et al., 2023) offers insight into how the cumulative strain of mentoring without systemic support can lead to emotional depletion over time.

Leading With Purpose, Not Policy

This theme reflects the internal motivations that ground leaders in their roles, emphasizing how personal identity, values, and emotional intentionality shape leadership choices; especially when institutional systems are misaligned with relational forms of leadership. Despite these challenges, many participants described a strong commitment to mentoring rooted in empathy, purpose, and identity. One participant shared, “I get more joy or fulfillment from the promotion of emotional wellbeing, so it pays its own dividends” (Participant 5). Another said, “I choose to listen [and] advise... because I want my team to feel safe with me and know that I care about them” (Participant 3), underscoring the centrality of relational care. A third added, “I try to always come back to the relationship or emotional part of the problem after we’ve discussed tactical solutions,” revealing the intentionality behind their leadership (Participant 4).

These expressions reflect Compassion Satisfaction, the emotional reward leaders derive from helping others, as a meaningful counterbalance to strain (Garnett et al., 2023). They also resonate with findings in Wellbeing Science, which highlight how connection and purpose act as buffers against burnout and emotional fatigue (Seligman, 2019). At the same time, these accounts illustrate the tension described by Boundary and Role Theory (Ashforth et al., 2000), wherein leaders must constantly navigate between operational demands and affective commitments. Developmental Network Theory (Higgins & Kram,

2001) further contextualizes these responses by framing mentoring as an identity-informed, reciprocal process shaped by personal experience and relational intention.

Informal Networks as Lifelines

A consistent pattern across responses was the central role of informal support systems in sustaining leaders’ emotional and professional wellbeing. Participants described leaning on trusted peers, supervisors, spouses, or small teams to process emotionally charged situations, debrief difficult interactions, and maintain perspective. One participant shared, “I find support through professional development... where I can connect with others facing similar situations. These interactions foster a sense of camaraderie and remind me that I am not alone” (Participant 8). Another noted, “My spouse is also a leader... and I bounce ideas off of them and trade funny stories” (Participant 4), highlighting the value of both personal and professional connections. A third said, “I have a co-worker with whom I share philosophical ideals about the workplace in higher education. This helps me feel not alone” (Participant 13). Finally, one emphasized team culture: “Weekly check-in meetings... help us stay connected and focused even during busy times” (Participant 1).

In the face of complex institutional contexts characterized by shifting priorities, resource constraints, and limited formal support for mentoring, informal networks often filled critical gaps. These networks provided what institutional systems frequently lacked: adequate mechanisms for emotional support, identity affirmation, and peer-based development. They acted as invisible scaffolding, helping leaders navigate isolation, pressure, and burnout risk. This theme aligns closely with Developmental Network Theory (Higgins & Kram, 2001), which emphasizes the value of non-hierarchical, peer-based support in professional resilience. In the absence of structured organizational resources, these relational ecosystems emerged as essential to leaders’ ability to cope, connect, and continue in their roles.

Discussion

Together, these themes suggest mentoring, as defined and experienced by participants, is not a supplementary activity but a defining function of mid-level academic leadership. Through emotionally resonant, relational engagement, many leaders make meaning, enact values, and sustain themselves in challenging environments. However, this labor is emotionally demanding and often unsupported by institutional systems. Its sustainability depends not only on internal resilience but also on an institutional willingness to recognize and resource this form of work.

These findings align closely with key elements

of the integrated model, particularly emotional labor, identity-informed mentoring, and relational scaffolding. While broader constructs from Wellbeing Science were less directly reflected, themes such as meaning-making, emotional intelligence, and resilience suggest a tacit engagement with wellbeing principles, echoing literature on flourishing and sustained engagement (Seligman, 2019). Taken together, the data offer a grounded view of the emotional ecosystem of academic leadership and extend the model's relevance.

Limitations and Reflexivity

As with any qualitative inquiry, this study has limitations. The sample was self-selected, which may have drawn participants who are already reflective, emotionally attuned, or actively engaged in mentoring. While their perspectives offer deep insight, they may not capture the full range of experiences among mid-level academic leaders. The open-ended questionnaire format allowed participants to share experiences in their own voice and at their own pace, but it also presented constraints. Some areas of the integrative model such as the broader constructs within Wellbeing Science (e.g., emotional intelligence, optimism, flourishing) were less directly represented in participant responses. This may be due to the design of the instrument, which emphasized practical and institutional dimensions of mentoring, or participants' tendencies to focus on immediate leadership stressors rather than abstract psychological states. The researcher's own background as a mid-level academic leader and scholar-practitioner also shaped the analysis.

To address potential bias, reflexive journaling was maintained throughout the coding process, and peer debriefing was conducted to test assumptions and ensure emergent themes were grounded in the data (Nowell et al., 2017).

Nevertheless, findings should be interpreted as one analytic lens, informed by both the data and the positionality of the researcher.

Directions for Future Research

Future research could examine how institutional type, intersecting identities, and organizational context shape the emotional and relational dimensions of mentoring in mid-level leadership. Comparative studies across community colleges, research universities, and minority-serving institutions (taking into account size, mission, and culture) could reveal how these conditions mediate mentoring support. An intersectional lens is especially needed. BrckaLorenz et al. (2023) found that LGBTQ+ faculty continue to face emotional labor, marginalization, and systemic barriers, challenges that likely extend into mentoring roles. Including LGBTQIA+ and other historically excluded identity groups in research would deepen understanding of how

personal identity shapes mentoring resilience and emotional support strategies. Longitudinal and experimental studies could further explore how mentoring practices evolve over time and how interventions such as structured mentoring networks or emotional labor policies influence leader wellbeing and sustainability.

Conclusion

Overall, these results highlight the emotionally complex and relationally rich landscape of mentoring within mid-level academic leadership. Far from peripheral, mentoring emerges as a central, identity-informed practice that sustains both leaders and their communities. However, the emotional labor involved remains largely invisible to and unsupported by institutional systems. The findings call for a redefinition of mentoring leadership as essential rather than extra work. Institutions must recognize and reward this labor to foster sustainable academic leadership. By centering relational resilience and internal purpose, this research contributes to a growing understanding of how emotional and human-centered leadership can thrive within, and sometimes in spite of, higher education structures.

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