

T. E. Time: Teaching and Empowering

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Any newly certified K-12 teacher will likely tell you, the number one piece of advice they receive before going into the classroom is to find a mentor. Mentorship is needed across the board in multiple disciplines but especially in education. T.E. Time is an intra-departmental mentorship program designed to support newly hired faculty transitioning from K-12 education into higher education. It was created in response to the expressed need for mentorship within the teacher education department. The T.E.Time program was developed based upon the Relational Cultural Theory. The premise of this theory emphasizes the importance of human growth and wellbeing. The impact of the program can be seen in how junior faculty were able to navigate departmental logistics, academic challenges, career aspirations, and personal growth with others. This program offered a safe space to nurture the exchange of knowledge between mentees and mentors. By fostering meaningful relationships, mentorship cultivates a supportive environment conducive to personal and professional growth of junior faculty. It equips them with the skills and confidence necessary to navigate the complexities of higher education. Institutions of higher learning must prioritize and invest in mentorship opportunities to cultivate the next generation of leaders, innovators, and agents of change. This investment has a lasting impact, as mentored faculty go on to shape the lives of the students they teach. This article introduces the perspectives of faculty members who co-construct this mentorship program for new teacher education faculty at a Southeastern public higher education institution. The viewpoints explored in this article are those of the mentees and mentors. These diverse perspectives help illustrate the development and effectiveness of the T.E. Time program over the past year, since its inception.

Keywords: Mentorship, mentorship program, relational cultural theory

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Introduction

Choosing to leave a fulfilling and successful K-12 career to enter the world of higher education is an intentional decision to embrace a new learning curve. Imagine rewinding life to repeat Kindergarten. That is the feeling that overcomes you. Starting over is hard to do in any career. It is especially hard when you have excelled in your craft for so long. You are comfortable and you feel valued. You are seen as a change agent; the one that everyone comes to when they want to get things done. You are the mentor, you are the one that sets the standard for new teachers coming into the profession, district, and school. Transitioning to higher education, one such group of newly hired junior faculty members found that this was no longer the case. They were no longer the mentors, but the ones who needed a mentor. In the K-12 environment, it is preached that you attach yourself to a mentor for your first year of teaching to help you survive; but no one talks about what to do when there isn't a mentorship

program available. Members of the group decided that they would ask for what they needed, never imagining that the response would meet all their mentoring needs.

Mentorship is very beneficial in faculty development. It is not only an exchange of advice, but it also represents a pivotal reciprocal relationship that provides guidance and support for the mentees and mentors (Xu et al., 2021). Previous research has shown that some positive attributes of a quality mentorship provide a knowledge exchange, academic identity, and a sense of community within the university (Chang et al., 2014; Gooden et al., 2020; Hellemens et al., 2023; List & Sorcinelli, 2018). Additionally, effective mentorship helps the mentee to navigate this transition with an outcome that leads to increased research, improved teaching strategies, enhanced job satisfaction, and higher retention rates (Hellemens et al., 2023). A mentor plays a critical role in helping you navigate how to effectively support your students, collaborate with colleagues, and contribute to the broader

university community (List & Sorcinelli, 2018). Success has been accomplished by utilizing mentorship to address barriers that hinder the progression of new faculty (Chang et al., 2014; Lewis & Olshansky, 2016;).

T.E. (Teacher Education) Time emerged as a mentorship program in response to the needs expressed by newly hired junior faculty in the Teacher Education department. Implementing a formal mentor program had not been a priority, until this point. Program creation and initiation occurred at a large public Southern University School of Education; that was composed of three departments: Teacher Education, Leadership and Counselor Education, and Higher Education. Program focus was centered around the Teacher Education department. The purpose of this program was to provide participants with mentorship that would help them to be successful as they transitioned into a faculty position.

Literature Review

In order to identify what kind of mentoring can be found in the T.E. Time structure, several different mentoring approaches are examined below. These approaches can be categorized as formal or informal based on how structured the approach may be (Hellemens et al., 2023).

Common Approaches to Mentorship

Some of the common approaches that higher educational institutions have adopted are the traditional mentor model, peer mentor model, intra departmental mentoring, and inter-departmental mentoring (Hellemens et al., 2023).

Traditional Mentor Model

The traditional mentor model can have a limited, one directional exchange of ideas and uses a formal approach. Historically mentor programs involve a novice (mentee) being paired with a veteran (mentor). The mentor is the authoritarian and the mentee is subordinate. The mentor yields power over the mentee that can mimic a parent/child dynamic (Chang et al., 2014). These types of mentorships are not beneficial, especially in a higher education setting where everyone is degreed and deserving of their faculty designation (List & Sorcinelli, 2018). This is a dated model of mentorship that is being replaced by others that are more collaborative, and mentee driven (Chang et al., 2014; Friedman et al., 2021).

Peer Mentor Model

The peer model uses an informal approach and is seen as being an open exchange of knowledge that is supportive of collaboration (Friedman et al., 2021). This evolving peer model of mentorship can be seen as a dyad, which has attributes that indicate a coaching/sponsorship model (Chang et al., 2014; Friedman et al., 2021; Gordon, 2017).

This model defines the mentor as a coach and the mentee as a protégé. Peer mentoring involves the participants having shared interest and tenure (Hellemens et al., 2023). There is limited research about this model.

Intra-Departmental and Inter-Departmental Mentor Models

Friedman et al., (2021) found that mentoring using an intra-departmental or inter-departmental model can also be beneficial. Intra-departmental mentoring consists of the participation of one department and, due to the closeness among the participants of this model, the focus is on departmental concerns. Opposite of the intra-departmental mentoring model, the inter-departmental mentoring model consists of more than one department that can be across the campus.

Lack of Mentorship in Higher Education

Unfortunately, despite the numerous models/ approaches described above, mentorship is not something that is required in higher education. The availability of a mentor program can vary by university, schools, and departments. This seems to be an oversight when you consider the fact that tenure and promotion are utilized to evaluate if a faculty member is successful regarding teaching, service, and research. Without formal programming, mentorship comes down to a chance encounter or relationship that develops between a junior and a more experienced faculty member, which creates an environment where inequities can be perpetuated. This lack of mentorship opportunities is an inequitable decision that needs to be rectified in higher education (Friedman et al., 2021).

Relational Cultural Theory and Mentorship

Developed by Jean Baker Miller, relational cultural theory (RCT) describes mentoring that is a collaboration between a defined mentor and mentee (Gordon, 2017). RCT consists of developing a relationship over time, regardless of if it is being classified as a formal or an informal approach. The relational aspect of this theory indicates that learning is occurring by both the mentor and the mentee learn (Gammel & Rutstein-Riley., 2016; Gordon, 2017). This mutually empowering relational connection facilitates a shared learning mentorship (Rector-Aranda, 2019).

Program

The creation of the T.E. Time mentoring program came from conversations of newly-hired faculty members, straight from the K-12 environment, and tenured-faculty members who had recently been promoted to the status of full professor. It became apparent early on that these new hires wanted the guidance mentorship could offer, and these established faculty members had the knowledge, time, and disposition towards passion

to devote to this support. After receiving positive feedback from both department leadership and junior faculty, planning began to create a program that would provide participants with knowledge and skills that would focus on teaching, service, research, and leadership began. These four core focus components drive the tenure and promotion process at the university, so it was imperative that the mentorship program should be based on these components also. Those early conversations with the newly hired faculty were to grasp what type of mentorship they were seeking.

While input from incoming faculty helped drive the creation of the program, ideas from tenured faculty were also solicited and incorporated into its development. These ideas ranged from how the mentorship could be developed, what topics could be covered, and how best to execute mentorship for the incoming faculty. Collecting a variation of ideas helped in making sure that the program would have a multitude of viewpoints to pull from. Since this mentorship was to aid in community building, it was decided that the program would be in-person rather than virtual. It would not be a formal assignment mentorship, but instead an open discussion format to allow an open exchange of ideas by all. This type of formatting led the program to be viewed with the lens of relational cultural theory (RCT) that was discussed prior. The mentorship occurred once a month during a non-teaching day for all participants.

Participants

In the beginning, T.E. Time was only open to junior faculty in the Teacher Education department. Due to all the participants being from one defined department, this made the mentorship an intra-departmental mentorship.

Identification of Mentors

There were two mentors that facilitated the program. They were both full professors who acquired tenure and promotion at the identified University. As professors in Teacher Education, they were chosen because they would be able to provide guidance to the incoming faculty as they navigated this transition in their career. One of the mentors was the Associate Dean of the School of Education. This mentor was chosen because they oversaw the promotion and tenure process and would be a useful asset for the junior faculty as they worked toward this milestone. The second chosen mentor had a history of mentoring in different arenas that would be beneficial to the program, including leading doctoral programs and advising some of the members of the junior faculty through their doctoral programs.

Identification of the Mentees

In the 2023-2024 academic year, six new teacher education faculty members were hired. Two of the newly hired faculty members were tenure-track and the remaining four were clinical faculty.

Of the six junior faculty members, five opted to participate in the mentoring program. All five participants had over fifteen years of experience in K-12 education as either classroom teachers and/or administrators.

Implementation of the Mentor Program

An email was sent to each of the newly hired junior faculty members with a description of the meeting and an invitation to attend the inaugural meeting. That inaugural meeting was utilized to discuss the frequency of the meetings, timing, location, and topics. The mentors felt that a monthly meeting format would be the most beneficial. It was decided that the meetings would be held on Fridays, due to the lack of classes held that day, in the School of Education in a lounge on the Teacher Education floor. At the beginning of each semester, the mentors would send an email to junior faculty with the dates and times of the meetings for that semester. The week of the meeting, the mentors would send an email that stated the topic for the upcoming meeting and ask for any other suggested topics to guide the open-ended discussion.

Methods

In the section below is a description of the data generation and analysis of the collected data.

Data Generation

Informal Survey: Mentors and Mentees

At the end of the T.E.Time program's initial year, the mentors and mentees evaluated the effectiveness of the program using an informal survey. The survey consisted of open-ended questions that addressed their experience within the mentoring program. The sample for the program was 5 mentees and 2 mentors. Each of the mentors completed the informal post survey consisting of the following questions:

1. Why did you feel a mentor was needed as you started in this role as early career faculty?
2. How did this mentorship contribute to your personal and professional development?
3. How do mentorship programs in higher education contribute to faculty development and support the tenure/promotion process?
4. What strategies do you suggest that higher education institutions use to institutionalize mentorship and make it an integral part of the academic culture?

The survey questions for mentees were identical to the questions that were submitted to the mentors, except for one question that explored the transition of the mentees from K12 to higher education.

Q1: How did mentorship support the transition from K12 to Higher Ed and facilitate your adjustment to being a full-time faculty member?

Data Analysis

Survey responses were analyzed using provisional coding (Saldaña, 2016). Excerpts were compared to the synthesized three aspects of a quality mentorship. As stated previously, research has identified that some of the positive attributes of a quality mentorship provides a knowledge exchange, academic identity, and a sense of community within the university (Chang et al., 2014; Gooden et al., 2020; Hellemens et al., 2023; List & Sorcinelli, 2018).

Findings & Discussions

Excerpts from the data aligned with the characteristics of a quality mentor program (knowledge exchange, academic identity and sense of community). Below are excerpts from the mentors and mentees that express their viewpoints about the program, the indicators of quality mentorship (knowledge exchange, academic identity, and sense of community), and relevant insights about the data related to the project.

Knowledge Exchange

Knowledge exchange is defined as the beneficial exchange of information and resources. Below are excerpts from the data and discussion from both the perspectives of the mentors and mentees on knowledge exchange.

Mentee Perspective on Knowledge Exchange

Analysis revealed that the information gained in the T.E. Time session provided “needed information or advice” that mentees conveyed around “curriculum vitae, research and writing agenda, conference presentations, faculty activity report, grant writing, and any other topics that were brought forward.” In addition, a mentee stated, “mentors provided true guidance and support for new faculty members to be able to do the same in their own work.” Further, one mentee stated, “Many of my adaptations had to do with logistics such as procedures and policies of the institution. Luckily, the mentors in this program were very flexible with the frequency of questions, concerns, or mere discussions about how to handle situations.” Both of these statements demonstrate an investment by the mentors in helping mentees traverse the same path, but with a better map.

Mentor Perspective on Knowledge Exchange

One mentor stated, “Mentors can provide clarity and keep new faculty moving forward.” which echoes an offloading of anxiety around the roles and responsibilities of the new position that the mentors can provide. Further, mentors stated, “This monthly meeting of early career faculty was where we could share insight, answer questions, and help make connections for writing and research projects.” and “I am able to clear up confusion in terms of department and university protocol.” The other mentor stated, “It was great to be able to

answer questions and hear the research interests of my colleagues.” In both instances, mentors suggested more “offloading” through knowledge exchange but also suggested that there is insight gained into the research and writing interests that could align with those of the mentors or other like-minded colleagues in the department or beyond.

Academic Identity

Academic identity is defined as perception of self and your actions in the higher education setting. Below are excerpts from the data and discussion from both the perspectives of the mentors and mentees on academic identity.

Mentee Perspective on Academic Identity

“There was much to discover about service and scholarship and how they play a vital role at the university level,” was a statement from a mentee that captured the overall sentiment of the group. Another mentee described the transition in considering the demands of a higher education position beyond teaching when they stated, “While I felt very comfortable with the teaching aspect of this faculty position, there was much to discover about service and scholarship and how they play a vital role at the university level.” Further they stated, “Having dedicated monthly meetings that covered these topics helped me develop my own individual growth plans to be sure I was meeting all expectations in this new role that were so vastly different from my K12 work.”

Mentor Perspective on Academic Identity

Mentors expressed a mutually beneficial perspective on development in this area. The general thought of the mentors was that by helping mentees understand the academic demands of the position they create partners for collaboration.

Sense of Community

Sense of community is defined as feelings of belonging. Below are excerpts from the data and discussion from both the perspectives of the mentors and mentees on sense of community.

Mentee Perspective on Sense of Community

So, the sense of community with the mentees which can be seen when one mentee stated, “We all are paddling towards tenure or promotion, so every meeting dealt with needed information or advice that was beneficial to my development.” In addition, another mentee stated, “This collaboration has allowed me the confidence to ask questions, seek guidance, and step outside of my comfort zone.”

So the sense of community feeds back into knowledge exchange in that the community has the expectation that there is an open understanding of the different degrees of knowledge in the room and that by asking questions you might be asking questions for someone that hasn't thought to ask it yet. These sentiments can be seen in

these statements, “These individuals do not mind taking the time to answer questions, talk through situations, and offer sound advice.” and “Having a dedicated mentorship helped me feel like I belonged and was valued as a new member of the faculty.”

Mentor Perspective on Sense of Community

The core intentions of the group formation were revealed by mentors through this aspect of quality mentorship. One mentor stated, “I wanted to create an environment for folks to find their people and get to where we go faster and without the stress and anxiety that can happen when you navigate this process alone.” The other mentor stated, “We wanted to help facilitate new faculty to get what we eventually were able to create in our working relationship together.” This, again, suggests a desire for the junior faculty to have an easier path than the mentors but not just for that purpose. Mentors also benefited from this aspect of mentorship, “I enjoyed getting to know our newly hired faculty on a more personal level and creating deeper connections with the faculty I already knew.”

In conclusion, the data analysis revealed that the T.E. Time mentor program provided the needed elements to be identified as a quality mentor program and met the expressed needs of the junior faculty. The first-year implementation also suggests that a similar type of mentorship should be a floor for welcoming junior faculty into higher education departments.

Limitations of the Study

1. The study consists of a small number of participants because participants were limited to junior teacher education faculty that started employment in the 2023 school year.
2. There is limited research of Relational Cultural Theory (RCT) being utilized in an intra-departmental mentoring model.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study helped to reiterate the need of mentorship programs in higher education to aid junior faculty who are coming from the K-12 setting to be successful as they transition into their role. This research focused only on the teacher education department. Further research could be conducted to analyze the impact of mentorship on junior faculty within other departments in the School of Education. The future research could be used to determine if this mentor model can be just as effective as it is or would it require changes to be effective in those departments.

Conclusion

Having an established mentor program for the mentorship of junior faculty by tenured faculty should be a consideration in all teacher education departments. The implementation of a mentor

program aids in supporting and nurturing the career development of junior faculty. The T. E. Time mentorship program gives insight into how a similar program can provide teaching strategies, self-empowerment, and career advancement. As the program progresses, and faculty continue their journey towards tenure and promotion, there will be an intentional focus on continuing to provide mentorship that focuses on knowledge exchange, academic identity, and a sense of community within the university.

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