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More than Mentors: Cultivating Networks of Support Through Writing, Grading, and Community

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University mentoring programs are a uniquely powerful tool for fostering developmental networks for faculty success. Faculty members who spend time in community with their colleagues in social environments designed to support their teaching and research enjoy a greater sense of wellbeing. Participating faculty members create spaces where sharing struggles and successes is normative and foster bonds that extend beyond their time together. This case study describes a faculty mentoring program at a public masters-level institution. Drawing from Self-Directed Learning, a key component of Knowles's Adult Learning Theory, the author utilized the National Center for Faculty Development and Diversity's Mentoring Map to guide faculty as they designed their own network of mentors based on their diverse needs. To address these needs, the author created a traditional mentoring program, Writing Accountability Groups, three themed communities of practice, and a community of support for the cumbersome task of grading student work. The Kirkpatrick and Kirkpatrick, Hines, and Kreber and Brook models guided assessment of these four programs. Participation varied, but assessment data was largely positive. Qualitative feedback highlighted the development of supportive and persistent networks and appreciation for useful resources, as well as challenges in participation when networks were not established successfully. Increasing participation is a key objective for improving faculty satisfaction with university mentoring support via these four programs.

Keywords: Mentoring, writing groups, communities of practice, self-directed learning

Introduction

University faculty mentoring programs facilitate developmental networks of support. Mentoring programs reduce isolation, foster belonging, and help preserve institutional norms and culture (Phillips & Dennison, 2015). Such improvements show promise for reducing faculty attrition. Seven-year data at the University of North Carolina-Greensboro showed substantially higher retention rates for faculty who participated in a mentoring program– 14% higher for faculty in general, 34% higher for diverse faculty (Phillips & Dennison, 2015). However, successful mentoring programs must be contextualized by needs, because clear, shared expectations between a mentor and protégé are the most important variable in mentoring program success (Clutterbuck & Lane, 2004). Where faculty are concerned, these needs show notable variance. This case study describes how one university educational developer addressed diverse faculty needs with four discrete professional development programs, each designed to contribute to a network of support and to foster advancement and wellbeing.

At Fort Hays State University (FHSU), tenure-track faculty carry a load of 60% teaching (four classes per semester), 20% scholarship, and 20% service. Non-tenure-track faculty typically carry heavier teaching loads, lighter scholarship responsibilities, and similar service obligations. Our university is heavily marketed as the most affordable four-year school in Kansas, promising "value," and our faculty are increasingly expected to utilize innovative instructional technology tools, create deeply engaging learning activities, and articulate connections to post-college marketability for students whose preparation for college study varies. Many full-time faculty teach both on campus and online, supervise graduate or undergraduate research, and serve on numerous committees.

Mentoring programs show promise for supporting these workload demands and improving faculty wellbeing, and our faculty members have requested mentoring dating at least as far back as a 2016 internal faculty development committee needs assessment. However, the diversity of our faculty needs necessitated offerings beyond a traditional mentoring program to create support for tenure and promotion processes, pedagogy, instructional technology, and research, as well as professional skills and wellbeing in an academic environment. Finally, professional development programming is rarely incentivized, creating an ongoing challenge for engaging busy faculty. So, mentoring programming must be compelling and faculty directed.

As an educational developer in FHSU's Teaching Innovation and Learning Technologies (TILT), I work to support faculty teaching and scholarship. Over the course of three years, I collaborated with our faculty development team, members of the Faculty Development Committee, and members of the Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) Committee to establish a traditional mentoring program offering both paired and group mentoring, Writing Accountability Groups (WAGs), Gather and Grade groups, and three themed communities of practice. Faculty self-registered for the programming they felt would best fit their needs. Those who engaged in these networks reported feeling more encouraged, less isolated, and more productive.

Literature Review

Knowles's (1968) Adult Learning Theory emphasized Self-Directed Learning (SDL), asserting that individuals become increasingly self-directed as they grow into adulthood, and should determine their own learning goals and learning experiences. Knowles (1975) proposed a linear six-step model for SDL: 1) setting the right climate, 2) identifying needs, 3) determining goals, 4) finding resources, 5) selecting and establishing strategies, and 6) evaluating outcomes (Merriam et al., 2007).

As faculty prepare to determine their own learning goals, they are likely to interact with their institution's Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL) and its educational developers. Faculty mentoring programs are typically situated in CTLs, as they align with a CTL's incubator role of providing an environment of belonging and nurturing faculty growth (Wright, 2023; POD Network, 2018). Research supports this role; Johnson (2007) found that mentoring programs were among the most effective methods for new faculty support and socialization, and Sorcinelli (2011) suggested that a network of mentors designed to support faculty in different ways provided an ideal protégé experience.

The National Center for Faculty Development and Diversity's (NCFDD, n.d.) Mentoring Map is designed to facilitate the network Sorcinelli (2011) recommended. This map prompts faculty to identify their needs holistically, based on research that confirms faculty benefit most from a map of mentors that collectively meet their diverse needs (NCFDD/COACHE, 2025). The NCFDD (n.d.) Map guides faculty to consider up to 64 individuals who can together offer "substantive feedback, sponsorship, access to opportunities, accountability for what really matters, role models, professional development, emotional support, intellectual community," and a "safe space."

As faculty work to determine their mentoring needs, they might consider Writing Accountability Groups (WAGs) as a resource for scholarship support. WAGs provide dedicated time for faculty to share their recent writing progress, work on writing tasks in silence, and then report progress and share goals for the next week (Skarupski, 2018). As faculty work to balance teaching, grading, and course preparation with service obligations and personal commitments, they often neglect their scholarship. Faculty members who participate in WAGs publish more frequently (Badenhorst, 2013; Chai et al., 2019; McGrail et al., 2006; Tysick & Babb, 2006). They also experience increased morale and feelings of community (Brandon et al., 2015), perhaps because WAGs reduce faculty isolation, offering collegiality and gentle accountability (Skarupski, 2018).

Grading Groups are a recent spinoff of WAGs; they provide dedicated time and accountability within a supportive community, so faculty may engage in a task that is traditionally solitary (UMass-Amherst, n. d.) and sometimes onerous. Grading groups are often available in Zoom or hybrid format (UMass-Amherst CTL, n. d.; UVM CTL, n. d.).

Unlike WAGs or grading groups which are defined by faculty working on independent tasks, Communities of Practice (CoP) are comprised of individuals who share enthusiasm for a topic or concerns about a topic, and who interact regularly to increase their skills and expertise (Wenger et al., 2002). CoP have a rich history, from the craft guilds of Middle Ages to Chrysler Corporation's Tech Clubs; members share insight, "help each other solve problems," and discuss issues, ideas, and policies (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 4). In academia, CoP provide knowledge sharing for faculty members looking to improve their teaching and institutional culture (De Carvahlo-Filho et al., 2020). CoP sustainably move beyond conventional faculty development workshops (Steinert, 2018) to create a shared identity among members who apply learnings to their daily practice (Krishnaveni & Sujatha, 2012; Wenger, 2000).

Several evidence-based models can be used for assessing mentoring programs like the four included in this study. Kirkpatrick and Kirkpatrick (2016) detailed four increasing levels of assessment: Reaction (engagement, satisfaction, and relevance), Learning (knowledge, skills, attitude, confidence, commitment), Behavior (changes in learner behavior following training), and Results (outcomes at both individual and organizational levels). Hines (2017) adapted the Kirkpatrick Model to educational development, adding Participation (tracking participation numbers, patterns, and frequencies) and disaggregating Results into Student Learning Outcomes and Impact on Institution. Kreber and Brook (2001) paid special attention to the importance of contextualizing training assessment.

Methodology

I chose a case study model because I wanted to share my experience implementing varied programs that collectively help create networks of

faculty support, so that other mentoring program managers and educational developers might consider how they can address diverse faculty needs at their own schools. I utilized SDL principles because choice in professional development learning goals, content, and implementation is vital for adult learners (Knowles, 1968). The programming presented in this case study began in Fall 2022 and continued through Spring 2025. This study was approved as a case study (determination of not research) via Fort Hays State University, IRB reference #25-0134.

Surveys were administered to participants in Spring 2025. Quantitative questions aligned with Kirkpatrick's Four Levels of Training Evaluation (Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick, 2016). Qualitative items requested additional explanation of quantitative responses and provided fields for open feedback. I relied on Kreber and Brook's (2001) recommendations for contextual educational development assessment to determine which program to assess at which level. I also collected participation data and online resource utilization in alignment with the Hines Model (2017).

Programming

Faculty Mentoring Faculty (FMF)

I established a traditional faculty mentoring program, with paired and group mentoring, based on an explicit charge within our institutional Faculty Development Committee. A dedicated subcommittee reviewed research on mentoring programs, developed a vision and goals, interviewed department chairs about needs, and presented a summary to deans and chairs in Summer 2021. The following year, our subcommittee wrote best practices, and I revised the NCFDD map to make it less overwhelming; I reduced the original 64 fields to 14 fields across seven categories: tenure and promotion, social-emotional support, cultural assimilation, same-culture support, research, educational technology support, and teaching support.

I provided junior faculty with the revised map and guided them in determining their mentoring needs, in alignment with SDL principles. I facilitated six roundtable events each year in 2022-2023 and 2023-2024. Each was focused on a specific topic, with guiding questions created by our subcommittee. Mentors and protégés spent the fall semesters getting to know one another and were paired based on mutual interest in the spring. In Fall 2024, I added a seventh mentoring session at New Faculty Orientation; mentors spoke with new faculty members, in a roundtable session. Over the past three years, focus has shifted to groups of mentors and protégés visiting at events, without necessarily pairing up in the spring.

Writing Accountability Groups (WAGs)

After reviewing our university's 2023 Faculty Morale Survey (n= 299) to find our faculty were more satisfied with support for their teaching than they were with support for scholarship, I read research about scholarship-focused programming. Akerlind (2005) found that faculty members wished professional development was holistic rather than focused on pedagogy, and Skarupski (2018) established WAGs that provided faculty dedicated time and space for scholarly work. I sent an interest survey to all faculty and used the results to establish two groups in Summer 2022: One was a WAG, aligned with Skarupski's (2018) model but expanded to a two-hour meeting time, and the second was a Write on Site group wherein members simply met and wrote in silence together for two hours. Both groups functioned as WAGs by the end of the summer, due to participants' requests.

From Fall 2022 onward, there have been five to six WAGs each semester and two WAGs each summer. In all semesters, at least one WAG is offered via Zoom. Each WAG has one to two key facilitators and several backup facilitators.

Gather and Grade

The Gather and Grade program began in Spring 2024, inspired by communal grading events at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst. I scheduled bi-monthly Gather and Grade sessions throughout the spring, all in hybrid format. By Spring 2025, we moved to a weekly Zoom format, based on faculty feedback.

Communities of Practice (CoP)

I augmented the networks provided by FMF, WAGs, and Gather and Grade with three Communities of Practice (CoP) in Fall 2024. The CoP were focused on 1) WAC, 2) Grants and Other Funding, and 3) Alternative Grading. Each CoP was facilitated by appropriate institutional experts: Our WAC committee chair and the director of our university's Writing Center co-facilitated the WAC CoP, our Office of Research facilitated the Grants and Other Funding CoP, and three faculty members who have presented and published research on Alternative Grading facilitated this CoP.

I provided several support measures to these facilitators. I shared De Carvahlo-Filho et al.'s (2020) Twelve Tips for Implementing a Community Practice for Faculty Development with all facilitators, co-funded copies of Licklider's (2012) Grant Seeking in Higher Education for Grants and Other Funding participants, and funded copies of Clark and Talbert's (2023) Grading for Growth for the Alternative Grading participants. I also attended at least the first session of each CoP. All CoP were scheduled monthly, for the months of September, October, November, February, March, and April. CoP varied in modality; Grants and Other Funding was facilitated entirely on Zoom, Alternative Grading entirely on campus, and WAC in hybrid format.

For all four of these programs–Faculty Mentoring Faculty, Writing Accountability Groups,

Gather and Grade, and the three Communities of Practice–our faculty development team managed marketing, registration, attendance-taking, and assessment.

Findings

In alignment with the Hines Model (2017), participation data included frequencies, recorded here as attendance instances. See Table 1 for details. Overall, the number of participants doubled, and attendance frequency rates increased by nearly 30%: Each participant attended an average of 8.7 instances in 2022-2023 and 11.28 instances in 2024-2025. However, participation in Faculty Mentoring Faculty declined from 29 faculty attending an average of 1.9 events in 2022-2023 to 19 faculty attending an average of 1.21 events in 2024-2025; this change occurred in tandem with a shift from mentoring pairs to group mentoring. Conversely, website clicks on Faculty Mentoring Faculty resources doubled each year, from 28 in 2022-2023 to 62 in 2023-2024 and 123 in 2024-2025. However, this increase coincides with an increase in the number of these resources as well, because the Faculty Mentoring Faculty Subcommittee wrote additional discussion questions for mentoring events each year.

The WAGs remain the most reliable source of engagement; each participant attended an average of 12.16 sessions in 2022-23, 16.08 sessions in 2023-2024, and 19.63 sessions in 2024-2025. Gather and Grade events show potential for similar participation patterns, if there are more faculty interested in meeting weekly. As the CoP were new in 2024-2025, we merely established a baseline for this program: 55 participants accounted for 66 participation instances, a frequency rate of 1.2 events per participant.

Table1.
Participation and Participation Frequency Rate Over Time

Program	2022-2023		2023-2024		2024-2025	
	Total Participants	Total Attendance Instances	Total Participants	Total Attendance Instances	Total Participants	Total Attendance Instances
Faculty Mentoring Faculty	29	56	24	40	19	23
Writing Accountability Groups	32	389	39	627	51	1001
Gather and Grade	n/a	n/a	6 (spring only)	6 (spring only)	9	72
Communities of Practice	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	55	66
Total	51	445	54	667	103	1162

In Spring 2025, all programs were formally assessed using quantitative questions based on Kirkpatrick and Kirkpatrick's (2016) Four Levels of Training Evaluation. In alignment with Kreber and Brook's (2001) recommendations to contextualize assessment, programs were assessed at varying levels. All programs were assessed for participant Reaction (Kirkpatrick Level 1). This level addressed the extent to which respondents find a program favorable, relevant, and engaging; 93.2% of survey respondents (n=104) found programming satisfactory at this level. WAGs, Gather and Grade events, and CoP were also assessed for Learning (Kirkpatrick Level 2), which measured the extent to which respondents felt confident to apply what they learned and committed to doing so; 96.2% of respondents (n=52) agreed with indicators at this level. WAGs, Gather and Grade events, and CoP were also assessed for Behavior (Kirkpatrick Level 3), and Results (Kirkpatrick Level 4); 88.4% of respondents (n=69) applied what they learned to their work via behavior changes for Level 3, and 91% of respondents (n=33) reported positive outcomes from doing so, for Level 4. Qualitative feedback highlighted the development of supportive networks, as well as challenges in participation when those networks were not established: "It was a lot of trust and relationship-building. I shared some of the challenges I had had…I wanted her to know this was a safe place." ~FMF participant

- "These are people I would not talk to regularly, so it is nice to be connected in this way and not just going through the motions of grading." ~Gather & Grade participant
- "My group has formed some really nice 'bonds' that help us feel comfortable and accepted at our writing time." ~FMF participant
- "I was never officially paired with anyone. It made attending the evens [sic] seem more optional to me because accountability wasn't as strong." ~FMF participant
- "I think WAGs with under 5 participants should

be canceled, as I was frequently by myself, which defeats the purpose of a WAG." ~WAG participant.

Discussion

The implementation of these four programs led to reports of increased connection, greater productivity, and reduced isolation, affirming the power of mentoring to facilitate faculty success via networks of support. Programs that met weekly (WAGs, Gather and Grade) enjoyed more persistent engagement and better outcomes than those that met monthly (FMF and CoP). Participants in weekly programs also reported sharing frustrations and good news with their colleagues, affirming Wenger's (2000) description of the engagement mode of belonging, and they more often cited a feeling community or support, aligning with evidence about the social and supportive benefits of writing groups (Skarupski, 2018).

These results also underscored the SDL pillar of learner choice: WAGs and Gather and Grade could be perceived as offering a greater degree of choice; participants selected their own grading tasks to address or manuscripts to work on, at these events. On the contrary, both FMF and CoP involved assigned topics or themes. For example, the topic for the September FMF session was tenure processes; a faculty member interested in methods for assessing collaborative learning had to wait until the October session, when this topic was addressed.

Conclusion

Looking ahead, various changes hold potential for improvement. Utilizing the Mentoring Map at a New Faculty Orientation and biannual professional development days may prompt more faculty to consider their mentoring needs throughout their careers. Revising the map to include programming–like FMF, WAGs, Gather and Grade, and CoP–may inspire faculty to consider these opportunities and increase participation. Scheduling more frequent meetings for the FMF and CoP may improve engagement by creating stronger connections and, therefore, greater accountability and belonging. As well, increasing choice in FMF by offering sessions without set topics or with a variety of topics may increase interest, per SDL. Finally, creating as many mentor pairs as possible might increase engagement with FMF.

Incorporating these improvements could increase institutional awareness and participation in programs, thereby bringing more faculty into the fold of developmental networks. Faculty members' diverse workloads, increasing pedagogical demands, and personal obligations call for varied and diverse mentoring programming they can self-select, based on their own goals and preferred learning experiences.

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