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# Mentoring Faculty Through Tenure and Beyond

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Although Black women are experiencing improved health due to increased national attention to their unique concerns, empirical studies amassing within the body of literature associate discrimination and unfair treatment with impaired physical and mental wellbeing for Black women faculty at predominantly White institutions (PWIs). Cultural taxation, isolation and alienation, unequal distribution of labor, tokenism, microaggressions and more make it difficult for Black women to persist through the tenure process. Moreover, no approach yielding positive outcomes for Black women faculty at PWIs based on various assessment measures has been realized. This highlights the need for more specialized mentoring efforts that can support Black women through the rigorous teaching, scholarship, service, and wellness journey to tenure and beyond. To address the presenting need, a revitalized, multidimensional approach to mentoring and wellness is recommended. The model uses age-old approaches and new methods. Central to the goals of the model are developmental considerations, institutional support of faculty wellness, intentional training of mentors, recognition of mentee lived experiences, and activities that support progress to tenure and protection of health and wellness. The focus of this paper centers mentoring for Black women faculty enroute to tenure at a PWI. The proposed intervention, however, is a career spanning support model adaptable for use with any group regardless of tenure status or identity. The proposed model can also be useful for continuing faculty experiencing issues of burnout or wellness challenges stemming from work-related stress on college and university campuses.

Keywords: Faculty mentoring, tenure, Black women, health and wellness, coaching

## Introduction

Black women in the US have experienced improved health and wellbeing due to increased attention to health disparities and social determinants of health (Chinn, et al, 2021). Conceptual papers and empirical studies amassing within the literature, however, associate the marginalizing experiences that Black women faculty endure at predominantly White institutions (PWIs) with impaired health and wellness outcomes. Reports of isolation, disrespect, invalidation, microaggressions, and other forms of poor treatment are historic and ongoing because of Black women's social location and the unique nature of their lives with respect to race and gender (see Collins, 1986; Harley, 2008; Howard-Baptiste & Harris, 2014; Martinez et al, 2023; Moses, 1989; Perry 2024; Pittman, 2010; Reeves et al., 2024; Simmons et al, 2021; Stroebe, 2020).

A well-documented body of knowledge confirms correlations between gendered racism, psychological distress, and physical health problems in Black women (see Greer, Lasiter, & Asiamah, 2009; Krieger, 1990, 2000; Spates et al, 2020; Szymanski & Stewart, 2010). These conditions, coupled with the everyday challenges Black women face in their personal lives, may compromise Black women's ability to remain focused and healthy and produce the scholarship, service, and teaching excellence required for tenure and promotion. In their longitudinal study of Black female faculty members and their journey to tenure, Kelly and Wilkens-Wagner (2017) discovered an interesting finding. One subject, in the middle of her tenure review, concluded that in order to remain healthy, she had to leave academe. This highlights the critical need for focused mentoring interventions that address unique faculty needs.

Upon entering the 21st century, the landscape of higher education was changing. Mentoring programs with goals of increasing faculty diversity were implemented. Nevertheless, an ideal model yielding positive outcomes for Black women faculty at PWIs based on various assessment measures has been realized. In this paper, we offer a revitalized model of mentoring to improve the experiences of Black women faculty in pursuit of tenure at PWIs. We propose a comprehensive mentoring method incorporating constellations of helpers who support Black women with developing the necessary tools for gaining tenure and promotion, and with protecting their health and wellbeing.

The paper begins with a review of the existing bodyof knowledge on mentoring. We cite the benefits and challenges of traditional mentoring. Because of the lack of empirical research on mentoring Black women faculty at PWIs, two general interventions with Black women are presented and examined to draw out factors that

made the initiatives successful from a cultural standpoint. Next, Zey's (1991) developmental levels of mentoring support in 4 domains are discussed and proposed Zey. Supportive mentoring constellations, according to Johnson & Griffin, 2024, are discussed. Finally, wellness initiatives posed by Harris et al (2025) is examined. In the proposed model, emphasis is placed on the importance of institutional values around health and wellness and the availability of optional wellness coaching for Black women faculty. Potential benefits and limitations of the proposed intervention, and recommendations for future research are shared.

The authors acknowledge that while gendered racism is offensive and it makes Black women sick, continuing faculty, White faculty, men and other groups can also be subjected to discrimination and other abuses that are equally injurious. As examples, a lawsuit was filed by a male faculty member alleging sexual harassment and climate abuse (see Panwar & Banda, 2025). Flannery (2024) said faculty are physically exhausted and experiencing sleep deprivation and mental health challenges as a result of their attempts to meet student mental health demands. For these reasons, the authors have proposed a mentoring model that is flexible and adaptable.

## Literature Review

According to Mullins and Klimaitis (2021), mentoring is challenging to define, and there is no standard operating framework that offers a standard approach. Based on the prevailing literature, mentoring can be formal or informal; structured or naturally occurring; goal specific or open-ended with no specific target in mind, and much more. In any instance, mentoring at its heart is the nexus of human development theory and practice. According to Kram (1983) mentoring involves intentional processes of skilled people helping the less skilled. It is essential for the growth and development of both the seasoned mentor and the inexperienced mentee. Grounded in social learning theory, situated learning occurs when experts and novices work and communicate in proximity to each other. This is legitimate peripheral participation (see Lave & Wenger, 1991). Ongoing dialogue between mentor and mentee are important to mentee development (Arnesson & Albinsson, 2017) as intellectual growth is demonstrated as progressive shift in complexity of thought and accumulation of information driven by deliberate verbal exchange (see Vygotsky, 1934/1986). Eby and Robertson (2020) say that healthy attachment, interdependence, and self-expansion as motivation is important to mentor/mentee success, and Johnson and Griffin (2024) emphasize the importance of mentoring as an emotional support tool.

Yun et al. (2016) conclude that mentoring networks rather than dyadic relationships yield a higher level of satisfaction and greater retention. Notably, these models also mitigate unfair treatment such as cultural taxation and identity-based service burdens that traditional mentoring often ignores (Morton & Gil, 2019; Harris et al., 2025). Kroll (2016) offers 4 frameworks for group mentoring: many to one, one to many, many to many, and peer groups. Kroll contends group mentoring as intentionally inclusive and it dislocates hierarchy. Further, group mentoring cultivates community, supportive interdependence, and shared success. The co-constructed peer mentoring model described by Morton and Gil (2019) reimagines the tenure journey as one that is collective. The model validates both professional aspirations and personal wellness goals, while affirming that faculty do not have to navigate academia in isolation.

Mentoring is not without problems. According to Johnson and Griffin (2024), there is the possibility for poorly matched mentors and mentees. Some mentors seek to reproduce themselves in their mentees. Poorly trained mentors may cross professional boundaries, neglect mentees, or display a lack of respect for differences. Incompetent mentors exhibit poor relational skills, and they may fail to advocate on behalf their mentees. Kram (1983) had previously cited trust concerns between mentors and mentees. Mentees can feel as though mentors intentionally thwart their progress, while mentors may feel that mentees are a threat to their job security and workplace notoriety.

## Sisters Project

### After Tenure

What happens to Black women faculty after tenure-oriented mentoring seasons are complete and tenure has been achieved? Many newly tenured Black women remain in the same institutions where the same unwelcoming attitudes continue to plague the institutional landscape. While their coping skills may be better, and their capacity to address marginalization and unfair treatment may have improved, what happens to Black women faculty as they seek to advance as full professors? This is why it is important for mentoring to evolve from a tenure track focus to a holistic career spanning support model. Career span faculty mentoring challenges isolationist norms within academic culture and encourages ongoing collaboration and support rather than competition and individualism (Savitzky et al., 2022; Morton & Gil, 2019).

In the next section, interventions that promote the success of Black women faculty, staff, and professionals are reviewed. Although there is a body of literature/conceptual papers, which describe the problems that Black women face at PWIs, research is absent. Much of the limited research on mentoring Black women in the academy focuses on faculty-student relationships, or they focus on women or people of color. Nevertheless, it is important to reference some studies to identify factors that contribute to the

success of developmental interventions for Black women in general from a sociocultural standpoint. Two important studies have been identified. The first is a Sisters' network at Central Florida University (see Green & King, 2001). The second is a wellness intervention for BIPOC women faculty in pharmacy (see Harris et al., 2025).

**Sociocultural Considerations for Mentoring Black Women Faculty**

At Central Florida University, a Sisters' project was established in the late 20th century to improve the recruitment, retention, career advancement and experiences of women and diverse groups on campus (Green & King, 2001). The institution recognized the low representation of Black women among faculty and staff and sought to help Black women with dismantling workplace barriers such as racism and blatant discriminatory practices. Leadership development and empowerment was central to the goals of the program. Participants were responsible for addressing the barriers they faced through a specific operating framework of learning new skills and knowledge for leadership development and career advancement. The project was also put in place to bring Black women together who were otherwise physically apart from one another and unaware of their shared struggles at this large institution.

The authors cite the uniqueness of the program, which focused on both personal and professional development of the entire population of Black women employed with the institution including faculty, staff, and facilities personnel. The program was facilitated from an Africentric worldview with leadership principles taught using the social, cultural, and spiritual framework of the Nguzo Saba: unity, collective work and responsibility, cooperative economics, creativity, faith, purpose, and self-determination. The structure of the program included focus group sessions to identify problems and mentoring group sessions to examine ways to resolve problems. A majority of the sessions were led by Black women, including Black women of national recognition.

No formal assessment of the Sisters' Project was initiated. The authors argued that the success of the program was indicated by participants' desire to continue in the project. Women were pleased with the new knowledge gained regarding Africentric values, and they experienced an improved sense of empowerment in their roles at the institution.

Harris et al. (2025), explores how Black women faculty engage in mentorship as a form of cultural care, resistance, and leadership within PWIs. Rather than following traditional hierarchical models, the mentorship described is relational, reciprocal, and rooted in shared lived experiences. Grounded in Black feminist thought, this model prioritizes emotional and spiritual wellbeing alongside professional development.

With this model, mentoring occurs informally through text messages, hallway conversations, or spontaneous calls. The focus is on checking in to discern the mentee's spirit status as much as their career path. Participants described this work as "spiritual stewardship," highlighting participants' deep sense of responsibility and commitment to communal care. These mentoring relationships function as critical counterspaces, offering validation, healing, and affirmation in environments that often marginalize Black women. While this kind of mentorship goes largely unrecognized for institutional metrics like tenure and promotion, this invisible labor is central to sustaining mentors and mentees.

From these 2 interventions for Black women, we have learned several important factors. In the first instance, institutional support from the program encouraged participation. Next, Black women appreciate Black women mentoring Black women in group settings. Third, the routinized nature of the program activities within the workplace may have also encouraged participation. Finally, taking ownership for intervention outcomes may have been another key to driving committed engagement. In the second instance, we learned that successful mentoring interventions for Black women consider inclusion of Black cultural values such as nurturance and spirituality. The researcher may have recognized the time constraints that Black women faculty face, therefore the intervention was more informal and less structured.

**A Revitalized Mentoring Model**

In this section of the paper, the career spanning mentoring model encompassing development and constellations of engagement is presented. It has been shaped according to Zey (1991), Johnson & Griffin (2024), and Harris et al (2025). The model encourages institutional values around health and wellness and recognition of Black women's culture. Thoughts on successful implementation and maintenance of this intervention is discussed along with potential benefits and limitations of the proposed model. Recommendations for future research is offered.

**Developmental Interventions in Mentoring According to Zey (1991)**

Zey (1991) proposes 4 functions of mentoring that facilitates the successful achievement of tenure, benefits the mentor, and supports the institution. They are teaching, counseling, organizational intervention and promotion. The first intervention is when the mentor shares information, experience, expertise, and other relevant information with the mentee about the institution, department, and/or discipline. This can be formal or informal sharing that promotes successful career development of the mentee, including achieving tenure and promotion. For the presenting population, it is important that relationship building activities precede engagement to build trust and to establish a healthy connection before jumping in the frying pan. It should be the understanding

of the mentor and mentee that they have the potential to become long-term colleagues rather than incidental employees.

The next level, counseling, involves the mentor's role as an emotional support person for the mentee. The goal here is to build up the mentee's self-esteem, motivation, and confidence. An experienced faculty mentor must be sufficiently relational in order for mentees to benefit from this level of engagement so that damage does not take place. Training is crucial to this activity because this aspect of mentoring intervention requires the investment of emotion, empathy, and time to assist mentees with concerns like fear of failure or performance issues. This leads to the next point.

## Findings

The organizational intervention level is about advocacy. It occurs when the mentor is willing to go above and beyond to openly support a protégé as necessary. The mentor takes the risk of engaging higher ups and peer colleagues regarding his or her mentee. The mentor understands that their reputation is on the line, but they want to protect and secure the success of their mentee. The goal of the fourth and last level of mentoring, which is promotion, is a mentor's actual recommendation that a mentee should be advanced. This means that a mentee believes that his or her investment in the novice faculty member has paid off.

Zey's (1991) model is not without problems. First, it requires highly skilled, cooperative mentor who can endure in this long-term commitment because it is a major investment of time and energy. The individual must be secure in themselves as well. Nevertheless, this approach is included in the proposed mentoring model for Black women faculty at PWIs because this level of engagement has the potential to cultivate deep learning and faculty retention. As the mentor and mentee grow in their relationship with each other, a career spanning paradigm of mentoring may be possible although the specific nature of the engagement will shift somewhat to more of a peer-to-peer relationship. Although Zey implicates one-on-one mentoring dyads, the 4-level model may be equally as effective using more than one mentor. This leads to the next discussion on Johson and Griffin's (2024) mentoring constellations.

### Mentoring Constellations

According to Johnson and Griffin (2024), development networks are the same as mentoring constellations; that is, a collection of valuable individuals, supporters, and assistants for a mentee.Within this ecosystem, there are primary mentors, secondary mentors, tertiary mentors, and culture mentors who articulate the ethos of the institutional macrosystem. As is the case with Zey (1991), these mentoring relationships are important to the short- and long-term success of a mentee.

Primary mentors are those who are involved at the interpersonal level. They are supporters, confidants, and advocates. They can be departmental colleagues or other close relationship with someone in the mentee's supporters like a spouse or close friend. Secondary mentors are those who are more collegial and less personally involved with a mentee. They are role models who translate key functions through casual interactions. Within the mentoring exosphere are tertiary mentors who are more formal role models not intimately engaged with a mentee, but are functionally assistive.

Culture mentors are represented by campus leadership. According to Johnson and Griffin (2024), their activities and attitudes determine whether or not a mentee believes in their ability to be successful at an institution.

Several variables determine the success of mentoring constellation: resources, attitudes, worldviews, strength of ties, motivation, and behaviors. The quality of interventions within a mentoring constellation is more important than the number of mentors. The benefits of this approach, as well as Zey's (1991) approach is that mentoring is a shared responsibility. Mentees benefit from the village, and mentees have immediate alternative options if a specific mentor within the constellation does not work out.

### The Importance of Wellness

Harris' study emphasized that for Black women faculty, mentorship is not merely a professional obligation but also a wellness practice and liberatory act that nurtures collective resilience and affirms identity in the face of systemic inequities. Black women already experience disparate health circumstances based on their race and gender, and associated social determinants of health (Chinn et al., 2021). The results of Harris' intervention emphasizes healing through spirituality and connectedness with peers. Recognition of this is important in the aftermath of the suicide and sudden death of Black female campus leaders in 2024. Wellness connections are critical to Black women's persistence at PWIs.

To avoid accusations of stereotyping, Black women faculty need to be able to choose wellness partners so they can journey together. This may be Black women on campus, in the community, or at other institutions. Further, Institutions may need to examine the requirements for tenure in the scholarship and service paradigms to ensure that all faculty can retain their health and wellbeing during the tenure process.

The revitalized model of mentoring Black women on their journey to tenure is comprised of three domains. The first domain consists of Zey's first and second levels of engagement, and Johnson and Griffin's primary and secondary mentors. Within this domain, Black women faculty have a network of primary supporters and informants with whom they interact with on a regular basis formally and informally. They can be faculty, non-faculty, or community members such Black religious leaders or Black entrepreneurs in town who have formally

connected with the institution to offer assistance. Written agreements are in place, and mutual benefits have been identified. These mentors may text, check-in on, or grab lunch with a mentee to assess their wellbeing on occasion.

The second domain of the revitalized model consists of mentors who are peripheral to the teaching and support component of mentoring but are organizational champions who will demonstrate to Black women faculty that the institution is committed to their success. As an added dimension to second domain mentoring, cross institutional engagement is suggested when there is a paucity of Black women mentors on a campus. As an example, if a Black women faculty member in a STEM field is the only Black female in her department or within her school or college at a large university, she should be introduced to senior Black female faculty at neighboring institutions who can mentor her. This can be a great arrangement in large school systems with multiple campuses like the Pennsylvania State University, the California State and University of California systems, or institutions which are not competing with one another for faculty. Agreements can be established to avoid conflicts of interest or quiet recruiting.

Finally, the third domain of mentoring in the revitalized model are the health and wellness emphases. Many campuses already have a wellness culture embedded in their campus communities, but they are often not incorporated into mentoring initiatives for new faculty. Mentoring events often involves group meals and social outings. While beneficial, these do not zero in on the silent issues of stress and health problems which are often not talked about in these settings. Health-related workshops and seminars, guest speakers from the healthcare sector, and culturally focused health coaching specific to Black women's health and wellness needs must ground this aspect of the mentoring initiative. Providing such is a demonstration of institutional excellence and a definitive show of care for Black women's persistence.

## Discussion

### Benefits and Challenges of the Proposed Model

The benefits of this program have been established. With the large connection, mentees have greater opportunities to gain colleagues who will coach them to success, learn the campus culture, and remain motivated to secure their own success and longevity on campus. Black women faculty who have been effectively mentored can become mentors to other Black women faculty.

To implement a program of this magnitude, an institution must buy in and be willing to put forth the resources to make it successful. First, organizing the plan will take dedicated staff time to collect and train the cadre of voluntary and compensated mentors. Intentional training and ongoing discussions with mentors are important to check in with mentors and see how they are faring. To that end, what is in it for the mentors? What incentives will be made available to encourage the sustained relationship? If a mentor already has tenure, what value is there in simply highlighting on their CVs that they mentored a new faculty member? Next, PWIs must be open advocates for improved treatment of all faculty. Institutions must have a commitment to abolish reckless abuse and prejudice of any kind. The proposed intervention should have rigorous, ongoing evaluation and assessment component to measure the impact of every interaction, and to solicit feedback from all involved.

### Limitations

Due to the outlay of human and financial resources, the need for a coordinated planning team, dedicated assessment efforts, and effective management and coordination of this proposed program which would serve all faculty, a dedicated administrator should be hired. Depending on the size of the institution and the numbers of Black women and other faculty needing pre-tenure and post-tenure mentoring, an institution must make mentoring a priority despite budget and staff challenges.

## Conclusion

Implementation of any initiatives that focuses on a target population presents a challenge considering the mandate that colleges and universities refrain from diversity-related activities. However, this is a flexible model that is appropriate for any new faculty member or for faculty members who need a boost of motivation during stressful seasons of their academic or personal lives. Further, the authors of this paper recognize that White faculty and men also experience environmental challenges on college and university campuses. It will take a skillful person to understand how to address the diversity of users, but recognition of faculty lived experience is as important as recognition of students' lived experiences. Finally, more empirical research is needed on mentoring Black women faculty in pursuit of tenure at PWIs.

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