

**Reflections on Experience: A Community of Practice Mentoring Initiative
for Mid-career Professionals**

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Mid-career mentoring can be a strategy for reinvigorating the energies, talents, and commitments of mid-career professionals. In this article, we write from the perspective of our experiences as designers and directors of a mid-career program that originated with funding from an NSF Adaptation grant. Thus, we bring to this discussion both an awareness of scholarly literature on the topic and experience with the practical challenges of implementation, which we hope will be helpful for others who are trying to enrich their scholarly understanding of mentoring or broaden their mentoring practice. Specifically, we describe a program designed to be a more responsive, communal, and practice-based model of mentoring at the mid-career phase that adapts Community of Practice (CoP) principles to a peer mentoring format within an academic community.

Post-tenure is much like the mid-career stage in other fields, which in some regards represents a maintenance phase (Super, 1957), but at the same time can be ill-defined and beset by structural, political, and personal quandaries that must be negotiated by the individual (Baldwin et al., 2008; Collin, 1984; Israel, 2020). The academic mid-career phase typically consists of the rank of associate professor, which can last from just a few to over 20 years depending on the individual. This is a period when some individuals may need to update their knowledge and skills, some may plateau, and others may continue pre-tenure career trajectories.

While some issues may be specific to academe, many are similar to what mid-career professionals in other organizational settings encounter. Thus, we emphasize the ways we adapted our program that encourage responsiveness to the daunting expectations and demands at this stage, particularly those often faced by women and under-represented and/or traditionally marginalized minorities (UR-TM). Altogether, our reflections suggest that site-specific

adaptations and flexibility can be key to a successful mid-career mentoring program both in academia and in other professions.

Our commitment to the CoP mentoring model and to the value of mid-career mentoring is premised not only in evidence-based models but also in our own experiences as designers, directors, and advocates for our program. We draw connections across research on organizational gender, learning, and mentoring to frame our observations. The generalizations and conclusions we offer are premised in self-reflection and subject to our own positioned perspectives (Chiseri-Strater, 1996). In this regard, our scholarly profiles are decidedly feminist and service-oriented. We have served on a variety of women-focused campus programs and academic committees for over 30 years; together, we developed a campus-wide Diversity Literacy program and wrote, along with colleagues, two successful NSF ADVANCE grant proposals. We make no apologies for our commitments to proactively pursuing equitable conditions and opportunities for women and UR-TM faculty. That said, the generalizations and conclusions we offer are admittedly informed by our perspectives; we provide citations and data where available but take full responsibility for offering explanations that make sense from where we stand.

We begin with a brief review of the need for mentoring at the mid-career stage for tenured academics. Following our review, we describe our program and rationale for a peer-mentoring model that adapts a CoP approach and reflect on five assumptions that we had to counter to realize the program's success. We conclude with some recommendations for those considering using this approach.

Why Mid-career Faculty Need Mentoring

From our survey of the scholarship on mentoring in practice, we have found a prevalent assumption that mentoring is mostly for those in the early career stage. Despite the previous organizational investments made in someone who has reached the mid-career stage, there is surprisingly little programmatic focus on sustained, institutionalized developmental support, whether training or mentoring, to address ongoing career development and changing work/life demands (Moen et al., 2017). The situation in academia is illustrative. Obtaining tenure is both requisite and arduous; the institution has a clear vested interest in this accomplishment while pre-tenure faculty have their careers on the line. Thus, pre-tenure faculty are typically assumed to benefit from institutionalized mentoring programs. In contrast, post-tenure faculty are assumed to have the knowledge, experience, and track record to continue their careers and contributions autonomously (Goltz et al., 2019). For example, our own institution initiated two formal and rather labor-intensive programs for new employees (an initial intensive orientation week and an ongoing set of mentoring meetings in year one) well before anyone ever considered creating mentoring programs for more senior employees.

A lack of clearly defined developmental career pathways can be derailing, both in academe and in the corporate world (Power & Routhausen, 2003). In academe, the mid-career path is often ill-defined with vague or poorly delineated progress criteria, lack of clarity about career opportunities, and increased responsibility for service tasks (Baldwin et al., 2008). At the same time, for many faculty, the mid-career level is a period of transition that can be highly stressful (Halat et al., 2023). Career transitions can require ongoing decisions, adjustments, and redirections (Sullivan & Al Ariss, 2021). Baker and Manning (2021) reviewed research on the mid-career faculty stage, noting that although mid-career faculty serve as the backbone of

universities, they face a lot of pressures that may or may not be supported with sufficient faculty development resources. Within academia, getting beyond the associate faculty level to the next level—full professor—entails a great deal of specialized knowledge, ongoing effort, and access to opportunities (Baldwin et al., 2008).

Further, career progress may be hampered by unexpected obstacles, particularly for professionals in UR-TM groups. Research indicates these groups tend to stall at mid-career, with far fewer than might be expected rising to upper managerial ranks (Canale et al., 2013; Powell & Butterfield, 2015). This is most likely because of the additional difficulties they face (cf. Croom, 2017; Martinez-Cola, 2020). As Täuber (2020) observed of her experiences as a woman faculty member, mid-career faculty who identify as women or from UR-TM groups often struggle to acquire organization-specific knowledge about what really counts apart from formal requirements; must overcome overtly-denied biases that favor in-group members; and too often have to navigate relationships marred by microaggressions, betrayals, and disappointments (see also Kulp et al., 2022). Supporting women faculty in developing their sense of agency during these years is critical to their retention and career progress (Terosky et al., 2014).

Furthermore, mid-career lifestage demands extend from partnering to parenting to aging. For example, mid-career professionals who are mothers face a complex set of factors that creates competing priorities so that they must prioritize self-care to both find balance and obtain meaning from life and work (Grady & McCarthy, 2008). Even so, the life processes some individuals must manage—such as menstruation, maternity, and menopause (Grandey et al., 2020)—may be disruptive to career progress since there has been little change to normative career paths in response to life and family stages (Ely & Meyerson, 2000). Ideal worker standards that emerged decades ago based on the experiences of White men who depended on

partner support remain influential in organizations (Kelly et al., 2010; Lester & Sallee, 2017; Tracy & Rivera, 2010), which unfortunately results in frequent mid-career exits by women (e.g., Cabrera, 2007; Frkal & Criscionne-Naylor, 2021; Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005; Stone, 2007). In her exposé of the way even institutionalized DEI support can undermine the careers of women and UR-TM faculty, Täuber concluded: “Together, the tightly knit networks, exclusion from tacit organizational knowledge, and ambiguous performance criteria create a perfect environment for gender bias” (2020, p. 1722).

Mentoring can assist in making sense of these career realities. Research indicates that mentoring positively affects performance and there is no moderating effect of career stage (Pousa et al., 2017). In other words, research findings contradict the common perception that new employees obtain greater benefit from mentoring than employees in other career stages, as will be discussed further. However, mentoring for mid-career faculty is often voluntary, spontaneous, and issue-specific, in contrast to the typically more formalized and in-depth mentoring found in the pre-tenure or establishment career phase (Moen et al., 2017). Although we agree with the need to mentor new employees, we encourage institutions to more systematically provide *both* early and mid-career mentoring programs. The program we describe is not only designed to better fit the needs of underrepresented and marginalized faculty but also to minimize the resources needed to offer mentoring at the mid-career level so that institutions that are resource-constrained are more able to offer such a program.

Our Program: A Brief Rationale and Description

The obstacles encountered by women and UR-TM mid-career faculty inspired the development of our program, although we designed it for all faculty at that rank. We became aware of these obstacles at our institution through several internal studies (both quantitative and qualitative) and reports conducted over time that were part of a self-evaluation conducted for purposes of two NSF grant applications, including: repeated climate studies; equity comparisons on salary, representation, and turnover; a set of exit interviews with women faculty; and a dual career study. Our (proprietary) quantitative indicators showed that, where equity advancements had been made at the rank of assistant professor, these had not translated to higher ranks. Our qualitative data indicated issues such as: disadvantages experienced due to international status, disability stigmas, parenting obstacles, and gender biases. Thus, our institution was a prime site for addressing obstacles to mid-level career advancement, especially for women and UR-TM faculty.

We proposed our program as part of an NSF ADVANCE Adaptation Grant, stipulating that we adapt an existing ADVANCE program at another institution, in this case, the University of Michigan's LIFT program for newly tenured faculty. LIFT offers one-time workshops for newly tenured faculty covering issues of transition and career development. We altered that model and offered an ongoing, peer-based, and career-track focused program. Also, although ADVANCE programs typically focus on women STEM faculty, our faculty demographics simply wouldn't support such a narrowly-focused program. Our campus has a dismal percentage of mid-career UR-TM faculty (<3%); further, mid-career women faculty account for less than one third of the faculty at that level. Although our grant required us to prioritize women, we created the Advanced Career Mentoring program (ACM) as an inclusive, non-restricted program

for all mid-career post-tenure faculty. Nonetheless, as we will explain, we have realized specific benefits for participating women and UR-TM faculty.

The ACM program for mid-career tenured faculty is composed of peer-mentoring groups, each organized around one of three major career tracks available to post-tenure faculty: Research-Intensive, Leadership/Administration, and Researching and Teaching Excellence. These career tracks reflect our university's profile as an R2 research institution in the Carnegie classification system as well as a STEM-focused, mid-sized institution. The Leadership/Administration track includes both faculty with ambitions to move into administrative roles and associate-level faculty serving in demanding administrative roles (such as department chair or associate dean) who want to advance to full professor. The Research-Intensive track focuses on performing research activities that strengthen, deepen, and expand meaningful projects, whereas Research and Teaching Excellence focuses on creating significant crossovers and balancing efforts between strong research and strong teaching.

Peer-mentoring groups meet with a senior professor serving as a "Senior Guide" at regular, self-scheduled times. Typically, each group has one Senior Guide and anywhere from two to five mid-career faculty who sign up voluntarily for the program. In any one year, there are 15 to 20 participants. In our program, over a four-year period, a third of eligible associate professors had participated in the ACM program, which we feel is a good rate for a voluntary program. Also, each year, about 30% of participants elected to continue in the program even though it was designed primarily to be a year-long program introduced to faculty shortly after they received tenure.

The program coordinator forms the groups each year and provides training, resources, and reminders for participants. Both an orientation for group members and a training workshop

for Guides are conducted semi-annually, and feedback focus groups are held annually with all participants. Monthly emails to Senior Guides include tips about facilitating a co-mentoring meeting, topic-relevant materials, and further resources available for all group members including an online library of readings, videos, and websites. Suggested topics for the first three meetings include career planning tools and strategies for prioritizing and networking. Some subsequent topics include best use of sabbaticals, negotiating workloads, and self-care. We also hold campus-wide mentoring events once or twice a semester offering individual sessions with a Senior Guide open to all mid-level faculty.

Groups meet both Fall and Spring semesters of an academic year and are reconstituted the following year (although some groups continue by their request). Groups vary on their frequency of meetings, but a common schedule is three to four times a semester. To encourage these regular meetings, the groups have the option of meeting once a month at the faculty luncheon facility, expenses paid by the program (some use this option; others prefer more scheduling flexibility). A typical meeting structure is as follows. Meetings open with check-in responses and close with a reminder of resources and a conversation about the date for the next meeting. Senior Guides keep the conversation moving, positive, on-topic, and inclusive, but are encouraged to avoid playing a “sage” role or controlling conversational directions. Topics emerge from the check-in responses or a member’s suggestion or may draw on one of the topics sent to the Senior Guides each month (who share these with group members).

We piloted ACM in the Fall of 2019; as a result, the COVID lockdown of 2020 had a critical impact on the program. Nonetheless, after our first year, participation increased 150%. In the third year, with grant funds nearly gone, we focused on institutionalizing the program. The Provost’s office continued offering the program beginning in its fourth year.

Advancing a Community of Practice Peer Mentoring Program

At this point, we describe the particular mentoring model we implemented: a Community of Practice (CoP) model which incorporates peer mentoring. A Community of Practice is a group of practitioners who engage in a specified domain of practices and who collectively learn about, solve problems about, and refine their domain as they interact regularly, help each other, and share knowledge (Antonio de Carvalho-Filho et al., 2019; Omidvar & Kislov, 2014; Wenger, 2000; Wenger et al., 2002). Peer mentoring groups involve people of similar rank who meet to listen to each other, problem-solve career issues together, and provide support and advice based on each individual's experience level and knowledge of institutional requirements and processes. In short, these groups address the practices of the professoriate at large and the skills and requirements for advancement at the particular institution.

Limitations of Traditional Mentoring

The CoP model dispenses with the traditional reliance on hierarchical status and authority in favor of a relational mentoring approach that feminist scholars have called for and find lacking in traditional mentoring models (Ghosh et al., 2020; Ragins & Verbos, 2017). There are critical reasons for shifting from the one-on-one mentoring model to peer-organized forms of mentoring. First, a sage/apprentice model fails to acknowledge the multidimensionality of academic (or corporate) life (Ghosh et al, 2020), whereas alternative models like mentoring networks recognize that one mentor may not be sufficient for everything a mentee needs or wants to learn (NCFDD, n.d.). Second, the traditional mentor-mentee relationship emphasizes academic hierarchy, which can be especially damaging for women and UR-TM faculty (Buzzanell et al., 2015). For example, consider the “White normalizing gaze” used to elicit performances that enforce racial and gender hierarchies as signs of academic competence (Alarcón & Bettez, 2017;

Rabelo et al., 2021). In contrast, UR-TM faculty co-mentoring can create a “homeplace” for sharing vulnerabilities and insecurities as well as desires and ambitions (Calafell 2007, p. 248).

Third, a one-on-one mentoring relationship can encourage performance rather than disclosure and paternalism rather than equity (Davis et al., 2022; Ghosh et al., 2020). For example, non-traditional faculty report learning to “mask” embodied differences and needs (Buzzanell et al., 2015), as well as responding to microaggressions with silence, and adopting self-damaging practices that are required to display professionalism (Kaufman, 2021; Mejia et al., 2022).

Mentoring then becomes yet another site where ongoing microaggressions accumulate (Nadal et al. 2017, 2014). Indeed, faculty of color often report mentoring experiences detrimental to their success (Davis et al., 2022; Espino & Zambrana, 2019; Zambrana et al., 2015).

In contrast, peer-to-peer mentoring, both spontaneously generated and formally organized, has supported historically marginalized faculty in STEM contexts through connection and problem-solving with similarly situated colleagues (Alarcón & Bettez, 2017; Brown et al., 2022; Chambers & Freeman, 2020; Graham et al., 2023; Muñoz et al., 2023; Thomas et al., 2015; Zambrana et al., 2015). Drawing on such examples, we implemented a peer mentoring program organized as communities of practice with the intention of providing participants opportunities to learn from and support each other across differences.

Peer Mentoring as a Key Component

Importantly, we implemented CoP as a peer learning model that offers faculty opportunities to share academic practices and resolve obstacles to academic success. Peer mentoring groups can be designed as CoPs given that colleagues discuss practice issues that only those “on the inside” might recognize, yet that are often shrouded in silence for fear of reprimands or marginalization, such as teaching dilemmas, co-authorship issues, uncertainties

about advancement criteria, or professional conflicts and barriers (Smith et al., 2013). CoPs offer a place to express shared anxieties and frustrations and gain insight from each other's career strategies. As Smith et al. (2016) explain, "Expert-novice roles are fluid as members draw on their varied experiences and knowledge to discuss and work through issues of their practice" (p. 3). Our CoP groups are not only non-hierarchical but cross-disciplinary and self-directed; groups develop dynamically, meeting as they like and addressing topics beyond those prompted by a monthly email with suggested career topics and resources.

As peer mentors engage in mentoring, they simultaneously learn from their own practices about what works and what doesn't. Within our ACM groups, the Senior Guides explicitly focus on mentoring practices within their CoPs to foster peer mentoring (Gabay et al, 2019). In other words, mentoring is itself a practice that emerges out of, and is advanced through, its enactment. When peer mentoring groups operate with critical reflexivity, that is, both critiquing and revising their understanding and enactment of mentoring, the CoP model becomes a form of practice-based knowledge that is both self-revising and self-sustaining. For us, this approach offers a mechanism for realizing a culture of mentoring at the institution beyond the ACM groups.

Feedback indicates these CoP peer mentoring experiences have been useful and supportive. Women faculty in CoP peer mentoring groups report a broad array of benefits that mirror those reported by Rees and Shaw, including "goal setting, connection to the broader institutional community, interdisciplinary group makeup, old girls' network, friendship, being connected to a group, support of professional development" (2014, p. 15). (See Table 1 for a summary of the differences between the traditional one-on-one and CoP peer-mentoring models.)

Table 1*Mentoring Approaches Comparison Table*

Dimension	Traditional Mentoring	Community of Practice Peer Mentoring
How enacted	Expertise of mentor based on prior experience; reflections are shared with mentee	Expert-novice roles are fluid and emerge as part of the practice of mentoring
Content shared	Limited to the knowledge of the single mentor	Multiple types of expertise are present and multiple perspectives are shared
	Focus is on performance	Focus is on support
	Embodied experience is often ignored	Embodied experience is acknowledged
Status, Inclusiveness	Hierarchy/status differences are inherent in the relationship	Participants in CoPs treat each as equal in status
	Some people needing mentoring are left out or marginalized even if mentoring is formalized (often UR-TM faculty)	CoPs can operate more inclusively by creating spaces responsive to members' identities and experiences
	Paternalism can lead to masking and silence by the mentee	Mentees feel more comfortable expressing their questions, feelings, and fears
Costs	One-on-one mentoring requires time from leaders who have limited time	A CoP of peers with one Senior Guide limits the time requirements from leaders

To summarize, a CoP mentoring approach is one way to redress mid-career marginalization and isolation and advance equity and inclusion. Conducting mentoring programs as exercises in rational career planning and decision-making fails in multiple ways to

acknowledge the challenges mid-career employees are encountering; models of knowing-in-practice, in contrast, emphasize everyday actions and sociomaterial relations (Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011). Learning by reflexively doing can re-orient career management and organizational pathways (Tams & Marshall, 2011).

An Unexpected Demonstration of Value

Somewhat ironically, these lessons were dramatically evident through our unanticipated pivot to mentoring online during the COVID pandemic. In the midst of our second year, the ACM program was interrupted by the COVID lockdown and our meetings became virtual rather than face-to-face. From this experience, we learned valuable lessons about the importance of collegial support and peer mentoring. Virtually held meetings made the communities in which co-workers live and interact more obvious, so peer mentors came to recognize the uneven challenges and resources among them, much as others have discussed (Hinds et al., 2022). Also, the virtual meetings altered how participants provided collegial support. As Watson and others have observed, mediated meetings allowed people to collectively “check in” rather than be “checked up on” (Stuart et al., 2021; Watson et al., 2021, p. 148). For our mentoring groups, this meant that in the context of a shared crisis, individuals had a space to express vulnerabilities and complaints, as well as to recommend resources.

One issue in particular which emerged during the virtual meetings highlighted our university’s site-specific intersectionalities (Crenshaw, 2017). Our campus has a more than one-hundred-year history as a male-majority, engineering-dominated institution. Ways of doing things, unspoken expectations, and valued identities are shaped by these legacies and their ongoing yet often implicit influence. We found that one such legacy was the local attitude toward parenting, traditionally a strongly gendered responsibility and an unrelenting time and energy

demand. The site-specific complications of parenting became particularly evident during the pandemic, exacerbated by gender, age, income, health, race, and international status. Further, COVID demands made the specific mid-career disadvantages of mothering faculty especially evident (Sotirin, 2023). Feedback from our women-only Research-Intensive STEMM group shared the dilemmas and disadvantages of mothering as an associate professor. Their peer-mentoring conversations became sites of mutual recognition and self-advocacy. For example, these participants forwarded their concerns to the ACM coordinators, who then opened conversations with the Provost's office and the Faculty Senate about campus childcare, resulting in a self-study of facilities and potential expansion. Another example was the prevalence of service obligations; participants voiced concerns about a lack of merit recognition, precipitating a successful Faculty Senate resolution to add more categories of service (specifically, inclusion and belonging service roles) to the annual faculty merit review.

In short, we learned valuable lessons about recognizing and adapting to site-specific intersectionalities as well as how peer mentoring can offer mutual support and buffer the uncertainties of such unforeseen crises. Through unintended glimpses into others' domestic lives, shared confessions of anxiety and vulnerability, and mutual problem-solving about how to "get on," these peer mentoring groups provided an important resource for weathering the pandemic and maintaining professional momentum despite intense personal demands.

Overcoming Obstacles to a Peer Mentoring Model for the Mid-career Stage

Although we put a lot of thought into our peer mentoring model and reaped some rewards for a non-traditional choice, we did encounter several obstacles. We were surprised by the commonplace assumptions and misunderstandings of mentoring held by mid-career faculty. We also encountered an expectation of tangible returns among administrators that affected the

institutionalization of our pilot program. Sharing and reflecting on our experiences here may be instructive for those seeking to establish mid-career mentoring for professionals in academe and other settings as well.

Specifically, we encountered five assumptions about mentoring that stymied participation in our ACM program as well as its institutionalization. We came to recognize these assumptions primarily by reflecting on feedback from faculty participating in our program, interactions with administrators, and our perusal of relevant studies. We identify these as an assumption of deficiency, the silo mentality, an assumption of undivided attention, an assumption of hierarchy, and the expectation of return on investment (ROI). We describe each of them here as well as how we addressed them.

Assumptions of Deficiency

First, there was a dominant perception among mid-career faculty that anyone who needs or wants ongoing mentoring at that stage must be deficient or would risk being viewed as deficient, which hampered our efforts to get people to join a voluntary program. The most pernicious implication was that certain groups, notably women and UR-TM faculty, were in particular need of mentoring. The “presumed incompetence” of BIPOC women faculty has been attested to again and again (Gutiérrez y Muhs et al., 2012; Niemann et al., 2020). However, this assumption does not acknowledge the subtle ways majority members exclude women and minorities from knowledge about the implicit rules of the game (Täuber, 2020). Additionally, assumptions of deficiency typically are based on prevailing notions of productivity: first they presume that one’s value is defined by productivity, and second, that only certain productivity indicators are acceptable in academia.

Accordingly, we worked against assumptions of deficiency in two key ways. First, we committed to challenging what has been called a deeply-ensconced ideal of the autonomous, self-directed, and isolated academic (Raizada, 2021) in order to promote a culture of peer mentoring. Despite the vaunted collegiality of academe, the ideal of the isolated scholar or teacher permeates the practices and everyday experiences of academics, isolating especially women and UR-TM faculty (Lashuel, 2020). Further, this ideal scholar is legitimated through traditions, practices, and criteria of intellectual and professional merit and value that advantage particular-classed, gendered, racialized, sexed, and abled bodies and identities while disadvantaging others, specifically women and UR-TM scholars (Acker, 2012; Price, 2024; Taylor & Lahad, 2018; Thornton, 2013). By instituting peer-based conversation groups as the agency of mid-level mentoring on campus, we hoped to call attention to and question the concept that a self-directed, isolated scholar/researcher/teacher model is the only option.

A second critical aspect of ACM that counteracted prevailing concepts and expectations of productivity was the explicit goal to support mid-career faculty careers in whatever ways faculty themselves defined progress, rewards, and success. While the neoliberal institution extols career progress, productivity, and external signs of success (grants, publications, awards, high evaluations, leadership roles, etc.), there are other ways to measure and/or experience career progress and accomplishment, including ongoing academic learning, rich collegial relationships, and conscientious contributions to worthwhile projects defined as such by faculty themselves, such as community service or DEIA projects that may or may not be valued based on discipline-defined or institution-defined criteria (cf. Grant-Vallone & Ensher, 2017). When ACM participants were provided materials for assessing their career priorities and goals, we were careful to emphasize that the program was not about climbing a career ladder but about finding

the path most suited to personal career ambitions and rewards. For example, one faculty member in a Leadership track group realized that he was not willing to take on the demands of such a path and preferred to focus on research, where he found considerable reward in his lab work, his graduate students, and his publishing. Other examples of ways that participants found themselves “slowing down” institutional demands included prioritizing non-disciplinary professional achievements and sharing modes of self-care as well as refusing to sideline family relationships and experiences in deference to career demands. In short, we promoted alternatives that countered assumptions of deficiency or incompetence by encouraging a more expansive and supportive repertoire of goals and values for faculty success.

We were heartened to note that although participation was voluntary, the ACM CoPs included a greater percentage of women and UR-TM faculty than their percentages in the associate professor rank on campus. A participant-requested woman-only ACM CoP was formed during the second year of the program to address issues specific to their experiences. Similarly, Latina women faculty on other campuses have reported the value of their own non-hierarchical cross-unit *muxerista* peer-mentoring programs (Alarcón & Bettez, 2017; Oliva et al, 2013). We contend that UR-TM peer mentoring in a program like ACM can be critical to countering the alienation and inauthenticity affected by the prevailing “White, male normalizing” paradigm of faculty identity and success.

The Silo Mentality

In part because of low numbers of mid-career faculty in many departments, we created mentoring groups across departments, that is, across disciplinary areas. This struck many of our mentees as being odd at first and some objected, having assumed they would be placed in groups with friends and colleagues from their own departments and professional disciplines.

Eventually, however, our mentees discovered multiple benefits from this cross-departmental grouping, benefits that resonate with the CoP principles of community, dialogue, and diverse perspectives. First, it created social networks that could be valuable in a number of ways, particularly in terms of cross-campus collaborations, such as new research ventures or shared teaching innovations. Indeed, a few of our participants developed research projects together, which was an unintended, but positive, outcome of the program. Second, mentoring across organizational units lowered the risk that confidential information might be shared within specific departments. Peer mentees often did not know their group colleagues well before ACM and abided by an agreement not to share confidential information divulged during a group meeting. Thus, ACM meetings could become a relatively safe space for mentees to express doubt and uncertainty and seek information, and this was confirmed in our post-COVID participant feedback. Third, quite a bit of benchmarking naturally occurred during ACM group discussions. Reports from the Senior Guides indicated that group participants were often surprised to learn that what they thought should be similar advancement processes across departments were done very differently. This shared knowledge helped them realize alternatives were possible. For example, the status of collaborative work, time to publication, and expectations for service work beyond the department were quite different across departments. Notably, however, alternatives discussed in the mentoring groups also occasionally included ideas that worked around or

enriched university norms or departmental benchmarks, such as making sabbaticals family friendly.

Overall, our own observations, feedback from the groups, and informal conversations with participants pointed to the value of listening to others who faced similar obstacles and goals but who had explored different rules, resources, and reactions. One of the benefits of ACM identified by participants was that they broadened their career strategies. For us, the program promoted the value of a CoP approach. ACM groups showed how collegiality, connection, and supportiveness can work to promote career development. The visibility of the ACM program and its support from chairs and deans cultivated a positive perception of peer mentoring across campus. In addition, our program design offered a working alternative to the traditional model of mentoring and demonstrated the workability of interdisciplinary, cross-campus peer mentoring. In short, ACM aimed not just at “fixing the individual” but at promoting a campus culture of mentoring.

Assumption of Undivided Attention

Some mentees assumed initially that all mentoring in the group would be directed at each of them individually following a traditional model. They had no idea what participating in peer mentoring groups meant (despite a very clear description of this in our advertising). This assumption may have been fostered by our requisite mentoring program for all first-year faculty, the Early Career Mentoring (ECM) program. In ECM, a specific mentoring committee for each new tenure-track faculty member meets monthly to address their needs and questions. This program was both popular and important; nonetheless, given institutional resources, a similar design for mid-level faculty just wasn't feasible, and as we have explained, there were good reasons for adopting a CoP model for ACM. While an ECM-type program remained a persistent

suggestion in ACM's annual feedback, most participants adapted to the peer mentoring model being used for ACM and even appreciated being able to share common experiences and possible solutions with other mentees.

Assumption of Hierarchy

A fourth misperception about mentoring, one that struck us as being especially deeply embedded, was the assumption that mentoring requires a one-on-one relationship between a more experienced and successful mentor and a grateful and worthwhile mentee, which has been noted by others as well (Ragins & Kram, 2007). In fact, in our own literature reviews, we found that across several decades of mentoring research and development, it has remained the dominant model. In practice, we found that, despite our efforts to foster peer-conducted mentoring with the Senior Guide as a conversational facilitator, participants clung to the idea of the Guide as sage or coach. Indeed, feedback suggested that the success of the groups was often linked to perceptions of particular facilitators. Nonetheless, facilitators themselves reported feeling mentored by their groups. From our observations and the feedback from our participants, it appears that responding to both life and academic uncertainties encourages mutual recognition and responsiveness across lines of authority, expertise, and professional status.

Admittedly, the power asymmetry in the traditional sage/apprentice mentoring model can provide access to upper level and senior organizational members, potentially letting mentees in on implicit rules, strategic networks, well-placed advocates, and inside information on opportunities and resources. Yet, gaining inside information is generally incumbent on the beneficence of the mentor and can incur unacknowledged transaction costs such as the need to follow expectations about how that information is treated. Further, the ACM peer mentoring members were associate level professors, some of whom had just been promoted but many of

whom had been at that level for years. Many were themselves in positions of authority and responsibility and well-placed to advocate for or recommend others. Thus, ACM members could share insights into strategies and opportunities and discuss questions about what really counts for advancement. In short, the design of the ACMs realized the benefits of a traditional mentoring relationship and more.

Assumptions of Insufficient ROI

Realizing and retaining an inclusive senior faculty and supporting the upward mobility of women and UR-TM faculty requires intentional efforts by the institution, including programmatic mentoring. However, too many programs of this type disappear once grant funding has dried up. This may be based on assuming that the cost of the program will be too high compared with the benefits, which we discovered when we appealed to our administrators to institutionalize the ACM program once the external funding was over and our team had been disbanded. This is unfortunate since research indicates the ROI of personnel programs such as training and mentoring is greater than typically thought (Bartel, 2000; Soldan, Osborne, & Gruenbacher, 2010). Villar and Strong (2007) demonstrated a range of benefits accruing to teacher mentoring, arguing that “returns extend far beyond mere retention questions” (p. 16). While reducing the value of mentoring to a cost-benefit ratio is clearly not what we advocate, nonetheless, such evaluative metrics can contribute to the case for institutionalizing a mentoring program (Buddeberg-Fischer & Herta, 2006).

Initially, we tried to persuade based on appeals to good faith, notably the commitment that had been made by administrators to NSF to continue programs started by the grant and the need for such a program on our campus. Our ECM mentoring program for junior faculty was considered quite effective, yet there was no such program for mid-career faculty. In response,

our administration asked for clear evidence of effectiveness, although what this evidence needed to be was unclear. Additionally, data collection was problematic. Equity data such as promotions to full professor and leadership positions were trending in the right direction, but conclusions could not be drawn due to issues such as low sample size.

After much frustration, we shifted gears and offered a cost/benefit appeal for institutionalization. First, we calculated the likely yearly cost of the program, which was largely for coordination tasks such as group creation and meeting reminders, given that most of the materials and structure of the program had already been developed with the grant funding. Then we calculated the likely benefits of the program using turnover estimates. Our argument was based in research indicating that faculty who feel supported, such as via mentoring or supervisor or co-worker social support, are less likely to leave a university (e.g., Chadiha et al., 2014; Woo et al., 2019) as well as research indicating peer mentoring groups, preferred by women and UR-TM faculty (Alarcón & Bettez, 2017; Alvarez & Lazzari, 2016), are one way to actualize support (Pololi & Evans, 2015; Rees & Shaw, 2014). Thus, the costs of mid-career faculty attrition and the value of ACM for retention were the bases of our case for administrative institutionalization.

To estimate the benefits of retention influenced by the ACM program, we analyzed our institution's data to compare the turnover rates of men and women as well as minority and majority faculty over several years, which revealed trend lines of decreased turnover for women and minorities over these years. Estimates of the costs of turnover per faculty member who left were developed based on academic studies (Hobbs et al., 2005; Weeks et al, 2006) as well as typical practices for calculating turnover costs. If we assumed, based on the research, that the ACM program could, at the minimum, reduce the loss of one faculty member per year, the result was a 20-to-1 ROI, an impressive ratio. After we included this analysis in our presentations, we

found that the Provost's office began to plan for institutionalization even though we weren't informed or consulted on this move. We suspect, therefore, that the analysis of the decreasing turnover rates at the institution was sufficient evidence of the impact of our programming. (We caution that there is a risk with such an analysis as well since making the cumulative cost of faculty turnover public could make administrators uncomfortable.)

Advancing an Alternative Model of Mid-Career Mentoring

The traditional view of career progression was based on organizational stability and clear, linear career paths that are no longer common (McDonald & Hite, 2005). Further, mid-career advancement is often ill-defined and professionals can find their career development either becalmed because they can't figure out what is needed or frenetic because they grab on to every opportunity. Additionally, career expectations have been premised on a model in which wholly career-focused White men were normative in the workplace thanks to the strict separation of work and home life and the allocation of family management to a spouse or partner (Kelly et al., 2010). Notably, mid-career can span life stages from the late twenties to early sixties, so mid-career professionals face ongoing shifts in life/work challenges. For women and UR-TM faculty, there are additional hurdles that emerge out of social, cultural, and professional biases that penalize non-conforming identities and bodies. Thus, in this environment, traditional career development mechanisms such as the mentor/mentee dyadic relationship may make less sense and there is a need to look to other developmental models that address contemporary career trajectories and are appropriate for managing extant contingencies (Beck et al., 2022).

Based on our experiences, we recommend the use of a Community of Practice model at the mid-career level, in which individuals can learn from peer co-mentors. This model is particularly suited to mid-career mentoring because it acknowledges and engages with the

experiences and knowledge that each co-mentor brings to the group. Further, members' experiences are equally valuable for career learning and development (as opposed to the single mentor model) so that differences of privilege, status, authority, tenure, and identity are resources for mutual insight rather than stumbling blocks. This approach is also relatively cost-effective as compared with alternative forms of support.

Despite the advantages of CoP mentoring, we have identified several common assumptions about mentoring that resist such alternatives to the traditional one-on-one master/apprentice model. We advise future practitioners to be aware of and prepared to address the assumptions and nuances particular to their own work situations. We offer a few of our strategies as catalysts: 1) work to raise mentoring to the level of a norm rather than an exception at the institution in order to overcome assumptions of deficiency; 2) emphasize to mentees the advantages of cross-disciplinary and cross-campus engagement in order to reduce both the silo mentality and demand for individualized, intensive support that requires significant resources; 3) emphasize to administrators the strengths of a relational rather than hierarchical approach for addressing the unique difficulties of mid-career obstacles, particularly for marginalized groups; 4) emphasize to administrators the relative inexpensiveness of this approach compared with other methods of supporting individuals and the benefits in terms of reduced turnover at this level.

We also urge identifying and addressing site-specific intersectionalities, especially as these emerge in the configurations and discussions of CoP peer mentoring groups. Rather than casting intersectionalities as demographics, we note that local and historic events and relations contextualize such issues and can be addressed as ongoing, dynamic features of CoP mentoring. By surfacing such contextualized intersectionalities, it may be possible to reveal and counter implicit practices and arrangements of discouragement and exclusion within our professions and

institutions as well as to create a sense of mutual understanding and support in the company of peer mentors. As we reported above, our virtual ACM experience during the pandemic served to illustrate that peer mentoring communities can be especially important not only for exploring possible career paths and developmental activities but also for jointly navigating intersectional career obstacles and uncertainties.

Altogether, our reflections provide both a blueprint for a mid-career mentoring program and a basis for site-specific adaptations aimed at the success of such a program. The ACM program we developed for mid-career faculty promotes CoP peer-mentoring groups as responsive, communal, and flexible. The CoP approach advances a practice-based form of mutual support and learning. It is our hope that such a model can support peer mentoring as a form of development not only for individual careers but also for the mentoring culture of organizations themselves.

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