Mentor Up: Preparing for the 21st Century Classroom

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Keywords: mentoring, senior faculty, professional development, networks

Background. Mentoring is no longer just a buzz word in the academy. Increasingly, institutions are deploying creative mentoring initiatives in efforts to recruit and retain both talented graduate students and early career faculty. Increased research productivity, improved teaching, and enhanced job satisfaction are just a few of the benefits realized from effective mentoring relationships (Jung et al., 2016).

While most of the mentoring conversation has focused on graduate students and early career faculty, there is growing evidence to suggest that senior faculty need and desire mentoring throughout their academic careers (Russell, 2010). However, according to Zeig and Baldwin (2013), very few institutions address the distinctive needs of senior faculty through formalized mentorship programs. There is no one-size fits all approach to mentoring, regardless of rank or career stage. Some senior faculty members may be challenged by transitioning their courses to an online format while others may struggle to keep up with advances in their field (Stone, 2018). A more common complaint among senior faculty is a perceived lack of resources and support from administration, sometimes leading to isolation and disengagement.

In her *Pocketbook Guide to Mentoring Higher Education Faculty*, Stone (2018) offers ‘mentoring up’ as one of the most effective mentoring programs for senior faculty because it builds on existing relationships (i.e., relationships with junior colleagues, former students). This model breaks down the traditional mentor-mentee relationship and places both individuals on the same level. The senior faculty member can share institutional knowledge, teach skills for navigating departmental politics, and share tricks of the trade, while junior faculty members can offer advice for dealing with the digital natives and strategies for adopting new technologies. The reverse mentoring approach is a win-win for everyone.

Purpose. This narrative highlights my retooling journey as a senior faculty member who ‘mentored up’ with junior colleagues and former students to prepare for my return to the 21st century classroom. As a career administrator returning to my first love of teaching, I was filled with idyllic visions of motivated students, captivating lectures, and perfect grade

distributions. However, doubts of my effectiveness and relevancy were ever present. Absent from the classroom for over a decade, ‘would I be up for the task in a discipline that had changed at the speed of light?’ Channel polarity, experiential storytelling, ubiquitous digital, and engagement choreography were just a few of the trends driving the retail industry (Sheldon, 2018). These ‘hot topics’ were non-existent or just in their infancy when I left our department for central administration. To say that I needed to ‘get up to speed’ was an understatement. The former mentor soon became the mentee.

A mentoring grant program, sponsored by the Provost Office, provided modest support and gave structure for my retooling journey. Using the *Intergenerational Mentoring Model*, I shadowed junior colleagues and interviewed former students working in the industry to inform my teaching (Satterly et al., 2018). This model eliminates traditional hierarchical relationships and is based on the notion that ‘everyone leads and everyone learns.’ The target goals were to: 1) identify best practices in teaching; 2) increase knowledge of current fashion industry trends; and 3) understand the requisite skills for students in our program.

Implementation. During my administrative development leave, I was mentored by three junior faculty members within my department, a unit known to boast a strong mentoring culture. The junior members, referred to as my internal mentor network, were diverse in their ethnicity, rank, training, background, and teaching responsibilities. As with any mentoring relationship, trust, transparency, and a willingness to participate in the project were key drivers in their selection (Fries-Britt & Snider, 2015).

Over the course of the semester, I carefully reviewed their course syllabi and observed their in-class teaching on two separate occasions for each faculty member. They provided me with different pedagogical formats to evaluate, including traditional lectures, case study discussions, and project-based learning. After each observation, I met with the faculty members, sometimes collectively and other times individually. An informal protocol was used to capture best practices, challenges, and opportunities (e.g., philosophy on attendance policies, use of learning management systems).

To get up to speed on industry trends, I sought the mentorship and guidance of students that I had once mentored, referred to as my external mentor network. Project funding provided a three-night stay in New York to interview former students (n=6) working in the industry. Upon return, I added two additional mentors to my alumni network who were located geographically near our institution. Similar to my internal network, these mentors were diverse in ethnicity, career portfolios and the retail segments they represented. Using an interview protocol, I sought information on key industry changes, current trends, and necessary skills for college graduates.

Effectiveness. Through the mentorship of junior faculty, I learned what classroom land mines to avoid, what opportunities to seize, and some specific strategies for working with a diverse student population. Working in central administration I was certainly not immune to the changing demographic and psychographic trends of our student population, but the tacit knowledge provided by my mentors eased my transition. Specific updates to my teaching included the creation of online exams, the development of problem-based learning activities for large size classes, and the creation of effective assessment tools to measure student learning outcomes. On the flip side, junior colleagues reported positive experiences by sharing best practices and having the opportunity to be mentored by peers. One junior colleague offered this insightful comment, “Even if we excel in an area such as teaching, we should still be open to being mentored. I learned much from sharing best practices.”

Similar and helpful lessons were realized from my external mentors. Consumer confidence, growing competition, pricing structures, and, not surprisingly, digital opportunities were the most notable trends impacting current business models. Requisite skills for college graduates were reported as a juxtaposition of traits. (e.g., self- sufficiency vs. team player; analytical vs. creative; flexible vs. focused; humble spirit vs. strong voice). The rich dialogue provided great insight into my teaching the following semester as I worked with students seeking internships and full-time employment.

Future Plans. Regardless of age, rank, or experience, faculty must be reflective about their careers and seek out co-mentoring opportunities where there may be areas of deficiency or opportunity (Stone, 2018). Perhaps the key takeaway from my retooling journey is that I still have much to learn and much to share. Next semester my mentees will conduct classroom observations and provide evaluative feedback on my instruction. Future plans are to extend the *Intergenerational Mentoring Model* to include senior faculty, faculty outside the discipline, unit administrators, and current students. The more inclusive the model, the richer our understanding of teaching, and subsequently, student learning.

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