

An Analysis of the Early Career Faculty Mentorship Network

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Introduction

The need for mentorship has been identified for all stages of an academic career, especially the transition into higher education for early career faculty members (Law et al., 2014). These opportunities for mentorship often facilitate effective socialization within an organization, department, or institution (Mazerolle et al., 2018) and can be particularly beneficial for women and people of color (Cline et al., 2019; Cline et al., 2020; Sorcinelli & Yun, 2007). Most faculty mentoring is informal, indicating a potential need for the creation of more formalized and structured programs (Lamm et al., 2017; Ruth et al., 2020). Furthermore, an emerging concept known as the multi-mentor network model (de Janasz & Sullivan, 2004) suggests mentor relationships create a constellation (i.e., network) of support, enabling participants to engage with multiple individuals in “non-hierarchical, collaborative, and cross-cultural partnerships” (Sorcinelli & Yun, 2007, p. 58; de Janasz & Sullivan, 2004; Mazerolle et al., 2018). Examining this network model in greater depth within the agricultural education discipline (broadly defined) and evaluating the value of these social connections can provide insight to aid the development of future mentorship programs within the profession. The purpose of this study was to assess mentorship networks within the academic discipline of agricultural education. We sought to identify mentoring relationships within the profession and their characteristics to determine commonalities in the types of interactions.

Theoretical Framework

The study was framed by social capital theory, which suggests social relationships are resources that yield further human capital through the sharing of resources and knowledge (Yang et al., 2017). Social capital benefits all parties involved (Coleman, 1990; Kriesi, 2007) and can be described as three forms (Claridge, 2018; Woolcock & Narayan, 2000): a) bonding social capital, which focuses on the relationships between homogeneous groups; b) bridging social capital, which refers to relationships between heterogeneous groups; and c) linking social capital, which highlights relationships between groups at different hierarchical levels and social structures. Social capital can be viewed as both an input and output in academia resulting from the mentoring relationships among faculty.

Methods

This study consisted of an online survey of early career faculty in the broadly defined agricultural education discipline to assess the network of connections between mentors and mentees. The agricultural education discipline was operationalized to include school-based agricultural education (SBAE), agricultural communications (ACOM), agricultural leadership education (AGLE), Extension education (EE), and related concentrations. The target population consisted of early career faculty in agricultural education, which was operationalized as assistant professors, as well as non-tenure track faculty and post-doctoral associates with fewer than seven years of experience who planned to pursue a tenure-track job. The list of prospective participants was pulled from the websites of the institutions listed on the American Association for Agricultural Education’s website. Those 202 individuals were then sent a link inviting them to participate in the study via Qualtrics. A reminder was sent through Qualtrics, followed by second reminder sent directly from the email account of a member of the research team in case the Qualtrics emails were going to junk folders. No further follow-ups were conducted due to diminishing response numbers (Dillman et al., 2014). After removing those who were not members of the target population and incomplete responses, there were 41 respondents, 39 of which identified mentors in the discipline. Respondents (i.e., mentees) reported who their mentors were (up to five), mentor tenure status, primary concentration of their mentors, if they were formally assigned or informally connected to their mentors, who initiated the mentorship, and if they had regularly scheduled meetings (and if so, how often). The mentees self-reported their own concentrations, age, gender, if they were Hispanic/Latino, and race. To

help ensure validity of the instrument, individuals with expertise in mentorship reviewed the instrument, including faculty from concentrating on SBAE, ACOM, and AGLE.

Results

The majority of mentees were assistant professors ($n = 36$, 87.8%) and the rest were in non-tenure track roles ($n = 5$, 12.2%). The largest number of mentees reported their concentration was SBAE ($n = 17$, 41.5%), followed by ACOM ($n = 12$, 29.3%), AGLE ($n = 5$, 12.2%), EE ($n = 3$, 7.3%), and other ($n = 3$, 7.3%). The average of age of mentees was 35.7 years ($SD = 7.1$). The majority were women ($n = 22$, 53.7%) and White ($n = 37$, 90.2%). The 39 mentees in the study reported 103 unique mentors. The majority of mentors were tenured ($n = 87$, 84.5%). There were 142 edges in the network (i.e., connections between mentors and mentees). The majority of mentors were linked to one mentee in the study, while 26 mentors were linked to multiple mentees. Two mentors had four mentees, which was the most in the study. The concentrations of the mentors were SBAE ($n = 44$, 42.7%), AGLE ($n = 19$, 18.4%), ACOM ($n = 18$, 17.5%), EE ($n = 12$, 11.7%), and other ($n = 10$, 9.7%). For the edges, which could be more than one per mentor if they had multiple mentees, the mentors' concentrations were SBAE ($n = 62$, 43.7%), ACOM ($n = 35$, 24.6%), AGLE ($n = 20$, 14.1%), EE ($n = 14$, 9.9%), and other ($n = 11$, 7.7%). In other words, ACOM mentors were more likely to have more mentees per person than the other concentrations. The majority of the connections were informally made ($n = 88$, 66.7%). The mentees ($n = 67$, 47.5%) were more likely than mentors ($n = 40$, 28.3%) to initiate the mentoring relationships, while the remainder were formally assigned without either mentor or mentee initiating ($n = 34$, 24.1%). The majority of mentor/mentee connections did not meet regularly ($n = 103$, 72.5%). For those who met regularly, the majority met monthly ($n = 22$, 56.4%), followed by weekly ($n = 10$, 25.6%) and other ($n = 7$, 17.9%). For the other responses, once a semester was the most common answer to the open-ended follow-up question.

Conclusions, Implications, and Recommendations

The majority of respondents to this study had mentors, though not all. While it was a low number, any faculty member without mentorship is an undesirable outcome. Connection with mentors has the potential to positively influence an early career faculty member's career (Law et al., 2014), especially in terms of social capital within the discipline. In looking at the nature of the connections, most were informal and were initiated by mentees about half the time. In other words, norms more than structure were the source of mentorship, which is in line with past research showing that most mentorship is informal (Lamm et al., 2017; Ruth et al., 2020). While this approach may be more organic, it has the potential to allow individuals to fall through the cracks. As for the concentrations of mentors and mentees, SBAE was the largest represented concentration among both groups, but it is notable that ACOM mentors were more likely to have multiple mentees in the study, possibly to make up the difference for ACOM mentors being underrepresented compared to the number of ACOM mentees. While there were some mentors who had multiple mentees in the study, the majority had one, which indicates mentorship may be spread throughout the agricultural education discipline. For future studies, qualitative research would be beneficial to understand how these mentorship relationships developed and what the mentorship interactions look like beyond the surface level. It would also be beneficial to survey mentors about their interactions with mentees. For example, while the mentees reported being more likely to initiate mentorship relationships, it is possible mentors believe themselves to be the ones initiating the relationships, which could point to a disconnect in understanding how these relationships develop. For departments and professional organizations, there is an opportunity to increase formalized mentorship to help ensure early career faculty do not fall through the cracks, especially given the informal nature of connections and lack of regular meetings currently. While many early career faculty are in large departments that have mentors readily available, plenty of early career faculty are in newer and/or smaller programs without as many built-in mentors. Improving mentorship structure in the discipline should help improve social capital, which benefits everyone involved (Coleman, 1990; Kriesi, 2007).

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