

Lessons learned from multiple-campus mentoring programs

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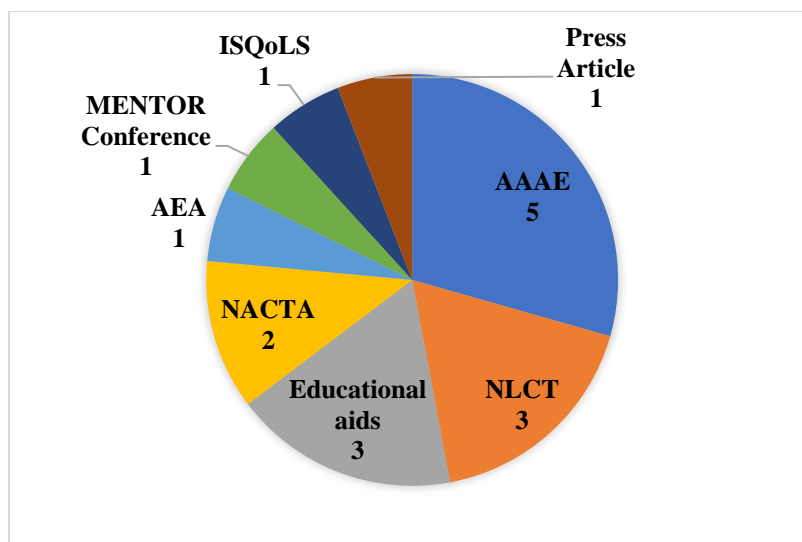
Introduction/Need for Innovation

The Multi-Institutional Mentoring Network for Transforming Organizational Culture (M.E.N.T.O.R.) was funded to establish collaborative capacity building between 1862 and 1890 land-grant institutions (LGUs), and to empower faculty leadership teams (FLTs) to develop campus-based mentoring programs for underrepresented minorities in food, agriculture, natural resources and human (FANH) disciplines (Esters & Knobloch, 2020). A total of 11 FLTs made up of three individuals each currently serve as primary organizers of the project activities for their respective LGUs. This multistate mentoring network is an alternative to single institutional efforts attempted in the past, as it provides innovative ways to work together to find common solutions and share useful mentoring resources. That is why in the final six months of the project, we are discussing the lessons learned from the implementation of different programs within the larger MENTOR project, with the hopes that the innovative mentoring approaches brought by a consortium of mentors across different LGUs can inspire future implementors of similar mentoring programs, who will leverage the knowledge acquired by this network of mentors to anticipate and/or successfully navigate the challenges they may meet along the way.

How It Works/Methodology/Program Phases/Steps

Figure 1

Outputs from the mentoring programs implemented



Our main goal was to highlight the innovative mentoring approaches brought by a consortium of researchers as they implemented a multistate mentoring project across different LGUs. Firstly, we made a compilation of all products related to mentoring developed by FLTs from 2020 to 2023 (Figure 1). Second, we identified the different challenges outlined in those products, and they were discussed during a Consortium Convening held in 2023, where multiple solutions to the challenges were proposed. The emerging challenges were (1) limited participation due to COVID-19 restrictions, (2) lack of clear communication between mentors and mentees, (3) differing goals between mentors and mentees, and (4) lack of buy-in from departmental and school administrators. All of the products are published in the project website

(<https://ag.purdue.edu/department/asec/mentor/resource.html>) and include presentations delivered during conferences and workshops, educational aids/curricula, articles published in the press, annual progress project reports and reports from the 2023 MENTOR Convening. The events and conferences covered can be found in the references.

Results to Date/Implications

Overall, across all programs, in-person participation was hampered by the restrictions brought by COVID-19. FLT's adapted to this challenge by moving most of their mentoring activities online. As the pandemic's impact subsided, FLT's were able to resume in-person workshops and other activities that reached over 70 faculty and 300 students across LGUs, and produced 12 accepted conference abstracts co-authored by FLT's. However, FLT's quickly noticed that for a mentoring program to be successful, faculty (mentors) and students (mentees) needed to be on the same page in terms of goals and expectations. Mentees were focusing on doing their research and graduate, while faculty mentors were channeling most of their efforts in trying to get tenure (Rodriguez et al., 2022). Furthermore, a platform at one 1890 LGU (UAPB) to facilitate effective communication between mentees and mentors, and can now be used by mentees to communicate the challenges they encounter to their peer mentors and the administration . Last but not least, two FLT's identified management buy-in, i.e., the commitment and support from institutional leadership and administrative offices, as a crucial ingredient for an effective mentoring program in their LGUs. The most successful FLT's were the one who had obtained administrative assurances for funding and including mentoring as part of tenure and career development initiatives (Radhakrishna et al., 2022).

Future Plans/Advice to Others

In addition to the abovementioned sources, workshop modules, webinars recordings, and other outputs produced by the different MENTOR programs are being compiled and shared on the MENTOR website (<https://ag.purdue.edu/department/asec/mentor/resource.html>). We hope these materials will help everyone looking to start an intentional and inclusive mentoring program at their institutions. For now, we would advise them to: (1) launch their mentoring program in collaboration with other universities since multi-institutional efforts are more conducive to an inclusive systematic reform of FANH education (APLU, 2009), (2) move to secure administrative buy-in from the beginning of each mentoring program, (3) adjust communication efforts to show both the students/mentees and faculty/mentors the importance of taking part in a mentoring program, and (4) plan for several opportunities to check-in with the different stakeholders of the project and address the challenges they face.

Costs/Resources Needed

Although the project was funded by a NIFA Higher Education Challenge Grant (Award number 2019-70003-29089), and each participating LGU received a mini-grant to start and implement their mentoring program, this kind of program can be operationalized with limited funding. The different programs have demonstrated that with a budget of \$15,000, two committed and dedicated faculty leaders, with the support of the administration, can, for a period of two years, initiate a mentoring program, communicate with stakeholders, implement the mentoring activities (workshops, webinars, communication campaigns, campus outreach, data collection and travel to conferences).

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