

THE GREAT HOPE OF ACADEMIC MENTOR PROGRAMS: THE UNFULFILLED PROMISE

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Abstract

This article reviews and critiques the literature on academic mentor programs in higher education. Challenges of both the one-to-one mentoring model and the network mentoring model are discussed. The author argues that both models fall short in revealing the hidden curriculum (i.e., the unwritten and unspoken norms, values, and expectations of the academic culture of higher education) to students of color (especially African-Americans) and first-generation college students. The author suggests that mentor programs should move beyond the “grooming” and “network” models to a more comprehensive model that operates at the institutional level, and that restructuring mentor programs to include a standard academic mentoring curriculum would effectively and systematically reveal the hidden curriculum to all students, regardless of their race and socioeconomic status. A standard academic mentoring curriculum would bring us one step closer to transforming colleges and universities into mentoring institutions.

The Implicit Mission of Formal Academic Mentor Programs

Many undergraduate mentor programs at predominantly White colleges and universities have been designed to promote academic success and increase retention rates of “at-risk” students often identified as underrepresented and first-generation college students (Dunphy, Miller et al. 1987; Sharkey et al. 1987). The reason many mentor programs at predominantly White institutions target these particular students is that they are presumed to have less access to informal social networks with faculty and administrators, who tend to be primarily White middle-class males. If students experience alienation from faculty and administrators, they are less likely to pursue other academic support services (e.g., tutorial services, writing center) which could have positive educational benefits for them (Johnson 1989; Ugbah and Williams 1989). It is important to note that while many White middle-class students also find it difficult to establish relationships with faculty and administrators outside the classroom, these students often still learn the institutionalized academic cultural capital of higher education through their family’s cultural and class backgrounds.

Institutionalized academic cultural capital refers to the unspoken and unwritten norms, values, expectations, behavioral codes of conduct, and the “rules of the academic game” concerning how to successfully navigate through the higher education system. Some researchers refer to institutionalized academic cultural capital as the hidden curriculum (Jackson, 1968; Apple, 1990). The hidden curriculum refers to how institutionalized academic cultural capital is manifested and operates within the culture of higher education. For example, there are appropriate ways to discuss grades with professors without challenging their authority, a “hidden” code of behavior that may not be self-evident to all students.

James Coleman (1988), a sociologist, refers to the skills, knowledge bases, and other resources that are transmitted within informal social networks as “social capital”. Coleman (1990) defines social capital as social actors having access and control over one another’s human capital (e.g., education, training) and other social resources (e.g., wealth, prestige) through social relationships. One of the primary implied missions of many mentor programs is to increase students’ social capital by empowering them to develop strong personal relationships with faculty and administrators. The social capital acquired through these mentoring networks is significant because it regulates the amount and quality of institutionalized academic cultural capital that is transmitted from mentors to mentees.

However, many mentor programs have adopted diverse approaches to fulfill this implicit mission. For instance, mentor programs may use paid or unpaid mentors who are faculty members, administrators, staff members, or advanced students. The mentors and mentees may or may not receive formal training. Mentor programs might encourage participants to form one-to-one or group/network mentoring relationships (Haring, 1997). In addition, academic support services (e.g., tutorial services) are often associated with mentor programs. In most mentor programs, the director or coordinator matches mentors and mentees based on similar academic interests and shared racial and/or gender characteristics. Also, the director determines the minimal number of meetings mentors and mentees should have with one another and how long the program will last (Haring, 1997). For instance, two years is the recommended minimal length of time mentors and mentees should commit to participate in a mentor program (Merriam 1983; Johnson 1989). The underlying assumption for building students’ social capital is that it promotes academic success, which is a crucial goal of mentor programs.

Defining the Meaning and Functions of Mentoring

The term “mentor” has its historical roots in Greek mythology. Before going to fight in the Trojan War, Odysseus asked his trusted friend, Mentor, to serve as a “spiritual guide” or surrogate father to his son Telemachus (Wellington-Johnson 1997, p.7). Today, there is no consensus among scholars regarding the definition of “mentoring.” A mentor is often thought of as a sponsor, advisor, role model, supervisor, tutor and motivator (Merriam 1983; Healy 1997). Freidman (1987) argues for a very narrow definition of mentoring: a person is considered a mentor only if she combines the roles of advisor, sponsor, research supervisor, supporter, and role model and participates in a one-to-one mentoring relationship. But Zelditch (1997) believes the definition of mentoring should encompass and acknowledge different forms of mentoring in higher education, and the notion of mentoring should not be constrained to just one-to-one mentoring relationships (c.f., Zelditch 1997, p.32-33). Zelditch suggests that we should simply consider “mentoring as an intensive kind of teaching” (p.34). Galbraith and Cohen (1995) have a broader definition of mentoring. In their review of the mentoring literature, they found several common themes in the various definitions of mentoring, including the following: Mentoring is a process within a contextual setting; involves a relationship of a more knowledgeable individual with a less experienced individual; provides professional networking, counseling, guiding, instructing, modeling, and sponsoring; is a

developmental mechanism (personal, professional, and psychological); is a socialization and reciprocal relationship; and provides an identity transformation for both mentor and mentee (c.f., Wilson 1997, p.178).

Although the definition of mentoring is debatable, there is more agreement on the major phases and functions of mentoring. Many scholars cite Kram's (1985) seminal work about mentoring relationships within the corporate sector. Kram (1985) delineates four major phases of the mentoring relationship: initiation, cultivation, separation, and redefinition. During the initiation phase the mentor serves primarily as a role model to the protégé. In the cultivation phase, the mentor and protégé relationship grows stronger as the mentor becomes her protégé's coach, counselor and sponsor, and provides exposure and visibility (networking) within the institution. The separation phase is a time marked by ambivalence as both the mentor and protégé prepare for separation. Finally, the redefinition phase is a transition in which the mentor and protégé relationship is replaced with a friend/peer relationship. Kram's work is significant because it illuminates how mentors and mentees negotiate with one another in order to achieve psychosocial and vocational goals. According to Schockett and Haring-Hidore (1985), the two primary functions of mentoring relationships are psychosocial and vocational. Psychosocial mentoring provides support to the protégés through "role modeling, encouraging, counseling, and collegueship." Vocational mentoring supports the protégés through "education, coaching and consulting, sponsoring and providing visibility and exposure and protecting" (c.f., Haring 1997, p.64). Psychosocial and vocational functions are incorporated in most models of mentoring, including "one-to-one" and "networking".

Academic Mentoring Models: One-to-One and Networking

Conversations about academic mentoring often emphasize individual benefits and not institutional goals. Recently, scholars have begun to take a new approach to studying mentoring by looking at both the individual and institutional benefits of academic mentoring (Berquist 1992; Wunsch 1994). These scholars argue that mentor programs could assist mentors and mentees with their personal and academic development in a supportive environment, which in turn could foster a sense of duty and loyalty to the advancement, continuity, and stability of the institution. For instance, many faculty mentors satisfy their generative needs (i.e., their desire to leave a legacy for the next generation) by helping student mentees achieve academic success and feel more connected to the university. As a result, colleges and universities are better able to accomplish their recruitment and retention goals within a supportive community.

Although the majority of the research on academic mentoring emphasizes the positive outcomes of mentoring, it cannot be ignored that negative mentoring exists, occurs on a regular basis, and has real consequences. In fact, Wilson (1997) outlines three effects negative mentoring can have on minority students: (1) lowering academic expectations; (2) encouraging students to consider "easy" majors; and (3) reinforcing students' low self-esteem by not academically challenging them to do better (p. 178). According to Collins (1983), negative mentoring experiences often influence people to make charges that, "'traditional' mentoring promotes and maintains the status quo by socializing

protégés into the ‘rules of the game’ and many of the ‘rules’ one must learn in order to be in the ‘inner circle’ are discriminatory against women and minorities” (c.f., McCormick 1997, p. 191). At the same time, Braun (1990) reminds us that we should always be aware that “mentors who are positive need not be of the same sex or race of the protégé” (c.f., Wilson 1997, p. 184).

In fact, according to Knox and McGovern (1988) there are six important characteristics of a mentor: “a willingness to share knowledge, honesty, competency, a willingness to allow growth, a willingness to give positive and critical feedback, and a directness in dealings with the protégé” (c.f., Otto 1994, p. 17). If mentors embody these characteristics, they should be able to create a positive mentoring experience for their mentees, regardless of their mentees’ sex or race. Although the previous evidence highlights primarily how negative mentoring affects mentees, one could also infer that negative mentoring could impede mentors from successfully meeting their emotional and psychological needs to “give back” to the next generation, and that schools could encounter more obstacles in achieving their diversity and retention goals.

Many colleges and universities try to foster positive individual and institutional achievement, development, and growth by designing mentor programs that are based on either a one-to-one or network mentoring model. One-to-one mentoring is also known as the “grooming model” (Haring 1997). The major attributes of the grooming model of mentoring are:

- One-to-one relationship.
- Search for the perfect match – matching primarily on racial and gender characteristics.
- Unidirectional and hierarchical - benefits flow from mentor to protégé (Haring 1997, p. 64).

According to Haring (1997), however, the three attributes of the grooming model are problematic because they are based on assumptions supported by inconclusive evidence. Haring offers counter-arguments for each assumption:

- Mentoring relationships do not have to be one-to-one to be effective and rewarding.
- There is inconclusive evidence on whether using racial and gender characteristics to match mentors and protégés produces the most effective mentoring relationships.
- The unidirectional and hierarchical approach implies that protégés are not perceived to be and thus are not treated as valued contributors to the mentoring relationship (p.64-67).

Overall, the grooming model, whether designed with the original or modified attributions outline above, could lead to two major problems. First, it could provide justification for why mentoring relationships fail when the mentors and mentees do not belong to the same gender or racial group. As a result, the mentors and mentees are not required to

reflect on the structure of the mentor program or how their individual approaches to mentoring could have contributed to their negative mentoring experiences. Instead, they find solace in the presumed fact that their relationship was ineffective due to racial and gender differences. Second, the grooming model could cause mentors to unconsciously and without malicious intent mold their protégés to be like them (the cloning effect). Moreover, some scholars (Gonzales-Rodriguez 1995) are very concerned that many good-hearted White mentors will encourage underrepresented protégés to replace their home culture with the majority culture in order to succeed in higher education.

Haring (1997) suggests that in order to avoid some of the problems associated with the “grooming” model we should use the “networking” model of mentoring which is more inclusive (faculty, administrators and students) and is coordinated by an appointed facilitator. The networking model purports to be more inclusive of different cultural values, experiences and perspectives. In fact, there are two primary components to the networking model:

- The mentor program is structured in a way that fosters group interaction among administrators, faculty and students so that everyone in the group can exchange both psychosocial and vocational benefits with one another (one-to-one mentoring is not the emphasis).
- There is a de-emphasis on hierarchy and power within the network model. For example, an individual could serve as a mentor to someone in the network at one point in time because she has expertise in an area. At another time, she could become a protégé seeking advice from another expert in the network (protégés are perceived to be and treated as valued contributors to the mentoring relationship, unlike many one-to-one mentoring relationships) (p. 68).

The advantages of using the networking model of mentoring are:

- No need to find a perfect match (less emphasis on matching on racial and gender characteristics).
- Protégés are less likely to be cloned by any particular mentor.
- More students can be included in the network (thus reducing the pressure to assimilate).
- “Chemistry” between mentor and protégé is not a crucial issue because relationships are less intense.
- Students learn more about the institutional culture from various perspectives (e.g., faculty, administrators and other students).
- Students in the network have more power because they belong to a group.
- Success of all the protégés in the group is the main focus, not success for just a selected few (Haring 1997, p. 68-69).

On the other hand, the challenges of the networking model are:

- Difficult to organize and maintain the energy necessary to sustain an effective mentor program.
- The effectiveness of the mentor program is greatly influenced by the skills of the facilitator. A skilled facilitator will bring key people and resources within the institution to the program. However, an unskilled facilitator will either dominate the network with her agenda or create a poorly organized network.
- Each participant must make a serious commitment to give and receive benefits from the network at various times.
- Networks must include “senior” individuals in the institutions (e.g., individuals who have been part of the institution for a significant number of years). Senior members are very important because they can offer greater insights into the politics and culture of the institution.
- Individuals are not promoted as rapidly in the network model as in the grooming model, but members in the network have more power to demand that the institution address their collective concerns (Haring 1997, p. 69-70).

Although the networking model is more advantageous than the grooming model, it still limits student’s access to only the academic cultural capital of the mentors in the program. Creating mentoring institutions which provide students access to institutionalized academic cultural capital from a larger pool of faculty, administrators, and advanced students would remedy this problem.

Recommendations and Conclusions

Academic mentor programs should be restructured to explicitly and systematically reveal the hidden curriculum to students. One approach to restructuring academic mentor programs is to create a uniform academic mentoring curriculum, which would standardize the types of institutionalized academic cultural capital that mentees receive within the program. Moreover, a standard academic mentoring curriculum would provide mentors with a blueprint of how to successfully transmit to their mentees the higher-level academic skill sets and knowledge bases associated with the domain of the hidden curriculum.

There are three criteria for implementing a standard academic mentoring curriculum within mentor programs. First, all the academic stakeholders (e.g., administrators, academic staff, faculty, and students) need to dialogue with one another about the academic culture of their institution and generate a list of topics that identifies the major attributes of the hidden curriculum of their college or university. Second, the list of topics should be converted into a training manual or handbook for mentors. Third, mentors should be required to discuss the topics in their manual with their mentees. It is important to emphasize that it would not be necessary for mentors to have a standard teaching style or technique for transmitting institutionalized academic cultural capital to their mentees. However, it would be crucial that all the topics in the manual were discussed in detail in order to ensure that all the mentees in the program would have access to the same institutionalized academic cultural capital. If colleges and universities restructure their

current mentor programs to include a standard academic mentoring curriculum, they would be one step closer to developing a mentoring institution.

In short, a case has been presented for why we should not think of academic mentoring only in terms of individual mentoring relationships; rather, we should consider how academic mentoring could operate at the institutional level. Since institutionalized academic cultural capital is not “academic common sense” to all students because they come from diverse racial and class backgrounds, it is the responsibility of colleges and universities to ensure that the hidden curriculum is unveiled to all students. If post-secondary institutions fail to provide all students with equal access to institutionalized academic cultural capital, they implicitly validate and reproduce structural inequalities within higher education. Colleges and universities can demystify the higher education process by explicitly and systematically revealing the academic cultural expectations and practices to all students. Finally, if institutions of higher education discourage the mentality and practices of “hoarding academic cultural knowledge” among its stakeholders they would create a more meritocratic and just higher education system.

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