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Posted Date: 31 August 2023

doi: 10.20944/preprints202308.2173.v1

Keywords: Mentorship; mentoring culture; minority higher education leadership; leadership; higher education; minority faculty; diversity; inclusivity



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Article

Creating a Mentoring Culture: Cultivating Leadership Potential in Faculty and Staff

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Abstract: Recent years have seen organizations increasingly shift towards the development of a mentoring culture, as opposed to the imposition of formalized mentoring programs. This original research paper set out to explore the utility of fostering mentoring cultures within higher education settings with a particular emphasis placed on the ways in which a mentoring culture may support the nurturing of leadership potential and serve underrepresented minority faculty and staff members. Primary data was gathered using an open-ended qualitative survey, which was followed up by semi-structured interviews. One hundred faculty members in diverse academic and administrative leadership roles across the United States were sent online surveys, with 18 individuals expressing interest in participating in a semi-structured interview. Those who responded affirmatively were then contacted via telephone to follow up with further questions. Analysis of their insights, in conjunction with analysis of other literature, suggests that the cultivation of a mentoring culture offers diverse benefits for mentees advancing into leadership positions; for mentors; and for the institution as a whole. Overall, the development of a mentoring culture characterized by informal, spontaneous exchanges, and tailored to the needs of underrepresented minority faculty members, appears to be a useful tool in enhancing leadership potential in higher education contexts.

Keywords: mentorship; mentoring culture; leadership; higher education; diversity; intersectionality; minority faculty

1. Introduction

Effective leadership underpins the success of any effective organization or institution. Leaders represent an indelible human element of ingenuity, capable of translating and crystallizing goals, visions, and missions into reality. However, academic leadership is distinctive in some critical ways to the leadership of other large professional service firms. Academic institutions allot significantly more autonomy to their professional staff members. There are other noteworthy differences: for professional academic staff who accept leadership roles such as department chair, the role is sometimes viewed as a temporary, obligatory position that will cease in several years. In such instances, the individual assuming the responsibility of chair may not be willing, or aware, of the leadership expectations encompassed within the role [1]. Furthermore, there exists myriad administrative and academic ways in which one may assume a leadership role in institutes of higher education.

As such, the transition to academic leadership carries with it a need to develop and utilize a new set of skills [2]. Diverse strategies have been suggested to help advance faculty and staff as they move into leadership positions. Mentorship, however, has been consistently identified as one of the most transformative and successful methods for assisting faculty members who aspire to, or may one day, be asked to assume leadership positions in higher education. In addition, it is critical to note that mentorship is particularly important for underrepresented minority groups or women who typically experience greater challenges in their trajectory towards the top [2–4].

The utility of mentorship in fostering and developing leadership qualities is therefore well-established in the literature. What has been less explored, however, is the development of mentoring cultures in institutes of higher education and the ways in which they may be harnessed to cultivate leadership potential. The investigation of such questions benefits from nuanced and critical research. As Brabazon and Schultz (2018) point out, formal mentoring programs can sometimes re-entrench

hegemonic ideals, obscuring organizational and social contexts that engender inequality and fail to propel underrepresented minorities into leadership roles [4]. As such, mentoring cultures benefit from a critical design that considers the needs of underrepresented individuals, helping them to strategically reposition themselves through targeted and culturally competent mentoring [5].

This original research study set out to explore these two central questions: 1) How can a mentoring culture support the cultivation of leadership in higher education settings? and more specifically, 2) How can mentoring cultures be tailored to meet the needs of underserved minority faculty members and support them in meeting their leadership potential? Primary data was sourced using two qualitative methodological tools: open-ended surveys and semi-structured interviews. The findings were analyzed and situated within the context of other recent scholarship exploring the nexus of mentoring cultures and leadership in institutes of higher education.

1.1. The role of mentorship in higher education

While private companies and firms have championed mentoring for decades, mentoring is a more recent phenomenon in higher education, becoming increasingly prevalent since the 1990s [6]. The presence of mentoring programs, or indeed, the development of a mentoring culture within an institution of higher education can benefit mentors, mentees or proteges, and the wider institution, and additionally elevate the wellbeing of the organization in diverse, holistic ways.

Nonetheless, a number of higher education institutions have identified the utility and relevance of mentorship with respect to leadership, and have embedded mentorship initiatives within their organization to support deans aspiring to move up the ranks. Some notable examples include The Council of Colleges of Arts and Sciences (CCAS), which offers a Mentoring Program for Deans and Associate/Assistant Deans that seeks to provide support and guidance to academic deans in higher education. The program is designed to help new deans and associate/assistant deans navigate the complex role of academic leadership and provide them with the resources and support they need to succeed. The University of Massachusetts Amherst, which has a Faculty Mentoring Program that provides support and guidance to new and existing faculty members, offers bi-weekly or monthly professionalization seminars, the identification of specific mentors for new faculty, and other resources to help faculty members succeed in their roles. Columbia University has also moved to champion mentoring, with its Guide to Best Practices in Faculty Mentoring that provides an overview and guidance for schools and departments seeking to develop new mentoring programs. The guide is a practical asset for schools and departments looking to establish effective mentoring programs for their faculty members.

Several other institutions also offer executive leadership mentorship programs to advance faculty aspiring to higher-ranked roles, such as college vice presidents. The University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), for example, offers an Executive Leadership Program that extends mentorship and support to college deans and vice presidents. The program is designed to assist these leaders develop the skills and knowledge they need to succeed in their roles and advance their careers in higher education. The University of Michigan additionally offers its aspirational faculty members a Leadership Development Program that gives mentorship and support to college deans and vice presidents. This initiative is designed to help emerging leaders develop the skills and knowledge they need to succeed in their roles and advance their careers in higher education.

In general, mentorship programs within higher education settings are designed to provide professional development, support, guidance, acculturation into the workplace, and resources for individuals advancing their careers in higher education. The benefits of such mentorship initiatives are often framed in terms of the mentee, who can develop critical hard and soft skills, faculty-specific competencies they need to thrive, and instrumental work relationships [7]. In this instance, soft skills encompasses socioemotional, personal, and interpersonal skills, while hard skills refers to job-specific capabilities or skills that can be developed and measured in a quantifiable way. The cultivation of both hard and soft skills in mentoring relationships has been identified as critical to fostering mentee success [6]. However, mentoring also incurs benefits for mentors, and for the wider organization as a whole, thus contributing to a theory of change [6]. Mentoring represents a reciprocal learning

relationship characterized by trust, respect and commitment, that can be beneficial to students and other members of the university community. Mentees thus become more likely to enact these positive traits with their own students or other faculty members.

Fountain and Newcomer (2016) carried out an extensive review of literature exploring the benefits of mentoring in institutions of higher education, and reported the following diverse benefits: Mentoring can help retain and advance faculty, socialize mentees into the culture of an institution; enhance collegiality and strengthen relationships and networks among mentors and mentees; elevate productivity among mentors and mentees; foster professional and scholarly growth and career advancement for mentors and mentees, and increase organizational stability [6]. Mentoring can additionally help new mentees become familiar with organizational socialization, which is particularly important to fostering success in academic settings by helping the individual to become familiar with the workplace culture, expectations, and the demands that will accompany the position. A person who has successfully navigated this process previously offers a robust platform for knowledge sharing and experience transfer [8].

Mazerolle et al. (2018) highlights that in institutes of higher education, mentorship can come from multiple sources and may offer greater benefits if it does [8]. A constellation of mentors allows for a diverse, specialized range of valuable, specific institutional knowledge and culture-specific expectations to be communicated from different sources. Mentoring relationships should involve multiple individuals with distinctive experiences and knowledge as a means to cultivate growth and development among leaders and faculty members navigating entry into higher ranked positions [9]. Faculty members transitioning into new roles with leadership expectations can benefit from support and guidance from a diverse range of mentors capable of highlighting complementary areas of expertise, knowledge, or past experiences.

There is additionally an extensive literature exploring the potential advantages and pitfalls of different mentoring methodologies within institutions of higher education. One constant that is identified, however, is the importance of offering mentoring training in a format that is accessible and appealing to potential mentors, and impels faculty participation. Podcasts, webinars, websites with advice, or coaches available on request are generally more desirable than scheduled workshops demanding in-person attendance. Such an observation also resonates with a more informal mentoring style that emphasizes flow and spontaneity. In addition, informal mentoring relationships appear to best serve mentors and mentees, allowing for social interactions to organically emerge and potential pairings to emerge naturally [8]. The significance of informal mentoring in the context of mentoring culture will be explored in greater depth in the coming sections.

2. Materials and Methods

Surveys represent a useful, multi-purpose method of gauging interest, revealing opinions, unpacking experiences and sharing brief narratives. Furthermore, surveys that prioritize qualitative research values can harness the rich potential of qualitative data and have much to offer researchers seeking simple and rapid dissemination of their survey [10].

A brief, open-ended survey was thus selected as a suitable precursor method of identifying initial themes or issues that could later be expanded upon and explored in semi-structured interviews. A survey consisting of four questions (1. How do you understand 'a mentoring culture'? 2. How does the cultivation of a mentoring culture support minority faculty members aspiring to leadership positions? 3. How can mentoring programs contribute to enhanced leadership? 4. How can mentoring programs better serve underrepresented minorities?) was distributed to 100 members of higher education institutions who held diverse academic and administrative leadership roles. Convenience sampling was used to locate the individuals and the demographic captured included women and men of diverse ages and Asian, Native American, African American, Hispanic and white ethnic backgrounds.

Eighteen of the 100 survey participants expressed interest in participating in a phone interview. A semi-structured interview was selected as the most appropriate format for the research purposes, given that the interview style allows for a focused approach while still allowing the exploration of

pertinent ideas that may enhance understanding of the research questions being evaluated[11]. Furthermore, semi-structured interviews enable the interviewer to explore lived experience in greater depth as it is narrated, a central concern as this study aimed to encompass the perspectives and lived experiences of diverse members of faculty. Semi-structured phone interviews were carried out with 18 participants with each interview lasting from 30 minutes to one hour. The interview was then transcribed verbatim and a narrative analysis of the survey and interview results carried out, with prominent themes and trends subsequently identified.

3. Results

3.1. *Defining a mentoring culture*

Increasingly, many organizations are shifting away from formalized, obligatory mentoring programs towards the cultivation of a mentoring culture within the workplace. Lois Zachary's well-established body of work exploring the creation of mentoring culture within educational organizations suggests that mentoring cultures develop within an environment that sustains an expectation of continuous mentoring and a consistently high-quality mentoring practice [12]. Zachary observes that those participating in a mentoring culture commit themselves to working collaboratively to build a workplace where mentoring excellence can flourish. A mentoring culture is borne of intention, developing from an institution's conscious desire to strengthen the internal capacity of its people, celebrating the uniqueness of the individual and his or her unique contribution [12]. The benefits from involvement and participation within a mentoring culture are manifold, extending to mentor, mentee, and the organization as a whole. Staff retention is increased, organizational commitment is elevated, and performance is enhanced due to increased confidence from individuals engaged in such developmental relationships [12]. Moreover, a climate of general positivity is created, uplifting trust and morale.

Zachary (2006) argues that there are eight hallmarks of a mentoring culture [12]. All the hallmarks must be present, at least to some degree, in order for a mentoring culture to be present. The more entrenched or consistent each hallmark is, the greater the likelihood that the mentoring culture is more robust and sustainable in the long-term. Zachary identifies the following eight pillars: accountability, alignment, communication, value and visibility, demand, education and training, and safety nets. Accountability refers to the need to define tasks and set goals and success factors at the outset. Alignment focuses on ensuring that the mentoring culture lines up with the culture and mission of an institution or department. Communication refers to the need to maintain open channels of communication at the individual, relational, group and organizational levels of the institution. Value and visibility refers to sharing personal stories, practicing role modeling, celebrating, or engaging in practices that increase the visibility of mentoring and compound its value. Demand encompasses the idea that it's essential to create a buzz around mentoring, and empower multiple mentoring opportunities. Education and training speaks to the idea that productive and meaningful learning can enhance individual capacity. Finally, safety nets are developed to ward off potential pitfalls or roadblocks, providing support that enables those engaged in the mentoring culture to move forward no matter what happens. The eight pillars offer a useful reference point for exploring the phenomenon of mentoring culture in higher education, and how the development of a mentoring culture may help to foster leadership initiatives.

One consistent theme that emerged from data analysis was the significance of cultivating value and visibility in the creation of a mentoring culture. As interviewees emphasized, embedding mentoring values and mentoring-oriented behaviors into the fabric of the department or institution was critical to raising the profile of mentoring and opening up channels of communication around it. As one interviewee, a Dean of Faculty Development, emphasized, "a mentoring culture signifies an environment where mentorship is not merely a program but an integral aspect of our university's ethos." Another interviewee, a Dean of Academic Affairs, underscored that mentoring cultures remove the obligatory nature of mentoring by weaving it into the everyday nature of the workplace. He commented, "a mentoring culture is about fostering an environment where mentorship isn't a

checkbox but a way of life. It's a commitment to uplifting one another through shared experiences, knowledge sharing, and meaningful connections."

Mentoring cultures may be characterized by newer mentoring models or concepts, such as "developmental networks", "mentoring constellations" or "multi-level mentoring initiatives" [12][13]. In essence, such approaches to mentorship are underpinned by awareness that mentoring happens on a regular basis in micro-interactions, among a range of people rather than a single individual. Everyday life is inflected with opportunities to mentor and be mentored, thus creating a culture of mentoring [13]. Higgins and Kram (2001) view mentoring as a multi-relationship phenomenon, where aspirational individuals benefit from receiving developmental support from diverse sources during their career trajectories [14]. When multi-relationship mentoring takes place in an organization, "constellations" of mentorship occur [15].

A mentoring culture resonates more with informal mentoring than formal mentoring, which is defined by more pervasive or set mentoring programs or initiatives. Informal mentoring, on the other hand, occurs as a natural component of a relationship where one, or both parties, develops insight, knowledge, wisdom, and support from the other [16]. Cotton and Ragins (1999) additionally report that informal organizational mentoring is more beneficial than formal mentoring for mentees and mentors, because the relationship that arises is authentic rather than obligatory [17]. Moreover, informal mentors are more likely to engage in helpful psychosocial activities such as counseling, role modeling, and providing friendship than formal mentors [16]. As one interviewee, a Hispanic female University President explained, informal mentoring was part of a collective commitment to uplifting each other. "A mentoring culture reflects our commitment to fostering growth, collaboration, and leadership at all levels. It's about cultivating a system where mentorship isn't a formality but a shared responsibility to uplift one another and the university."

Moreover, a mentoring culture additionally neutralizes many of the features of traditional dyadic mentoring models that have been identified as problematic or uncomfortable, such as power imbalances borne of top-down interactions, tedious scheduled meetings, a long-term commitment creating a sense of obligation on the part of one or both parties, or a sense of vulnerability on the part of the mentee. As Chang, Longman and Franco (2014) emphasize, underrepresented minorities can feel averse to traditional, hierarchical mentoring relationships, instead expressing a desire to participate in developmental networks that are characterized by power through rather than power over others [18]. The fostering of a mentoring culture may therefore render mentoring more appealing to those who would otherwise shy away from more formalized mentoring initiatives.

Informal mentoring styles can additionally work more effectively for underrepresented minorities and women. Men are sometimes reluctant to initiate formal mentoring relationships with women due to the fears of spending time with a single member of the opposite sex, and white men also tend to avoid maintaining professional mentoring relationships across race as they harbor concerns about cultural competence [13]. Shorter, more informal exchanges can alleviate both these concerns and similarly remove the stigma of "being mentored" from underrepresented minority persons. One interviewee, a white female Dean of Faculty Development, expressed a similar sentiment, articulating that a mentoring culture deconstructs power-imbued mentoring relationships, "as it is about fostering relationships across hierarchies, sharing experiences, and nurturing each other's growth. This culture ensures that guidance, feedback, and support are readily available for all members, leading to collective development." Another interviewee, an African American Vice President of Institutional Advancement, echoed a similar sentiment, pointing out that mentoring cultures are "about fostering relationships that transcend titles, nurture growth, and building a community where knowledge flows freely."

In a mentoring culture, mentoring opportunities may arise in a brief visit to the cafeteria or coffee room, an exchange in the corridor, or by lingering after a staff meeting to share an encouraging word or offer an opportunity. This approach to mentorship resonates with fluidity, spontaneity, non-hierarchical relationships and micro-exchanges borne of the moment. Research indicates that mentees prefer organic, informal exchanges to those that feel forced [19]. Momentary, brief interactions that arise in natural circumstances can create fertile soil for positive mentoring exchanges to take place

[13]. Moreover, when these interactions occur with different members of faculty, developmental networks or webs of supportive relationships can be fostered across diverse individuals.

3.2. How mentoring can support leadership in higher education settings

Leadership in environments defined by both academic and corporate elements can be complex. Professional staff who become administrators and leaders frequently face challenges separating themselves from their faculty role in order to make decisions that may challenge allegiance to colleagues or traditional values of the academy [20]. There are additionally other unique responsibilities aligned with academic leadership: as Rowley and Sherman (2003) emphasize, faculty members who find themselves thrust or impelled into academic or administrative leadership roles do not necessarily aspire to such positions, and may lack the expertise, problem-solving skills or vision to successfully fulfill such a role [1]. Because so many academicians may be ill-equipped or unprepared to face the rigors of a leadership role, mentoring can represent a powerful tool capable of transforming faculty members into confident leaders. Academic leadership nonetheless represents a vital component of organizational growth and learning that can render the institution a more creative, innovative place [1].

Friedman et al. (2014) offer a valuable departure point for considering the relationship between mentorship and leadership in a school of public health in the southeastern United States [21]. Their analysis of survey findings suggests that peer mentorship can specifically benefit leadership development through the 1) sharing of knowledge and improving navigation; 2) fomenting change in a way that is both respectful and inclusive, and 3) inspiring motivation and balance among staff members to prevent burnout. Overall, they assert that peer mentorship models promote the development of successful leadership qualities and encourage inclusive practices that promote diversity and improve equity.

Rathmell, Brown and Kilburg's (2019) ethnographic case study traces the transformational passage of an academician into a leader of the hematology and oncology faculty at Vanderbilt University Medical Center [22]. The article highlights the developmental relationship between the individual and mentor as she ventures into a leadership role, revealing intimate insights. The authors note that the transition from faculty member to academic leader requires a transformation: a conversion that can be precipitated and guided with the support of an intentional coach or mentor. The authors observe: "Much like a high-performing athlete receives coaching, an elite academician can be trained in skills that enhance his or her game and contribute to creating a winning team [22]. In this particular case study, the mentor is instrumental in helping the individual to find their feet, establishing ground rules, experimenting and trying new things, developing their identity and structure as a leader, mastering the juggle of academic research and teaching responsibilities with the leadership role, and honing the art of difficult conversations.

3.2.1. Mentorship can support the complexities of academic leadership

Our survey findings and interviews also indicated an awareness that mentorship offered invaluable insights into the unique nature and demands of academic leadership positions, providing rapid, real-world learning in handling complex issues. One Hispanic male college president shared the following insight: "Mentorship programs are leadership academies. They provide emerging leaders with a platform to learn from the experiences of mentors, helping them navigate complex situations and develop skills that go beyond textbooks."

Another interviewee, a Vice President of Student Affairs of Asian descent, emphasized that mentorship offered a means of accelerating leadership potential in a safe space. "Mentorship programs are leadership incubators. They allow emerging leaders to learn from the experiences of seasoned mentors, accelerating their growth trajectory. It's a safe space to refine leadership skills, adapt strategies, and gain perspective."

3.2.2. Mentorship can help female faculty members prepare for leadership

Beyond the development of specific skills and attitudes, mentorship can be particularly powerful in helping women transform and uplevel into academic leadership roles. Dunbar and Kinnersley's (2011) research on female mentorship and leadership in higher education administrative settings offers an overview more specific to women, suggesting that mentors can help mentees in two critical areas of leadership development: career development (hard skill) and psychosocial development (soft skill) [23]. According to Bynum (2000) a mentor was rated the most critical success factor in developing female leadership characteristics [24]. In fact, some women recommended having "several mentors"[24].

A female Dean of Development underlined the importance of mentorship for supporting the development of critical soft skills in female faculty members aspiring to leadership roles, articulating, "Aspiring leaders receive insights, skills, and perspectives that might not be covered in formal training. Effective mentoring fosters self-awareness, emotional intelligence, and strategic thinking – all essential for successful leadership." Another female interviewee, a Hispanic college president, mentioned similar sentiments, explaining: "Mentorship programs enhance leadership by instilling self-awareness, resilience, and adaptability. These programs help emerging leaders identify their strengths, address their blind spots, and cultivate the interpersonal skills required for effective leadership."

The cultivation of these "soft skills", particularly resilience, has been identified as vital to the success of women aspiring to leadership roles in academia. The need for resilience in successful female leaders in higher education settings has been identified by diverse scholars, including Isaacs (2014) Airini (2011) and Chance (2022) [25–27]. Resilience represents a useful strategy for countering challenges such as stereotyping, tokenism and the intersectionality of racism, sexism and ageism. Resilience can additionally act as a protective factor and positive adaptation mechanism, assisting women (and indeed, women of color) as they navigate personal and professional challenges on their leadership journey [27].

3.2.3. A culture of mentoring creates a safe space for minority members to learn leadership skills

The role of a mentoring culture in contributing to leadership and mentorship in women and minority faculty also arose as an important concept in both the established literature and our survey findings. The majority of Dunbar and Kinnersley's (2011) female administrator participants reported that they found their most significant mentoring relationship through informal means, and that the development of a mentoring culture fomented informal developmental relationships that lead to professional advancement [23]. A female Native American Dean of Faculty Affairs pointed out that mentoring cultures "weave mentorship into our university fabric, creating an atmosphere where knowledge transfer, personal growth, and professional development happen seamlessly through meaningful relationships...For minority faculty, a mentoring culture is a lifeline. It connects them with mentors who've faced similar obstacles and can offer guidance. This culture fosters an environment where they're empowered to explore leadership paths with confidence." Another participant, a female university President of Hispanic background, emphasized that mentoring cultures played a pivotal role in uplifting minority faculty members and preparing them for leadership in a safe, supportive environment. "It provides them with avenues to connect, learn, and receive guidance from those who've walked similar paths. This support system enhances their confidence and encourages them to embrace leadership roles," she reflected.

3.3. Tailoring mentorship to underrepresented minorities

As explored above, mentorship can offer unique benefits for faculty members of underrepresented minorities, offering a supportive environment in which to learn, practice, and hone the leadership skills needed to thrive as leaders in academic settings. However, both existing research and our survey findings indicated that traditional mentoring models may not serve or benefit underrepresented minority faculty. The development of a mentoring culture, characterized by informal or brief mentoring exchanges may be more advantageous to such populations, or the tailoring of targeted mentoring initiatives may be more useful in meeting the needs of

underrepresented faculty. The perpetuation of a “one-size-fits-all” approach to mentoring cannot serve the advancement of minority and female higher education leaders as it presents mentoring as a neutral activity that is universally applicable and fails to acknowledge the unique experiences of these members of faculty.

Nkrumah and Scott’s (2022) study of women of color who were mentored in STEM higher education illuminates the need to evolve away from mentoring programs that do not address inequity issues [28]. One issue they identify in particular is the need to consider intersectionality—the ways in which factors such as age, race, and gender mingle and interact, bearing influence upon the individual’s personal and professional biography. Women of color, for example, do not necessarily have the same mentoring needs as white women, or black men. Chang, Longman and Franco’s (2014) intersectional study of mentorship and leadership in higher education highlights, for example, that women of color were more likely to gravitate towards brief, informal, developmental mentoring exchanges than formalized, long-term mentoring relationships [18]. The informants championed the concept of “developmental relationships” as a more desirable alternative to mentoring, due to their spontaneity, lack of obligation, and egalitarian nature. Several African-American female faculty members noted that proving self-reliance and competence by figuring things out alone was critical for women of color working in predominantly white, male environments where they may be questioned or viewed as incompetent if they failed to demonstrate self-reliance [18]. Traditional dyadic mentoring relationships could undermine such self-reliance, and are based on hierarchical dynamics whereby an inexperienced mentee is often expected to be vulnerable and comfortable with self-disclosure. For the women of color interviewed by Chang, Longman and Franco (2014) there was instead a preference for lateral, relational, informal mentoring relationships [18].

In addition, Tran (2014) used empirical data sourced from female leaders of color at a Hispanic-serving institution to demonstrate the importance of challenging a traditional mentorship model. Instead, a more critical approach to mentoring was championed that reflected the multidimensionality of the mentoring process, and identified the need to tailor it and harness it as a strategy to accelerate change within institutions of higher education [29].

Research carried out by Kang (2022) additionally highlights that faculty of minority backgrounds or marginalized communities are often unaware of critical elements of the organization’s culture [30]. Cognizance of unwritten institutional rules and norms can be instrumental to succeeding in leadership roles, with those who are not savvy sometimes assumed to be a poor fit or disrespectful of institutional values. Kang (2022) recommends that faculty of color can benefit from connecting with senior mentoring faculty who can share this insider knowledge with them in a culturally competent way [30].

Our interviewees underscored the urgency and importance of crafting a mentoring culture that helped minority staff feel comfortable, supported, and safe to express their culture in lateral, non-hierarchical ways. As one respondent, a white female Dean of Faculty Development observed, “We’re working on tailoring our mentoring programs to better serve underrepresented minorities. This involves mentor training that emphasizes cultural competence and awareness. Additionally, we’re creating mentorship circles where mentees can connect with multiple mentors, offering diverse perspectives and a broader support network.”

Similarly, a male African American Vice President of Academic Affairs highlighted the importance of fostering a mentoring culture where learning happens on both sides—for the mentor, and mentee, thus deconstructing the traditional dyadic hierarchy so commonly seen in mentoring programs. “Tailoring mentorship programs for underrepresented minorities involves fostering a sense of belonging. We’re implementing reverse mentorship, where experienced leaders learn from diverse mentees. This reciprocal exchange ensures that mentorship isn’t one-sided and benefits both parties,” he explained.

Another informant, a female Hispanic President of a university, emphasized that tailored mentoring culture honed towards leadership requires mentors to be trained in cultural awareness. “We are in the process of customizing mentoring programs by integrating cultural competence training for mentors. This ensures that mentorship relationships are sensitive to the unique

challenges faced by underrepresented minorities. It's about promoting inclusivity and equitable support." For another Native American female Dean of Faculty Affairs, a tailored mentoring program was instrumental in her advance to leadership, and an opportunity she wishes to share with other aspirational Native American leaders. "As a result of my Native American background, here, we're focusing on mentor-mentee matching that considers shared experiences, focusing on the stories that brought you as an academic this far, ensuring mentors can provide guidance that resonates with the mentee's journey. I come from an oral and storytelling culture, therefore creating a successful mentoring program was important for me."

Overall, the evidence explored above accentuates that a one size fits-all mentoring format may not serve diverse demographics within faculty. As Nkrumah and Scott (2022) emphasize, the omission of intersectionality in the mentoring framework results in the perpetuation of mentoring models that are informed by hegemonic norms [28]. Hozien (2023) explained that the incorporation of intersectionality as an analytical lens through which to develop mentoring programs, and indeed a culture of mentoring, could transform mentoring initiatives to better serve diverse members of faculty and elevate more underrepresented minorities into leadership positions [31].

4. Discussion

Leadership in academic settings poses a range of unique challenges, and many faculty or staff members who ascend into leadership roles are sometimes ill-prepared for the challenges that such positions encompass. Mentorship can offer an invaluable means through which academic and administrative members of higher learning institutions can acquire the necessary soft and hard skills to excel in these leadership roles, and usher in positive change and transformation in university settings.

In recent years, a growing awareness of the benefits of cultivating a mentoring culture has arisen in organizations and higher education institutions. Mentoring cultures offer a more informal, spontaneous way in which mentors and mentees can engage in mentoring behaviors and activities and often dismantle the obligatory, hierarchical nature of traditional dyadic mentoring models. As our interviewees observed, the development of a mentoring culture embeds a mentoring dynamic into the fabric of the institution, normalizing relationships where members of staff uplift and support each other.

Furthermore, mentoring cultures can offer an alternative to formalized or traditional mentoring programs that may not appeal or serve diverse members of faculty. As outlined in the examples and data discussed, individuals with different intersectional identities may have unique or specific mentoring requirements. Mentoring must thus be malleable enough to meet the needs of diverse faculty, and the crafting of a mentoring culture that is fluid and flexible may better serve marginalized or underrepresented populations. For underrepresented faculty who are aspiring or advancing to leadership roles, it is particularly essential to ensure mentoring programs can support them in upliftment, and contribute to bringing greater equity in elite academic positions.

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