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Intentional Mentoring: A Shared Journey of Discovering and Supporting Diverse Talent in Academia

By: Barbara Holmes, Ph.D. & Kent L. Willis, Ph.D.

Thriving in academe for faculty of color is difficult and challenging (Gasman, 2022). Faculty of Color face enormous odds of overcoming barriers such as an unwelcoming culture, isolation, lack of professional support, imposter syndrome and disengagement from the community of scholars. In recognition of these factors, intentional mentoring provides a strategy of support in facilitating successful persistence in the academy.

This autoethnographic paper explores the mentor-mentee relationship of a tenured faculty member whose contributions in mentorship and coaching produced notable professional growth for countless doctoral students and new faculty members. Sharing the experiences of one mentee and mentor may inform the journey of uncovering some of the nuances of navigating the barriers of entry in the academy. Mack, Watson, and Comacho (2012) articulate the longstanding structural barriers in higher education that impede the professional progress of groups not traditionally present as faculty and posit that the voices of affected faculty must be heard.

Consider census data from 2010 revealing that while Latinos make up 15.5% of the population, less than 4% of faculty are of the same background. Next, African Americans represent 12.6% of the U.S. population and only 5% of the faculty workforce. Conversely, Asian/ Pacific Islanders are at 8% of the faculty makeup which is above the 5% share of the U.S. population that they represent (U.S. Census, 2010).

Intentional mentoring emanates from the aims of servant leadership. Haysetta (2021) defines intentional *mentoring as a developmental experience intended to increase the willingness to learn and establish credibility while building positive relationships through networking*. The goal of the intentional mentoring experience is to foster an environment in which mentees enjoy a professional experience that helps them to develop without threat to the psyche or mental health, knowing that there is a caring supportive colleague that minimizes the multiple threats that may be encountered.

Intentional mentoring is an act of graceful caring. It contributes to the future by helping to sustain the development of emerging scholars. Tjan (2017) in the article *What the Best Mentors Do*, affirms that mentoring is about helping people become their best selves and building good relationships. Mentoring is

above all else a selfless act on helping, supporting, and caring. Mentoring is about focusing on the other person and helping them to do well and to be well.

The Purposeful Mentor

With over fifty years of teaching and supporting emerging scholars, several practice principles guide the work:

1. Building trusting relationship
2. Promoting the powerful belief in the capacity of others
3. Identifying and sharing ways to grow and develop
4. Being present in good and challenging moments

Gibbs (2018) explains that intentional mentoring is rooted in the desire to help others grow and develop. Together mentor and mentee are connected through productive purpose with the goal of creating the path forward. Through the trust developed through active nurturing, mentor and mentee learn how to be mutually supportive and committed to agreed upon professional aims and objectives (Werner-Washburne, 2018).

Methods

Data Analysis in autoethnography involves formative analysis of retrospective accounts, reflections-in-action, and fieldnotes, a summative analysis [8] followed by the development of themes. Recurring themes in the narrative reveal significant points of departure for consideration. Shared experiences and interpretations of life events uncover powerful knowledge for developing new ways of approaching larger problems to create meaningful interventions that may help solve problems.

Mentee Reflection

As a new doctoral student, engaging with faculty a group of faculty members articulating a vision for more faculty of color was transformative. In short, you can't be what you don't see. My first substantive encounter with faculty members of color was during my PhD program at a Historically Black College and University (HBCU). The most eye-opening aspect of the entire

experience was the fact that the faculty had deep belief in the students. Next, the professional accomplishments of the faculty set a clear example for what would be possible with hard work and persistence. Some of the key factors that made the entire program so impactful included mentorship, networking, and sponsorship.

The mentorship provided by the faculty members went beyond the classroom guided by a genuine interest in helping students achieve long term career goals in academia. The mentorships were intentional because each student was able to establish a one-on-one rapport with the faculty and understand the motivation and expertise that each brought to their work.

Networking was another pivotal part of the process that was a byproduct of the intentional mentorship. Faculty members would often connect students with other classmates, alumni, and professionals to encourage collaboration on scholarly projects, community service, and professional development. Helping students build a broader network was one of the secrets to success for helping me and many others establish professional identity and gain exposure to the upper echelons of leadership and decision-making.

Finally, sponsorship was the most critical byproduct of the intentional mentorship afforded by the faculty. Having accomplished individuals who are willing to sponsor professional growth and advancement is priceless. Some of the practical benefits in my own experience include:

- *Nomination for senior-level leadership roles and faculty appointments.*
- *Letters of recommendation that include deep knowledge of leadership capacity, scholarly interest, and potential.*
- *Career guidance and advising during the search process and negotiation phase of professional growth.*

Intentional mentorship has been the absolute ingredient for success in my professional journey and especially as it relates to academic career pursuits. It is next to impossible to navigate the system without one or more mentors with a commitment to growing the next generation.

Discussion

What attracts people to mentoring is similar to what attracts people to teaching. There is purpose inherent in guiding growth and supporting

developing scholars and thought leaders. Professionals need trusting relationships that allow them to be their best selves and work through challenging and vulnerable moments. Mentees also need support navigating unknown and unfamiliar territory such as the dissertation process, performing as an adjunct member of the faculty and negotiating the performative evaluation process. There is benefit to be gained from elders in the process who have successfully navigated the terrain of higher education. Through intentional mentoring, neophytes have the benefit of a welcoming culture and a network of supporters who are committed to becoming their cheerleaders.

Effective mentors bring their cultural upbringing and experiences to the mentoring process. Johnson and Smith (2019) advocate that real mentoring begins with culture not with formal programs. In the mentor-mentee relationship under review, several cultural tipping points emerged:

1. An authentic role model was present
2. Passion about the work was foundational
3. The mentor cared first and then guided
4. The mentor set and expected high standards in all aspects of the work
5. The mentor and mentee were committed to each other and the journey ahead

Mentorships are reciprocal in character and process. Both parties have to communicate openly and honestly. Mentees thrive when they are made aware of areas of needed growth and shown a path to professional improvement. Mentees thrive when their unique voices and perspectives are valued and honored. Sharing grace permeates the mentoring relationship and allows each party to bring strength and wisdom to the process. Mentors have to aim high, set out to do good and create future scholars with the will to pay it forward.

Conclusion

Promoting the next generation of faculty members from diverse backgrounds namely, black and brown professionals require intentional mentorship. The underpinnings of intentional mentorship include opportunities for networking, sponsorship, and coaching. Next, despite the most valiant individual efforts, institutions must also commit to culture changes that can advance equity and inclusion in the academy.

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