

Peer Mentoring for Tenure-Track Faculty

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Four tenure-track nursing faculty members at a large, research-intensive university came together to help each other learn the role of faculty scholar and to provide discipline, critique, and collegiality for each other with the goal of building research careers. Peer mentoring is usually construed more as senior faculty mentoring newer faculty. In this model, new faculty members mentor each other based on the knowledge gained in their doctoral programs and through sharing experiences with their own mentors. The value of this strategy includes building relationships among diverse faculty members, creating opportunities for collaboration on research projects, and developing camaraderie among members that might not otherwise develop. One year after implementing this innovative strategy for faculty peer mentoring, group members report success in individual and collective scholarship productivity, more research collaboration, improved mutual expertise, and stronger relationships with each other. (Index words: Peer mentoring; Faculty; Research program) *J Prof Nurs* 19: 335-338, 2003. © 2003 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

THE ROLE OF NURSING FACULTY is evolving. The primary emphasis in the faculty role at research-intensive universities is shifting from teaching to scholarship. The meaning of scholarship is changing from the scholarship of teaching to conducting research in nursing science. In a recent editorial, Meleis (2001) commented that federal funding is becoming a requirement for those who want tenure and promotion. Tenure-track faculty members are being hired in schools of nursing with the goal of building research programs that will support the work of doctoral students. The development of these programs of research has implications not only for the individual faculty members, but also for the reputation and ranking of the school and particularly the doctoral program (Nor-

beck, 1998). Meanwhile, in many schools, few senior faculty members have established programs of research from which to mentor the newer faculty. With these ideas in mind, four junior faculty members in our school of nursing created a group to provide a forum for scholarly discourse, encouragement, critique, and collegiality.

A major goal of our group is for the members to support one another through the tenure-track process and peer-mentor our way to productive research careers. One of our members described her transition from clinician to academician this way:

We are all familiar with the “reality shock” experienced by new graduate nurses. Well, for me, the transition from a clinical arena to the academic setting was also shocking. Sure, I had a PhD, but the chasm between knowing the theoretical and applying the practical was overwhelming. Our peer research group has not only provided me with strategies for crossing the chasm but [has] also introduced me to new colleagues and friends.

Another member of the group was not only making the transition from a clinical to an academic setting, but also, having emigrated from another country, was going through a process of acculturation. The group has provided a space for all members to learn about another culture. During group meetings, members can freely discuss issues of acculturation. These discussions have been a valuable experience for all members.

There can be mixed messages in the academic setting (Glenn, 2001). The standard for performance is that faculty members will be expert teachers, conduct research, and provide service to both the university and the profession. It is extremely difficult to meet all of these expectations, and new faculty might have trouble interpreting the relative value placed on each of these activities by the administration and other faculty. Also, relationships and expectations for performance among categories of faculty—tenured, tenure-track, and clinical—can vary.

Academia can be very isolating for faculty members (Glass, 2001). Although there is an aura of collegiality, each faculty member is expected to develop a unique

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program of scholarship, publish as first author, and be awarded grants as principal investigator. The members of our group have found a way to build collegiality while maintaining unique programs of scholarship. The group provides a forum for frank discussion regarding members' role development and priorities in this new setting.

Group Members

The four authors of this article comprise the group. Dr. Jacelon is a rehabilitation clinical nurse specialist with a practice and research focus on dignity and function in older people. Dr. Zucker conducts research with patients who have hepatitis C. Dr. Staccarini is a psychiatric clinical nurse specialist from Brazil whose research interest is Hispanic women with depression, and Dr. Henneman is an intensive care clinical nurse specialist with a research focus on patient errors. We have all recently graduated from doctoral programs, and we began tenure-track positions about the same time.

The idea for forming the group was synthesized from several sources. First, the qualitative research tradition encourages reflecting upon one's data analysis with a group of peer researchers to increase trustworthiness of the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Second, our doctoral programs taught us the value of collegiality and mentoring. Third, we all identified the need for peer support and a structured environment in which to focus on our scholarship. It is a well-known fact that surrounding oneself with productive people increases one's productivity (Norbeck, 1998). In addition, the opportunity to share ideas with peer faculty members is a very important strategy for faculty development (Vassantachart & Rice, 1997).

Aspects of Mentoring

Mentoring has been defined as "an interactive, interpersonal process between a dyad of expert and newcomer" (Goran, 2001, p. 120). The classic objectives for mentoring include career enhancement and professional development, building and maintaining a professional network, and increasing competence and self-esteem (Wright & Wright, 1987). Our group has incorporated these objectives and adapted the mentoring model to a group of four experienced nurses who are entering a new phase of their careers.

Few models were found in the literature upon which to pattern our group. Unlike a publication syndicate

(McVeigh et al., 2002) or a research work group (Colling, Grabo, Rowe, & Straneva, 1998), our group has diverse research interests. This diversity allows each of us to develop a unique program of research while having a supportive group of peers with which to discuss ideas. As peers without extensive knowledge of the subject area, we can ask questions from a naive point of view that quickly illuminate the gaps in the researcher's explanation of a research problem. The peer research group is designed to help members develop programs of research that include internally and externally funded research, publication in peer-reviewed publications, and opportunities for doctoral students to work in the faculty member's program of research. To accomplish the goal, our group is small. Three to five is the optimum number of members. In groups larger than five, one person's program does not come up for discussion often enough. In groups of fewer than three, the researcher does not receive enough feedback.

GROUP STRUCTURE

Creating a structure for the group was important to its success. Firm commitments from each group member for productivity and attendance are made and honored. Meetings are scheduled for every other week. Meetings are planned to allow about one half hour for each member to discuss her scholarship. Although some groups focus each meeting on a different group member, we discuss each member's research every time we meet. Exceptions to this rule occur when a member needs more time, such as when developing a grant proposal. At that point, a special meeting might be scheduled to devote everyone's attention to a particular project. During meetings, members discuss their current scholarship, sharing successes and less-than-successful moments. We share reviewers' comments on our manuscripts and proposals so that we can all learn from our individual experiences. Each meeting provides time for scholarly discussion and laughter. By discussing our successes and our failures, each of us can benefit from the experiences of the other group members. The group members help each other to navigate the evolution from new PhD to scholar.

COLLEGIALITY

Developing colleagues is a deliberate strategy for success in academia. The high value of collegial relationships to nurse scholars is a consistent theme among successful researchers (Norbeck, 1998). University activities for new faculty provided opportunities for meeting peers across the campus and across disciplines.

The dean of our school of nursing has also actively supported opportunities to develop colleagues across the profession. Nonetheless, the peer-mentoring group provides a special opportunity for collegiality that these other more general activities do not.

Some members of our group have formal mentoring relationships with senior faculty. All members of the group benefit from these relationships through group discussion of the guidance they receive from their mentors. Although all group members are new to the tenure track and research, all have been nurses for many years and have many relationships throughout the nursing world. One advantage of belonging to the group is the opportunity to be personally introduced to other members' colleagues at national conferences (Wright & Wright, 1987). Opportunities for networking are increased fourfold when each member of the group has a sound understanding of the others' research programs. Some members of the group have held offices in national and international nursing organizations, thus providing rich opportunities for networking and resources of which all can take advantage. Members have introduced each other to potential collaborators and alerted each other to opportunities for awards and calls for abstracts that might otherwise have been missed.

One role of traditional mentors is to provide acceptance and confirmation of the protégé's abilities (Wright & Wright, 1987) as well as emotional support (Shaughnessy, 1994). Group members affirm each other's aspirations. Members help each other differentiate activities that will enhance a member's program of research from those that are outside the scope of the program. One of the most important questions group members consistently ask each other is, "Is this idea consistent with your research program? If not, don't do it." It's always easier to say no to a project when the group advises, "Say no."

These collegial practices birthed in our doctoral programs and continued during our first tenure-track year have been very affirming. We continue to be positively influenced by patterns of regular collegial interactions, which seem pivotal to the experience of becoming a scholar.

DISCIPLINE

Time constraints are a significant obstacle for developing scholars (Emden, 1998). As group members, we hold each other accountable for meeting self-imposed deadlines. At the end of each meeting, we set goals for ourselves for the next meeting. We are expected to account for ourselves if we do not meet our goals. The

effect of setting these goals is to force members to schedule scholarship time so that they will be prepared for the next meeting. Meeting notes keep members on target. The notes are reviewed in subsequent meetings, and updates on projects or ideas are discussed.

Many activities in the academic environment, including teaching and service to the school, might seem more pressing than spending time thinking about the next grant application. Norbeck (1998) says that "For faculty teaching in doctoral programs, establishing and maintaining research productivity is the analog to being clinically competent for faculty teaching in clinical courses" (p. 200). Group members regularly challenge each other's priorities and advise each other to resist the temptation to volunteer for assignments that might infringe on time that could be devoted to scholarship.

Critique: Peer Review of Work

An activity instrumental in developing a research career is publication in refereed journals (Emden, 1998). Editorial review by peers before publication is essential to publication success (McVeigh et al., 2002). Giving and accepting peer review of one's work requires "a high degree of maturity and an ability to accept constructive criticism" (Shaughnessy, 1994, p. 13). Reading each other's work and providing feedback is an essential component of the group process. Reading can take the form of editing, asking questions about meaning or content, and highlighting areas of a document that are good and those that need improvement. Discussions also include selecting the best journal for the article. If members have manuscripts or grants to be critiqued, they give the other members copies and ask that the comments be returned by a specific time. A typical time for group members to comment on each other's work is one week.

Feedback is an essential component of the peer-mentoring relationship. Critique must be honest, constructive, and supportive. The emphasis of constructive criticism is on growth and a better way to do things (Shaughnessy, 1994). The activities of reading and critiquing each other's work strengthen the author's manuscript before submission. A second benefit is that group members can apply discussion of the critique and the process of critique to their own work, thereby strengthening the writing and research skills of all group members.

Group members strive to offer support and encouragement while still providing realistic critique and direction. All proposals are scrutinized for feasibility.

Each member asks the group, "This research study I am proposing is fascinating and interesting, but is it important and fundable?"

Collaboration

The group has begun to serve yet another purpose: providing a forum for building a research network in our school of nursing. Opportunities for collaboration have arisen from the group's discussions. These opportunities have arisen spontaneously because group members have come to know how their interests connect.

Although mentoring is usually thought of in terms of the more-experienced professional guiding a less-experienced colleague, we have found that by pooling our knowledge, our group members have been able to mentor each other. Our individual expertise has increased, and we have developed strong relationships with one another. On the eve of our second year, we can report success in individual and collective scholarship productivity. Members have submitted 10 articles

to peer-reviewed journals, five of which have been accepted to date. Eight grants have been submitted to intramural or extramural sources, four of which have been funded. In addition, two of us have begun to collaborate on a line of research that combines our strengths and areas of interest. As we enter our second year, two of us are preparing our first federal-grant applications, and the other two members are not far behind.

Conclusions

Although choosing a research-intensive environment for employment is one strategy for improving the opportunities for developing a research career (Emden, 1998), it is not the only road to success. As the discipline of nursing evolves and more schools develop doctoral programs, there is a continued need for researchers at institutions who are developing research traditions. Creating a peer-mentoring group can help new faculty develop research careers in settings that have not been historically research intensive.

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