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Marilyn J. Haring

In the past decade, mentoring programs have been implemented at many colleges and universities to support and encourage members of minority groups to enter and achieve success within higher education (Welch, 1997). These mentoring programs also sought to close the demographic gap between the percentages of minorities in the general population and those with college degrees. Some of those mentoring programs were successful in recruiting and retaining minority students, as reported in the higher education literature (e.g., California Community Colleges, 1993; Campbell & Campbell, 1997; Canton & James, 1997). Other programs were not documented or were unsuccessful and cannot be found in the literature.

Overall, then, it is difficult to evaluate the success rate of minority mentoring programs. We do know, however, that the collective impact of such programs has not yielded the significant increase that is desired in the percentage of minorities obtaining college degrees.

In this article, I explore possible causes of low durability and impact for minority mentoring programs during the past decade. I also present a case for program design with a conceptual base to ensure meaningful program goals and practices, including participant empowerment. Emphasis is

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placed on designing programs based on a cogent definition of mentoring, reflection on roles that can be played in mentoring relationships, and consideration of cultural and social implications for an alternative mentoring model—networking mentoring (Swoboda & Millar, 1986).

A Decade of Disappointment

In a review of mentoring programs for underrepresented students, Haring (1997) found only a small number of mentoring programs for minorities reported in the higher education literature. Her conclusion was that many mentoring programs do not persist over time, and mentoring programs often stall after an initial, enthusiastic start. Furthermore, her review suggested that the design of most mentoring programs is remarkably similar, which could suggest programmatic weaknesses needing to be analyzed and strengthened.

Most minority mentoring programs are similar in that they have been designed to match a minority protégé with a mentor (often a faculty or staff member, but sometimes a member of the community). Usually, there is a recruiting period for mentors who want to help protégés who belong to some group that is considered “at risk.” Recruitment is followed by matchmaking by program personnel of mentors and protégés on one or more bases that seem to make intuitive sense (e.g., sex, race, academic interests). Then, for each matched pair, the mentor contacts the protégé for an initial meeting (sometimes with the entire group of mentors and protégés). Following this introductory meeting, there is an expectation that mentor–protégé pairs will continue to meet periodically to interact, especially about the protégé’s academic progress and future career. From time to time there also may be group gatherings that are social as well as professional. Often there is a central office or program director who requests feedback on how many times the mentor–protégé pair have met, any perceived successes, and any perceived problems.

The design of prototypical mentoring programs for minorities just described relied heavily on (a) a notion that mentoring is “good” and assigned mentors are generally helpful; (b) an assumption that a mentor is in a superior position within the organization and is motivated to assist an at-risk (and grateful) protégé who needs the mentor’s help to be successful; (c) the belief that mentors and protégés can be matched to capture the chemistry and benefits of naturally occurring mentoring relationships that develop spontaneously outside of formal mentoring programs; and (d) an assumption that programmatic support for critical functions can be assigned to a staff member, perhaps with some clerical support.
Unfortunately, each of the design features cited may contribute to programmatic weaknesses, and, if most or all of these features are combined, achieving success is problematic. First, an amorphous view of mentoring as positive and generally helpful gives neither clear purpose to a mentoring program nor focus to relationships in it. When participants lack an understanding of specific program goals and the types of benefits that can be part of a mentoring program, they seem unable to press mentoring to its fullest potential. In fact, an uninformed mentor may not know how to help with specific needs of an individual.

Second, the assumption that a mentoring relationship is one in which a mentor with status assists a protégé in need, surprisingly, is not well received by many protégés (cf. Granados & Lopez, 1999/this issue). That is, such an assumption casts the mentor as the one who has benefits to offer and ways that should be emulated. The tacit assumption in such a model is that the protégé needs assistance due to weaknesses or deficits. The situation that is thus created highlights an imbalance in position, experience, and accomplishment between mentor and protégé. In other words, a hierarchy is assumed in which the mentor is superior and thus occupies a position of power in the mentoring relationship. Despite the benevolent intentions of mentors, then, this situation is not generally empowering to protégés. It is ironic that empowerment may be a goal of those who participate in mentoring programs as protégés (and perhaps as mentors), but the usual program design has not fostered it.

In addition, at best, matching as a design feature appears to be hit or miss. Occasionally the variables on which mentors and protégés are matched result in a facilitated relationship with a special chemistry, but often I have found in working with mentoring programs that matching is ineffective. The apparent reason for the mixed results of matching is that the obvious variables on which mentoring pairs are matched do not represent the elusive elements that make relationships successful. The usual variables that are selected for matching purposes are sex, race or ethnicity, major or career goal, and hobbies or avocational interests. Yet, we know that not everyone who is female or African American or a business major or who likes to hike will find those with similar characteristics and interests a good match. In fact, these easily identified variables do not have much explanatory power for why some relationships flourish and some do not.

Finally, a common design feature of mentoring programs—including those for minorities in higher education—is understaffing. In the absence of significant funding to support the program, a faculty or staff member is given the assignment of implementing a mentoring program as a labor of love or, perhaps, with some released time. On the surface this appears to be a reasonable approach; however, it relies heavily on a sustained, energetic,
and knowledgeable effort by a faculty or staff member who was probably fully assigned otherwise. Such reliance on one individual to implement a mentoring program as an add-on incurs programmatic risk because the obvious tasks (e.g., matching pairs, arranging meetings) are only a part of a larger effort required in facilitating a successful mentoring program. Less obvious are the time-consuming tasks of communicating with all members of the program (singly, in pairs, and as a group), encouraging the program’s dyadic mentoring relationships to progress through desirable developmental stages (Merriam, 1983), and tracking and addressing problems that may arise between mentor and protégé (Brooks & Haring-Hidore, 1987).

Strengthening the Design of Mentoring Programs

At the heart of the design weaknesses that have been evident in many mentoring programs—including those for retaining minority students—is the lack of a conceptual base (Burlew, 1990). Mentoring programs can be designed with a conceptual base by (a) building on a strong and explicit definition of mentoring, (b) addressing a myriad of mentoring roles that have been identified in the literature (e.g., Merriam, 1983; Schockett & Haring-Hidore, 1985), and (c) building on an articulated model of mentoring that is consistent with the goals of the program.

Definition of Mentoring

Programs may be based on the general premise of mentoring as advice and support given to those who need it by influential people who wish to be helpful. This vague definition of mentoring, however, contributes little to program focus or to identification of the expertise needed to make a facilitated mentoring relationship meaningful.

Healy (1997) and Bogat and Rednar (1985) are among the many who have decried the lack of a standard definition of mentoring to guide both research and practice. To fill the void he perceived, Healy (1997) defined mentoring as “a dynamic, reciprocal relationship in a work environment between an advanced career incumbent (mentor) and a beginner (protégé) aimed at promoting the career development of both” (p. 10). Some advantages that this definition provides to those planning and implementing minority mentoring programs are: (a) recognition of reciprocity in the relationship, (b) definition of mentor and protégé by career stages rather than age, and (c) an explicit definition of mentoring that shapes the expec-
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tations of both participants (i.e., career development for both). A drawback of this definition, however, is that it does not suggest how the empirical literature on roles and activities in mentoring should inform practice. Rather, when mentoring is defined as a relationship with purpose, suggestions are lacking about how that purpose can be achieved.

In my own research and practice I have utilized a definition of mentoring that seems particularly useful in program design: Mentoring is significant career assistance that is given by more experienced person(s) to less experienced one(s) during a time of transition. Implications of the three key parts of this definition are explored in the following sections.

Significant career assistance based on needs and mentoring roles. The issue of what is considered significant by a protégé inevitably focuses attention on what protégés (for whom the mentoring program will be designed) feel are their most pressing needs and how a program should be designed to meet them. Because needs vary widely, a needs assessment is a desirable first step. When there is no needs assessment, program directors and mentors consistently have opted to focus their mentoring programs on what they perceive to be protégés' needs (e.g., educational matters such as achieving in courses, identifying and clarifying career goals, and persisting to degree completion). Such assistance might better be characterized as good advising and a program devised to strengthen current advising practices rather than to mentor students.

One way to assess needs is to simply ask protégés what their needs are with regard to being successful in college. It is in meeting those needs that assistance will be deemed significant by the protégé. But this open-ended approach may not surface the range of possibilities that a framework based on the mentoring literature would. Merriam (1983), for example, identified mentoring roles that she characterized as meeting career needs and psychosocial needs. Supporting her conceptualization, Schockett and Haring-Hidore (1985) reported a factor analysis in which mentoring roles for addressing protégés' needs clustered into those that were career-related (educating, coaching and consulting, sponsoring, and protecting) and those that were personally supportive (role modeling, encouraging, counseling, and providing colleagueship). These roles continue to be mentioned prominently in the mentoring literature (cf. Frierson, 1997).

By presenting a description of generic mentoring roles and having protégés identify the extent to which they wish to benefit from each one, it is possible to develop specific activities for the program and to determine the prospective mentors who can meet the strong needs and desires ex-
pressed by protégés. (Note that in each educational setting in which I have collected data on protégé needs—formally or informally—the more valued cluster of mentoring roles are those that are personally supportive; i.e., the psychosocial roles.)

Experience. The second part of the definition of mentoring stated previously emphasizes experience rather than age. This is a liberating concept in that those who are older are not necessarily those who can be most helpful as mentors. On the contrary, given the protégé’s expressed needs, who is likely to have experience in those roles? In a mentoring program for first-year minority students in engineering, for example, the answer could well be that advanced minority students in engineering have both recent and valuable experience to offer. Furthermore, there should not be an automatic assumption in this case that engineering faculty are the best mentor candidates, especially if protégés express higher needs for encouragement, counseling, and colleagueship than for such roles as educating.

Transitions. Finally, the definition of mentoring I have chosen targets transitions as those times when mentoring can make a significant difference. Usually, a transition in education means progressing successfully from one level to another (e.g., high school to college, community college to 4-year institution, undergraduate school to graduate school, doctoral studies to faculty position). In addition, transitions for minority students may include moving from an educational setting where theirs is the majority culture to one in which they are a small percentage of the institution’s population and their culture is poorly understood or accepted. At such times, success in the new venue is not assured; the outcome is in doubt. Whereas good advising is helpful, mentoring (by definition) makes the difference.

By focusing on transitions, this definition of mentoring facilitates program planning by suggesting such considerations as these:

- What challenges must be met successfully by protégés to make this transition?
- How do the specific challenges of minority group members differ from the challenges of others at this institution?
- What adjustments must an individual make to attain success here?
- What adjustments by the institution would make these transitions easier?
- How can a mentoring program encourage responsiveness by the institution to the needs of minority students in transition?

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Articulated Models of Mentoring

Another way to strengthen the design of mentoring programs is to examine models of mentoring that have been articulated throughout the literature to select a known one that will be useful because it has been tested by others. This is in contrast to programs being designed eclectically or invented by intuition with little or no reference to best practice. Two extant models offering different mentoring perspectives were described by Swoboda and Millar (1986) and are suggested as a starting point for those designing mentoring programs for minority students.

The first model, grooming mentoring, is more widely utilized in formal mentoring programs and represents the classical conception of mentoring from Greek mythology (e.g., *Odyssey* [Homer, trans. 1990]). The second, networking mentoring, is newer and extends the concept of networking (and mentoring) in important ways. It is also possible to combine some elements of the two models to meet program and individual needs.

Grooming mentoring and networking mentoring differ in such characteristics as who participates as mentors and protégé, expectations of the flow of benefits, structure and power dynamics of the mentoring relationship, and staffing. These contrasts are sketched in the sections that follow.

**Grooming mentoring.** In programs based on this model, a mentor is paired with a protégé to enhance the protégé’s possibilities of a successful transition. The mentor is noticeably more experienced (and hence is almost always older), and the flow of benefits is expected to be from mentor to protégé. This creates a hierarchy in which the mentor is in charge and has power over the protégé, whose role is one of learning his or her lessons well to advance.

Although the goal of a grooming mentoring program most often is stated as supporting newcomers to be successful, a logical outcome is that those newcomers are more readily assimilated into the institution because they have been schooled in the traditional ways of their predecessors (mentors). Thus, this model is best suited to those protégés whose needs are to succeed in the institution as it now exists and those who are willing to serve an apprenticeship. Ideal grooming mentors are those who wish to pass along their skills and insights to create a new generation in their own image.

**Networking mentoring.** This relatively new concept (Haring, 1993, 1997; Swoboda & Millar, 1986) undergirds mentoring programs that depart from the traditional mentoring described in the previous section. Some
features of a network are evident (e.g., a nonhierarchical connection among a number of people who exchange benefits). Also, some features of mentoring can be identified (e.g., a commitment to assist each other in making a transition by meeting career and psychosocial needs). From these features flows the central characteristic of networking mentoring: the expectation that each person in the network can and must contribute something to the others’ success. Thus, each person in networking mentoring may sometimes serve as a mentor to others and may sometimes receive benefits as a protégé.

Generally, this model is perceived as empowering individuals to develop in unique professional ways. It also is perceived as having the potential to marshal the strength of the group to alter the profile for success in the institution. The networking mentoring model, then, encourages change in institutions through the contributions of newcomers. Ideal participants in a networking mentoring program for minorities are highly motivated individuals who seek equity and an environment for change. In education, that change may involve curriculum, topics and modes of inquiry, or cultural activities as examples.

As described in Haring (1997), one or more volunteer facilitators can be enlisted to access resources outside the network, to focus the group on its goals, and to provide logistical support. In a successful networking mentoring program, these facilitators fade in and out of the network as needed and are a transparent part of the network. An example in education is a group of minority faculty who facilitate a network for minority students but are not at the center of that organization. If one faculty member is unavailable for a period of time or for any reason disengages, the network can continue without disruption because its members (students) continue their supportive interactions. Similarly, one or more students in the network can drop out or stop and the network continues.

A blend of models. Mentoring programs can blend the grooming and networking models with careful planning. An example is when a small cohort of three to five newcomers works with a more experienced person to meet needs that will result in a successful transition for the newcomers. Even as there is a network established among the newcomers, their individual relationships with the more experienced grooming mentor tend to be hierarchical. Such a program design overcomes a lack of available grooming mentors and has the advantage of creating strong peer relationships.

Questions raised in the process of selecting a mentoring model that already has been articulated might include this: Which model would enable us to accomplish our purpose (e.g., grooming for success, empowering individuals, reshaping the institution’s culture)? In addition, more practical
questions may arise such as these: Do we have enough mentors to utilize the grooming mentoring model, or would we utilize our experienced stakeholders more effectively through networking mentoring? Finally, examination of models should raise questions about the program's values (e.g., How egalitarian are we?).

Conclusions

In this article, I have endeavored to make the case for a conceptual base for mentoring programs for minority students. Such programs have potential to systematically and positively impact the success of minority students on campuses committed to a diverse student population. This goal is far too important to leave to chance—that is, to rely on each campus to invent a best practice for mentoring minority students, if it can. The mentoring literature can provide a rich base for successful programs if mentoring proponents—both experienced and newcomers—will employ it in their program designs.

References


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