

TITLE: Network Effects in Faculty Mentoring: It's Not What You Know But Who You Know
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ABSTRACT

At Grinnell College, new faculty are given the option of participating in the Faculty Mentoring Network, which matches incoming faculty with seasoned colleagues. The latter serve as “accountability partners” as new faculty set goals and establish priorities regarding teaching, scholarship, and “socialization,” Boice’s term for formation of collegial connections (Boice, 2000). The faculty mentor is asked not only to provide support and advice, but they are encouraged to introduce or connect new faculty (their protégés) to resources and programs that can provide an extra layer of support, which explains the “network” component of our program. It is this piece – the “network” in the Faculty Mentoring Network—that we will explore in our presentation. We examine which relationships and connections lead to new faculty success and satisfaction. How influential are personal connections in one’s productivity as a professional or in one’s attitude towards the institution? Does a cohort of new faculty share similar approaches and practices towards their engagement with the institution or colleagues? Equally important is the relationship between the mentor and the protégé. Does the relationship between mentor and protégé affect the ability of an early career faculty to feel like a successful and productive member of the College community? We explore these questions through surveys and interviews with new faculty members at Grinnell, and hope to expand our mentoring studies to some subset of the fourteen institution Associated Colleges of the Midwest as they implement an \$8 million Mellon Foundation grant to increase faculty diversity.

CONTENT

Introduction

Grinnell's Faculty Mentoring Network was started four years ago in an attempt to provide new faculty—both term and tenure track—with a support structure that would help in their transition to the College. Under this program, new faculty members are matched with a specific mentor for the purpose of goal setting and accountability. However, it is the “network” component of the program that is emphasized; that is, the connections new faculty members make with colleagues and resources outside of their respective relationships with their mentors are at the heart of the program. The notion of mentoring networks more generally is becoming more widespread and is supported by leading figures in the field such as Mary Deane Sorcinelli (2007) and Linda Beane-Katner (2014), both of whom favor a comprehensive mentoring program that moves beyond mentor and protégé to encompass more parts of the academic community. As we've come to see, focusing on the “network” frees the mentor to *not* have all the answers, so that the job of mentoring is a shared enterprise in which protégés seek answers and identify forms of support through other sources. Relying on a network of support may also impact one's ability to successfully navigate the terrain of one's department, and one's institution more broadly, so there's something to be said for extending the forms of support that are available to new faculty.

Decentralizing support, however, by necessity relinquishes some of our control over the messaging to new faculty. As such, we are interested in the role that making connections plays in the overall job satisfaction and productivity of a new faculty member. We want to know the extent to which networks of colleagues tend to foster similar views, and the extent to which the connection between mentor and protégé influences the effectiveness of the mentoring relationship. Not only do institutional factors affect one's experience of an institution, such as one's interaction with a department chair, teaching and learning groups, scholarly interest groups, or other administrative components of the institution, but social networks also inform a faculty member's general attitude towards the academic community. Put simply, we'll utilize some of the central features of network analysis to support the claim that “how an individual lives depends in large part on how that individual is tied into the larger web of social connections.” Put another way, “the success or failure of societies and organizations often depends on the patterning of their internal structure” (Freeman, 2015). Our hypothesis is that the attitudes of new faculty toward their institutions and their jobs are influenced not only by direct experience with the institution, but by the experience of, and connections to, their closest peers. If those peers are numerous and satisfied, we posit, the new faculty member is also more likely to be content. To test this question, we first need to accumulate the sets of connections and the self-reported level of job satisfaction for each new faculty member. There are some straightforward statistical tests that can be brought to bear to answer some questions, such as do faculty members with many connections report more extreme attitudes than faculty with few connections? However, to analyze this in greater depth, we plan to bring to bear some of the newer tools of network analysis. Comparison of egocentric networks, or potentially use of stochastic simulations of faculty networks, as described by Wasserman and Faust (1994), should allow us to see if the patterns of satisfaction appear to correlate with network connections, or if they are independent of those connections.

In the upcoming academic year, we will conduct a number of interviews and administer a survey to each new faculty member who recently completed their first year, and to tenure-track faculty in their third year, about their interactions with their mentor, their satisfaction with the institution, and their own evaluation of their professional productivity. Our interview questions will include the following:

- Who are the top one or two people you typically communicate with about work-related issues, either for advice or support?
- Who else do you talk with on work related items—either in a professional or a social setting?
- How well do/did you interact with your mentor?
- How would you characterize your personal connection with your mentor?
- In what area did you find your mentor to be the most helpful?
- In what area did you find your mentor to be the least helpful?
- Did you meet your scholarly goals for the past year?
- Did you meet your teaching goals for the past year?

Exploration of these questions will help us to understand how near peers impact a new faculty's relationship to the College. Using a Likert scale, our survey will also address some of these questions and will directly ask protégés about the kinds of support they received from their department as well as whether or not their mentor was a positive influence in their transition to Grinnell.

Past Mentoring Efforts

In the past, Grinnell's mentoring efforts were centered on the relationship between the mentor and the protégé. Although this approach is not without merit, it only succeeds if the mentor and protégé have the right chemistry and have enough in common, such as personal characteristics or scholarly interests, to sustain the mentoring relationship. In cases such as these, it is easy to understand why the mentor may automatically become the go-to person for the protégé, and the mentor may not mind being seen as the repository of all knowledge. However, when the mentoring relationship doesn't work, it can become a source of stress for both the mentor and the protégé, especially if the mentor is identified by the protégé as the only person to whom he or she can go to seek advice and support. Even in cases where the mentor and protégé have a good relationship, the job of mentoring can prove to be quite burdensome for the mentor. This scenario was a familiar one at Grinnell, which made it increasingly difficult to find faculty who would serve as mentors for incoming faculty. In fact, there was no structured mentoring program to speak of before the Faculty Mentoring Network. Instead, senior faculty members were often paired with an incoming faculty member for a particular reason, an approach that had a potentially stigmatizing effect. For instance, on a campus with a white majority, faculty members of color were often paired with a mentor, but not white faculty. Similarly, it was not unusual to assign a mentor to a faculty member who was not thriving. This model of mentoring proved to be problematic and unsustainable at Grinnell and led to discontent among newer faculty.

Thus, instituting a network approach to faculty mentoring seemed to make the most sense since it would take the pressure off the mentor to have all the answers and it would enable new faculty members to seek answers from more than one source, which would help in cases where the mentor and protégé didn't have perfect chemistry. After six years of development and refinement, we have found that our network system has broad support from new faculty and does

not “burn out” our mentor pool. Past survey results have revealed that new faculty like the Faculty Mentoring Network and appreciate its structure. We have also received positive feedback from the mentors themselves, which is highly encouraging since it’s the mentors who play a key role in implementing some features of the program. For example, we rely on the mentors to refer their protégés to other sources of information on campus, which helps to solidify the network component of the program.

We should also add that in past years the Early Career Faculty (ECF), a grassroots group at Grinnell which caters to the needs of new faculty, often aired concerns about the institution that had a negative impact on the attitudes and views of incoming and newer faculty towards the College. In recognition of this, we made efforts to work more collaboratively with this body in ways that not only highlight the vital role they play as part of the Network, but also respect their needs and contributions to the institution. Thus, since the advent of the Faculty Mentoring Network, the relationship between the ECF and the larger institution has improved, which means that new faculty are more likely to have a positive view of the institution, a big change from previous years.

Preliminary Interviews and Analysis

Although we are in the early stages of the data collection process, we already have seen some interesting contrasts regarding the effectiveness of networks for new faculty at Grinnell; we highlight this with features from several interviews and compare them to a couple of departing faculty. In one interview, the faculty member reported overall satisfaction with the institution. When asked about her communication with others on work-related issues, she reported seeking advice and support from her PhD and post-doctoral supervisors. She also sought advice from a core group of early career faculty, and frequently asked questions of her assigned mentor and her departmental colleagues. Not surprisingly, the faculty member described feeling confident and comfortable reaching out to different constituencies for answers. Because the faculty member actively sought advice from multiple sources, we can only conclude that her willingness to network with others played a big role in her general sense of contentment following her first year. Although she reported having a good relationship with her mentor, and identified her mentor as someone she called on occasionally, her mentor was never her sole source of support. If anything, her mentor played a big role at the beginning of her first year, but was less instrumental as the year progressed, due in no small part to the advice and support she received from her external advisors and her closest peers at the College. This faculty member also stated that she met her professional and pedagogical goals for the year. This is a key achievement for someone in their first year because this period is often the time in which new faculty struggle to balance their professional and personal lives.

A second interview revealed a similar satisfaction with progress at the institution, but a different path that relied much more on the mentor. Although this faculty member reached out to departmental colleagues and made connections with near peers at the College from whom he sought advice, his relationship with his mentor proved to be instrumental in his transition to the College. One of the things we ask mentors and protégés to do as part of our mentoring program is to schedule frequent but relatively brief meetings in which accountability and referral are emphasized. The suggestion for short meetings is one of the defining features of the program and is offered as one approach for preventing the mentor role from becoming too onerous. The

faculty member we interviewed stressed how helpful it was for his mentor to stick to the recommended guidelines for the program. The mentor was said to be helpful in providing perspective in meetings that were well-structured and focused on the obvious issues of teaching and research. During these meetings, the faculty member was able to set short-term goals which were easy to achieve and often helped to provide motivation and a clear sense of accomplishment. With the exception of his mentor, the new faculty pointed out that he had no significant connections with people who've been at the College longer than he has. This is an important finding because it confirms our belief that new faculty generally tend to seek advice from, and are largely influenced by their closest peers. At the same time, we have also found that newer faculty who do not forge connections beyond their department and their mentor tend to find marginal success in their first years at the institution.

Interviews conducted in late summer continue to confirm our hypothesis regarding the influence that networks have on the experiences of new faculty. In two interviews (conducted separately), each faculty member reported having few contacts outside their departments throughout the academic year. While the lack of contacts did not translate into any obvious dissatisfaction with the institution, both individuals revealed that they did not meet their professional goals for the year. The lack of extra-departmental contacts, we would argue, prohibits connections that could open up spaces for potential conversations or collaborations that could support scholarship or other relevant areas of work at the institution. In the absence of these opportunities, particularly in relation to scholarship, new faculty are likely to feel discouraged when they are not meeting the goals they have set for themselves. And as we well know, an attention to scholarship is crucial for tenure-track faculty who hope to achieve tenure, and for term faculty who hope to secure a tenure-track position at another institution. It seems important to point out that of these two interviewees, one is on the tenure-track and the other holds a term position. We are persuaded then, that making additional contacts—whether on or off-campus—beyond one's immediate department leads to more success.

The results of our survey revealed that both tenure-track and term faculty are generally satisfied with their experience of the institution. However, when asked to reflect on their level of productivity, those who reported not feeling productive as a scholar also reported having fewer substantive conversations with others about their scholarship. These were the same faculty members who reported having minimal contact with colleagues beyond their department. What is noteworthy, however, is that most, if not all, of the faculty members who were surveyed reported feeling at home at the College. In other words, although some faculty members were able to meet their goals and some were not, a positive attitude towards the institution was shared by all. We attribute this outcome to the Faculty Mentoring Network itself, which offered the necessary support for both term and tenure-track faculty as they transitioned into the institution.

In contrast to the experience of the new faculty described above, we've observed extreme cases in which new faculty were unable to make satisfying or meaningful connections, which negatively affected their attitude towards, and experience with, the institution. In one case, a term faculty member was unable to connect with his mentor, his departmental colleagues, and faculty in his cohort. Although he was at the College for multiple years, he reported feelings of isolation and left with negative feelings for the institution. In a more surprising case, a tenure-track faculty member who had been an active member of the College community, and was well-

connected to all the “right” people and resources decided to resign after a negative encounter with an administrator. At this juncture, it’s important to note that that the administration, particularly the Dean’s Office, is a vital component of any network for new faculty, and the primary representative of the overall institution. If this element fails, then the efforts of all the other pieces of the network will potentially be lost.

Conclusions and Next Steps

Based on the preliminary information gathered from the faculty we’ve already interviewed, there are some obvious themes that are emerging about the effectiveness of networks on one’s view of the institution, as well as the extent to which personal connections between the mentor and the protégé affect the success of the mentoring relationship in terms of satisfaction and productivity. In the first case outlined above, it is clear that having strong, supportive relationships prior to one’s arrival at a new institution complemented the support the new faculty member received from her department and assigned mentor. As such, the faculty member did not have to rely too heavily on her mentor for advice and direction. In the second case, the new faculty member needed more structure in his transition to the college, and his mentor (with guidance from the Faculty Mentoring Network) provided just enough structure for him to view his first year in a positive way. The other examples also suggest that early experiences can have dramatic effects on how one experiences the institution.

In the months ahead, we will conduct additional interviews with new faculty and review the results of our survey to gain a fuller sense of their individual experiences and how their perceptions are affected by those around them. With just the Grinnell faculty, the convincing use of network analysis will be difficult, which is why we are planning to expand our studies to other campuses, including interested members of the Associated Colleges of the Midwest (ACM) consortium. A recent Mellon grant to the ACM, which will fund some new tenure-track lines with associated mentoring, provides a fortuitous opportunity to extend our study and provide support for improved mentoring on those campuses.

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