Mentoring in higher education: Issues to be addressed in developing a mentoring program

Dr Sandra Bochner
School of Education
Macquarie University

Abstract

A review of recent literature on the topic of mentoring (e.g. Caldwell & Carter, 1993; Wunsch, 1994) identified many issues that need to be considered when introducing a mentoring system at the tertiary level. For example, choices can be made between informal systems (relationships "left to chance") and more formal arrangements (relationships planned and purposeful, with clear agreement on roles and responsibilities of both mentor and mentee). Issues raised in the literature (e.g. Janette Long's 1994 AARE Conference paper on the "dark side of mentoring") suggest that more formal arrangements may have advantages, on the grounds that clear agreement can be achieved on issues such as the main focus of the relationship (e.g. writing research grant applications, writing for publication), the rights and responsibilities of partners (e.g. frequency of contact, rights re authorship of publications, amount of direct involvement or other contribution in joint research projects). Apparently mentoring arrangements work best if all parties are very clear about their roles. Other issues to consider include support (some programs provide funds for mentee and mentor), mentors sometimes selected from outside the Department (this has the advantage of a wider field to identify needed skills and less risk of negative outcomes if the relationship sours).

Introduction

This paper is concerned with issues associated with the concept of mentoring as it relates to the tertiary education sector in Australia. It is based on experiences associated with the introduction of a mentoring system in a department at an Australian university. Procedures followed in developing the system are described and conclusions draw about the use of mentors in university contexts.

Pressures to introduce staff mentoring schemes into universities in Australia can be traced to economically rationalist-based demands upon universities for academic staff to achieve increased efficiencies in teaching and related functions, coupled with improved performance in research output, particularly in the form of scholarly publications. Mentors are seen as a means of improving the level of performance of academics, in both teaching and research, over a short time-frame. For example, the Strategic Plan of the School of Education at a Sydney
university includes, as part of its overall goals, the establishment of an effective mentoring scheme associated with a system of staff appraisal "as a means of both enhancing the working environment and the productive outcomes" (School of Education, 1994, Preamble). Specifically, it is proposed that a mentor be appointed for each new staff member. However, there are inherent risks associated with any proposal that aims to achieve rapid improvement in individual performance within the framework of a procedure such as mentoring which involves a partnership based on cooperation, goodwill and trust between individuals (Long, 1994). Such arrangements need to be introduced cautiously, taking account of the needs of each individual, both mentor and mentee, and the specific situation within which the relationship must function.

The concept of a mentor, or "wise and trusted counsellor" (Macquarie Dictionary), has a long history that is usually traced back to Greek mythology and the story of Odysseus who left his son, Telemachus, in the care of Mentor when he went off to fight in the Trojan Wars. According to this view, the role of mentor involves both protection and development or education of the young child. The concept of "protege" remains, though the term mentee is now often used to represent the role of the young Telemachus in a mentoring relationship. Most definitions focus on the role of the mentor as a guide, sponsor, adviser or gatekeeper who protects and, more particularly, in the present case, takes a special interest in the professional development of another who is usually less powerful and inexperienced (Carruthers, 1993; Madison, Knight & Watson, 1993; Sands, Parson & Duane, 1991; Wunsch, 1994).

The main focus of this paper is on "mentoring" in the context of staff development within a university context. The impetus for the review reported here arose from a request to examine the topic of mentoring, with a view to its introduction into the School of Education at a Sydney university. This move can be traced to recent demands for increased efficiencies in the teaching role of academics, coupled with expectations for higher levels of productivity in research and related activities. Mentoring is seen as a means of facilitating this process, particularly in relation to younger staff and those who have transferred into a university context as a result of amalgamation and reorganisation of different types of institutions. The following discussion is organised around a series of topics associated with the introduction of formal mentoring schemes into the tertiary sector.

Mentoring in tertiary institutions
Mentoring appears to have a long history. Carruthers (1993, p.10) cites examples from as far back as the 1490s when Sir Thomas More was mentored by Professors Linacre and Grocyn. In most areas of human endeavour, those who have achieved success can usually trace their
progress to the influence and support of a senior person in their field who provided guidance, support and advice, either within an ongoing relationship or at crucial points in their careers. In the period when bright undergraduates entered an honours program, then moved on to a doctorate and into tutorships or junior lectureships, as the first steps in an academic career, there was often a more senior academic who recognised their potential and, subsequently, encouraged, in some cases facilitated, their entry to academia. This process worked well for those who were lucky enough to be spotted and supported. However, there were many groups who were neglected within this system, in particular, women, members of minority groups, as well as part-time and evening students, part-time and casual teaching staff, all of whom had difficulty in finding mentors. In general, students and junior staff who were associated in some way with a senior academic who saw mentoring as part of his or her role were most likely to receive support, with the result that their future careers were assured. Those who did not have access to such relationships had much greater difficulty in achieving career-related goals.

Differences in the potential rate of access of some groups to professional support becomes important in times of rapid change when the traditional slow but steady progress of an academic, from postgraduate student to, perhaps, professor, is replaced by short-term appointments, with individuals moving between universities, government departments, schools, industry and so on. At these times, the potential value of mentoring to facilitate rapid induction and development of new staff becomes significant; hence, the current interest in the process of mentoring in universities.

Data reported by Madison et al (1993) and Sands et al (1991) suggest that mentoring within university departments is limited. For example, Madison et al (1993) surveyed all staff in a small rural university. Among the 30% who responded, just over half had experienced a mentoring relationship at that university. Sands et al (1991) also reported a low incident rate for mentoring, noting that when it did occur, it generally took the form of informal arrangements and usually involved junior and senior faculty of the same sex. They commented that staff negotiating a mentoring relationship should be aware of the type of assistance they needed, while those willing to act as mentors should specify the type of help they were willing to give. Madison et al did not find evidence to support a preference for same-sex partners among women seeking mentors, though this finding may have reflected a shortage of women academics at senior levels. However, they did find evidence to support the pattern reported in other studies that mentees are usually in their twenties or early thirties, while mentors tend to be from 8 to 15 years their senior. Mentoring relationships tended to last up to four years.
Why talk about mentoring now?
Informal pressures: The last decade has been a period of rapid change in the tertiary sector in Australia. For example, the incorporation of Colleges of Advanced Education (CAEs) into the university sector, coupled with the introduction of a "research composite index" as a basis for payment of the research component of university operating grants, has resulted in pressures for rapid up-grading of the many staff who had not completed doctorates, as a means of achieving a higher institutional profile in competitive grants and publications. At the same time, there have been economic pressures for increased efficiencies in all aspects of teaching. By the nineteen nineties, the traditional system for identifying and inducting new staff from the pool of postgraduate students had largely broken down. The limited number of positions that now become available are usually fixed term, with no guarantee of permanency. Staff appointed to these positions often come from backgrounds that involved government agencies, industry, commerce and so on, rather than tertiary teaching and research. Mentoring provides a means for rapid re-training of such staff.

Formal pressures: Requirements associated with university staff enterprise agreements (which include staff appraisal), have led to the inclusion of formal commitment to mentoring and appraisal as part of university strategic plans (for example, see School of Education, 1994).

Issues to consider when setting up a mentoring scheme:
What form should a university mentoring program take? Should it be formal or would an informal arrangement be as effective? Are there existing models that can be followed? In reviewing the literature, three possible frameworks for a mentoring program were identified, involving teacher education programs, reports of successful university-based mentoring programs and ad hoc or existing informal networks.

Teacher education programs Within the context of pre-service teacher education, the relationship between student teacher and supervisor, whether university lecturer or master teacher, provides one model of a mentoring relationship. There is an extensive literature on this topic, particularly in the light of requirements by the British government (DFE, 1992) that all training of secondary school teachers become school-based, with higher education institutions and schools cooperating in the planning, teaching and assessment of student teachers' work; for example, see Barnes and Stiasny (1995). However, this model is probably inappropriate for a "staff mentoring staff" situation, in view of the degree of inequality in the status of mentor and mentee in teacher trainee/master teacher or supervisor relationships.
University-based mentoring programs Three models for mentoring new staff within an academic department at a university in the USA are described by Jackson and Simpson (1994). Two of the programs focused on the improvement of teaching. For example, in one case, funding was provided to a small number of selected participants over an academic year for a project concerned with improvement of teaching, coupled with support from a mentor selected from senior academics of the participant's own department or from the wider university. The role of the mentor varied, but was usually related to some aspect of the teaching project. The second model was concerned directly with improving the teaching effectiveness of new and inexperienced staff. Mentors observed the teaching performance of the mentee, discussed strengths and suggested how teaching strategies and style could be improved. To avoid difficulties associated with confidentiality in relation to decisions concerning salary, tenure and promotion, mentors were usually selected from outside the mentee's department or, if possible, university. Participation was voluntary and all information remained confidential between the two parties. Jackson and Simpson's third model concerned the development of expertise in research. In this case, the mentoring relationship lasted for 12 months, with the goal of assisting the participant to obtain outside research funding. Each mentee received $3000 and the mentor $500 from a university fund. Seminars and other group activities were also organized to support the program. Jackson and Simpson concluded that there was a need for formal mentoring programs for academics at the beginning of their careers. Senior staff could be found who were willing to act as mentors, in some cases working across departmental boundaries, though this latter situation required that the mentoring program be administered at a broad university level.

Existing informal mentoring relationships As was noted above, mentoring relationships often develop informally, between senior and junior academic staff. It is often claimed that the role of senior staff in a university includes a mentoring function in relation to more junior staff, particularly when there are areas of common teaching and research interest. Traditionally, such informal relationships have comprised the only form in which mentoring has occurred in universities. However, as noted above, the career path of academics has changed, pressures on staff time have increased and mentoring, on an ad hoc basis, does not provide the level of support needed to ensure that new staff, in particular, develop effective teaching and research skills. It is evident that within informal mentoring systems, many staff miss out, being unable to identify possible mentors, establish appropriate relationships, or being wary of becoming too closely aligned with specific academics who might be able to assist them. Some staff will take part in mentoring, as either mentee, or at a later stage in their career, as mentor. It is for those who are not able to establish such relationships that more formal arrangements are needed.

What should be the role of mentor and mentee? What aspects of these
roles need to be taken into account when setting up a formal mentoring program? From a review of the literature, a number of questions and alternative responses were identified (see Table 1).

Table 1 Summary of questions and alternative responses associated with mentoring

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Alternative responses</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What should be the role of mentor and mentee?</td>
<td>peer/pal/sibling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>paternalistic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Should there be links between mentoring and appraisement?</td>
<td>direct links with appraisement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>no links with appraisement</td>
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<tr>
<td>What should the mentoring relationship be?</td>
<td>formal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>informal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What should be the main purpose of the relationship?</td>
<td>focussed on a particular task</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>unfocussed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How long should the relationship last?</td>
<td>fixed term</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>no time limit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What rights should each party have?</td>
<td>rights (for one or both)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>no rights</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Should either party be trained for their role?</td>
<td>trained (one or both)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>untrained</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Should mentor and mentee be same sex</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>different sex</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Should participation be voluntary</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>required</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Should there be, from one or both parties commitment to the relationship</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>no commitment</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Probably the most important issue identified in Table 1 concerns the role of the mentor. Options include that of an older sibling; a personal confidante willing to give time and energy freely to teach, guide, support and encourage a mentee; or a senior figure, paternalistic, wise, experienced, knowledgeable and a model for success. The relationship between mentor and mentee may be formal or informal, intensely personal or more distant. Contact may be face-to-face, frequent and focussed on a specific topic, as when both partners are involved in the same teaching area or work together on a specific research project. It can also be indirect (by telephone or Email only), infrequent and less focussed. The rights of each party can vary, as with decisions about whose names appear on any resulting publications or who has control of any research funds. Mentors may be selected from within the same discipline or department as the mentee, or from outside these areas. This latter option has advantages; the choice of an external mentor has the advantage of access to a wider pool of expertise than is available in the mentee’s department. It also has advantages if the relationship sours, or if there is uncertainty about confidentiality in relation to aspects of the mentee's program (e.g., allocation of teaching loads, applications for research grants, requests for re-grading). All these questions become relevant when decisions are being made to introduce a formal mentoring program into a university department.

Other relevant issues to be considered in relation to the possible involvement of some staff in mentoring arrangements include the following:
possible conflict with other existing but, perhaps, less interesting/exciting commitments; e.g., staff engaged in higher degrees should not be "diverted" until the degree program is completed;
staff with very heavy loads may not seek further commitments (i.e. involvement in a mentoring program), though they may be in greater need of mentoring than others (and not aware of their need). For example, this situation may occur where there is a long history of heavy teaching loads for younger staff, with no senior staff watching their interests to ensure completion of higher degrees leading to publications, promotion and so on.
casual and part-time staff should be encouraged through a mentoring program, since they may provide the pool for future appointments (i.e, follow a path similar to the honours student route that existed in earlier years - and may yet exist again!).

A survey of School of Education staff on the topic of mentoring As part of a review of mentoring within a university context, academic staff within the School of Education at Macquarie University were
invited to complete a short questionnaire on the topic of mentoring. Just over half the academic staff completed the questionnaire. Their responses are summarised below.

Re their preferred type of mentor/mentee relationship: formal vs informal arrangements; most choices were at the formal end of the continuum (6-8 on an 8-point scale)
Comments: staff should be given a choice; the issue of matching possible mentors and mentees must include some formal agreement about roles, responsibilities and so on, to ensure that the relationship is profitable.

Re the use of mentors from within the School of Education only or from the university as a whole; responses spread but tended towards a university-wide pool.
Comments: decision should be made in the light of the mentee's interests and assessed needs; maybe stay within the School for teaching but go beyond for research.

Re the commitment of time to the relationship; responses varied from contact on a fortnightly basis to 'according to need', median choice: once or twice a semester
Comments: need to define a minimum time commitment; commitment should be by agreement with a formal schedule determined for each year; half an hour per week or as decided; whatever suits the two people, maybe only by phone, Email etc.

Re the main activity of the mentor and mentee; rank order of suggested possible activities;
1. research
2. publishing-academic journals
3. teaching
4. career planning (regrading)

5. grantspersonship
   planning of OSP
6. contact with professional organisations
   publishing-books and other materials
7. writing skills
Activities added by respondents:
8. 'gamespersonship, or getting to know the 'system' and how to work within it, its influence and shape
9. liaison and interaction with School staff and with staff at a wider university level
Comments: the main activities of mentoring depends on the situation (mentee's level, interests and needs, mentor's strengths etc); all the activities listed here are important at different stages of an academic's career; the main focus should be on research but there could be advantages in being mentored about teaching, perhaps by a different
person; all items are important, so decide, first, by mentee's need, then by "performance"; use School's needs, as well as mentee's needs to determine priorities; what does "assistance" mean? (guidance, monitoring, overview of progress, help with goal-setting?); activity depends on level - could hardly mentor a level E (professor) on teaching.

Other comments on the general concept of mentoring included:
It could be a requirement for all, with individual selection being determined uniquely for each pair;
It is a good idea.
At this stage it is usually just luck. If there is no-one else in your area, you may be left to discover it all by trial and error - mainly error - a painful and time-wasting exercise. It rests usually on two issues - goodwill and time.
Do not forget part-time and casual staff.
Mentors must be trained in the task.
Should be a flexible and voluntary arrangement but with a co-ordinator/supervisor/senior person.
There should be some degree of supervision of the scheme/ time consumption? ratio of students wanting vs needing assistance; ratio of staff and outsiders willing/able to assist.
Need to distinguish between teaching and research - often makes sense to have two different people;
Does everyone have to have a mentor?
Authorship would only be relevant if mentor received a lot of help, as with a higher degree supervisor; .
There seems to be no distinction between mentor and appraiser; real risk of overburdening several key people if everyone must have a mentor.
Who mentors the "mentors"?
Disagree with monitory reward for being a mentor, unless the mentor/mentee are jointly doing a project, but then external funding (for research) should have been considered.

Conclusion
On the basis of the information collected for this review, it was concluded that, to develop and implement a mentor program, the following steps would need to be considered:
a. do a needs assessment; ask staff if they want/need help in any area,
b. plan the procedures to be followed for selecting/training mentees and possible mentors,
c. monitor implementation; appoint a co-ordinator/co-ordinating committee to monitor the implementation process and trouble-shoot any difficulties.
d. evaluate outcomes.
For mentors and mentees, we would need: agreement on:
the task
time commitment
procedures for contact: when/where/how often
approximate overall time frame

Finally, it was proposed that the School's Research Committee should consider suggesting to Head of School that a committee be set up to develop a plan for establishing a trial mentoring system in the School.
This Committee should carry out an assessment of perceived needs among staff, identify priorities among these needs and any existing mechanisms for satisfying these needs (e.g. courses offered by the Centre for Higher Education and Professional Development). It should then begin to plan and implement a pilot mentoring program which would involve decisions being made about selection and training of participants (mentees), agreements about task and time commitments, as well as procedures to be followed for monitoring and evaluation of the project. Efforts should also be made to identify senior staff who would be willing to act as mentors in the program. To date, this proposal has not yet been implemented. However, informal arrangements have been made to encourage mentoring relationships for newly appointed staff and some staff have participated in a formal mentoring program operated within the wider university.

References


