

Dismantling Bias Conference Series

Promoting Inclusion and Career Equality through a Targeted Formal Faculty Mentoring Program

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Abstract

The concept of mentoring is not new. In fact, most Caucasian faculty members in the academy acknowledge the importance of a mentor-mentee relationship in their professional development and the impact it played in their progression through the promotion and tenure process (Thompson, 2008; Stanley & Lincoln, 2005; Kosoko-Lasaki, Sonnino, & Voytko, 2006).

Women and historically minoritized groups are not only excluded from these opportunities, their research is often times viewed as not academic and rigorous enough, their credentials are questioned, and smaller percentages are seen as competent to advance to more senior positions (Chesler & Chesler, 2002; Stanley & Lincoln, 2005; Thomas & Hollenshead, 2001; Blood et al., 2012). While these stereotypes are unfounded, women and faculty of color are usually overcommitted (i.e. service, committees, mentoring students of color), and they often feel isolation and alienation, and feelings of invisibleness (Thompson, 2008; Thomas & Hollenshead, 2001; Harley, 2008; Bilimoria, Joy, & Liang, 2008). These feelings of invisibleness and isolation are barriers to professional mobility and often result in women and faculty of color being demoralized enough that they simply choose to leave their institution (Harley, 2008; Thomas & Hollenshead, 2001).

Research indicates that formal mentoring programs are especially beneficial for women and historically minoritized groups. It could mean the difference between success and failure for early career faculty, who are searching for guidance, a sense of belonging, and confidence in their academic journey. In addition to assisting with promotion and tenure, mentoring programs and the relationships that develop, assist women and historically minoritized faculty with dress code, unwritten rules regarding promotion and tenure, networking, conflict and negotiation, and assists with retention of faculty of color (Chesler & Chesler, 2002; Stanley & Lincoln, 2005; Blood et al., 2012; Bilimoria, Joy, & Liang, 2008).

A mistaken belief that permeates is that mentors must be of the same race or ethnicity or even the same gender (Stanley & Lincoln, 2005). In fact, cross-race mentoring has been found to be beneficial to both participants especially when the relationship is viewed as reciprocal and not one person doing the other person (woman or minority faculty member) a favor or having more to offer in the relationship.

The Enhancing Mentoring Program with Opportunities for Ways to Excel in Research (EMPOWER) was developed to support faculty who are historically underrepresented and/or excluded populations in their discipline or area of scholarship and historically denied admission to higher education or that discipline. Goals of the program include supporting minority and women faculty, 1) to become successful in sponsored research and scholarly activity, and 2) to achieve significant professional growth and advancement. The program targets two groups of faculty as mentees: assistant professors and untenured associate professors in tenure-track positions and associate professors in tenured faculty positions. The mentors are tenured professors at the associate or full rank, with successful research programs, who are willing to support mentees, and assist with developing their research agenda.

From 2011 through 2021, 236 individuals (mentors and mentees) have participated in the program. The program was evaluated by an external assessment at the 5-year and 10-year mark. Overwhelmingly, mentors and mentees felt that the EMPOWER Program provided them with numerous direct benefits. These benefits included accountability through a structured/formalized mentoring program, support in identifying sponsored research and external funding, increased

scholarly activity, and career advancement. In addition to the direct benefits, participants shared there were a variety of indirect benefits associated with their participation. Indirect benefits included increased well-being, networking opportunities, general professional development, a better understanding of organizational politics, acculturation to the campus, and additional resources and support.

While there is research in higher education that suggests that mentoring does not always account for the intersections of differences across gender, ethnicity, race, sexual orientation, ability, linguistic differences, national origin, etc., participants in the EMPOWER Program did not feel like this was an issue as it related to their experiences. However, some mentors and mentees shared that having a mentor with the same gender was beneficial.

Implications for this research include a better understanding of how to best support faculty who are historically underrepresented and/or excluded populations in their discipline or area of scholarship through a formal mentoring program. Additionally, the program helped the institution with retention of faculty of color and women who were early in their career. The university also received a 650% return on investment of funding.

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