

The Experiences of Mentors and Mentees with Mentorship in the Agricultural Education Discipline

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Abstract

While mentorship is valued and studied across disciplines, it is not well understood within the broadly defined discipline of agricultural education. This study consisted of interviews with mentors and mentees in the discipline to understand why they engaged in the mentorship process and what affected their mentoring relationships. There were 12 participants in the project, equally split between mentors and mentees. There were two themes for why participants engaged in mentorship: Mentorship is an opportunity to learn and people seek out mentorship for guidance. There were five themes for what affected participants' mentoring relationships: Personal experiences and values drive mentorship, compatibility influences mentorship, mentorship is a personal relationship, communication preferences vary, and comparisons of formal and informal mentorship. For mentees, it was recommended that they take ownership of their mentoring experiences, including cultivating multiple mentors to meet various needs. For mentors, it was recommended to focus on mentees' needs and fostering connections between their mentees and other potential mentors. While they were not preferred by participants, formal mentorship programs are still recommended to help ensure all junior faculty are served in the discipline. To ensure their success, efforts need to be made to ensure a good fit between mentors and mentees. Programs also need a clear structure, training for mentors, and ongoing evaluation to adapt to participants' needs. Future research is needed to assess more aspects of mentorship in the discipline, including graduate students and tenured faculty members mentorship needs.

Introduction & Literature Review

Mentorship is commonly recommended for faculty members (e.g., Cunningham et al., 2022; Dahl et al., 2019; Fountain & Newcomer, 2016; Savage et al., 2004). It is valued by mentors and mentees (Fountain & Newcomer, 2016), and ideally mentors and mentees each benefit (Ransdell et al., 2021). Mentorship provides a host of benefits for faculty members: supporting professional development (Bean et al., 2014; Carpenter et al., 2022; Mendez et al., 2017; Minshew et al., 2021), planning and prioritizing career goals (Bean et al., 2014), supporting retention (Minshew et al., 2021), improving job satisfaction (Minshew et al., 2021; Van der Weijden et al., 2015), increasing productivity (Van der Weijden et al., 2015), fostering collaboration and relationships (Bean et al., 2014; Carpenter et al., 2022; Minshew et al., 2021),

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reducing burnout (Minshew et al., 2021), pursuing grants (Van der Weijden et al., 2015), and even improving the peer-review process (Adamson, 2012).

While mentorship is beneficial and evolves throughout an academic's career (de Janasz & Sullivan, 2004; Law et al., 2014; Minshew et al., 2021), it receives more scrutiny with newer faculty members as they transition into higher education, including helping them socialize within the organization (Mazerolle et al., 2018; Sargent & Rientes, 2022). Mentorship and appraisal impact early career academics' identities and how they navigate their careers, serving as a form of risk management (Nästesjö, 2021; Sargent & Rientes, 2022)

Mentors need support and rewards to engage in the process (Fountain & Newcomer, 2016; Sargent & Rientes, 2022). While there are some motivations for engaging in mentorship, such as benefitting from collaboration and relationship building (Carey & Weissman, 2010), getting pushed by mentees (Carey & Weissman, 2010), and viewing it as a way to give back (Mendez et al., 2017), more formal incentives could be beneficial (Fountain & Newcomer, 2016; Sargent & Rientes, 2022). Part of the support should include training to be a mentor (Etzkorn & Braddock, 2020; Lumpkin, 2011).

Mentorship does not have a single definition, which can make it difficult to assess (De Janasz & Sullivan, 2004). However, this could be because mentors can serve a variety of roles. Tobin (2004) reported that mentors can serve as a teacher, sponsor, advisor, agent, role model, coach, and confidante. The concept of mentors serving multiple roles complements recommendations for having multiple mentors who can provide different perspectives and satisfy different needs (Carey & Weissman, 2010; Dahl et al., 2019; de Janasz & Sullivan, 2004; Mazerolle et al., 2018; Ransdell et al., 2021).

In addition to a wide variety of roles, mentorship has a variety of models. Mentoring is often thought of as a one-on-one process (Moreau-Johnson et al., 2023; Savin et al., 2006), but it can also show up as mentoring networks where one person has multiple mentors (Carey & Weissman, 2010; Mazerolle et al., 2018; Sorcinelli & Yun, 2007), a committee of mentors who give one person feedback (Spangle et al., 2021), or a network of peers mentoring each other (Carey & Weissman, 2010; Goerisch et al., 2019; Moreau-Johnson et al., 2023). There is also functional mentoring, which is tailored toward necessary expertise for a project (Thorndike et al., 2008).

Informal and formal mentoring are both addressed in the literature (Fountain & Newcomer, 2016), but mentoring is often left to chance (Ruth et al., 2020; Sargent & Rientes, 2022), and mentorship has been recommended to be a part of universities' norms and expectations (Bean et al., 2014; Etzkorn & Braddock, 2020). While unassigned mentoring relationships tend to be more successful, there is a risk of early career faculty falling through the cracks and missing out on important feedback at a pivotal point in their career (Law et al., 2014).

Formal mentorship is commonly recommended and can occur within universities and professional organizations (Bean et al., 2014; de Janasz & Sullivan, 2004; Spangle et al., 2021). Organizations benefit from formal mentorship because it can serve "as a source of competitive advantage and as a means of reducing turnover and increasing socialization rates, organizational commitment and satisfaction" (de Janasz & Sullivan, 2004, p. 275). Formal mentorship programs can also address career development gaps (Williams et al., 2023).

While commonly recommended, building a formal mentorship program does not mean it will automatically be successful (de Janasz & Sullivan, 2004). Programs need adequate resources and investment (Hundey et al., 2020), and there is a need to develop mentorship programs purposefully (Etzkorn & Braddock, 2020), including conducting an initial needs assessment (Hundey et al., 2020). Providing a guiding framework is recommended at the beginning of the process (Sargent & Rientes, 2022) and fits in

with recommendations that mentoring in general needs to have clear goals (Carey & Weissman, 2010; Lumpkin, 2011; Spangle et al., 2021). Lumpkin (2011) proposed a four-stage model of mentorship programs, including conceptualization, design and development, implementation, and evaluation. Time constraints and scheduling are common issues for mentoring programs (Bean et al., 2014; Minshew et al., 2021), which is important given that frequency of meetings is linked to successful mentoring relationships (Bean et al., 2014), and mentees do not always take advantage of opportunities to meet (Moreau-Johnson et al., 2023).

While mentorship programs need to have a clear purpose and structure, they also need to allow and encourage flexibility (Eisner, 2015; Etzkorn & Braddock, 2020), which fits in with the recommendation that successful mentoring is tailored to the needs of the individuals involved (Dahl et al., 2019; Law et al., 2014). Evaluation and feedback from participants are important for adapting mentoring programs (Eisner, 2015; Etzkorn & Braddock, 2020; Hundey et al., 2020; Lumpkin, 2011; Savin et al., 2006). Mentorship programs also need to be accessible to everyone (Carpenter et al., 2022; Eisner, 2015) and be designed in a way participants will actually use, such as using briefer tools and nonburdensome protocols (Fountain & Newcomer, 2016).

Ensuring a good fit between mentors and mentees is a challenge for the mentorship process (Minshew et al., 2021). Methods for matching mentors to mentees and needs assessments to ensure mentees are getting what they want and expect from mentoring relationships can be a part of ensuring good fits occur in mentoring programs (Lumpkin, 2011; Shields et al., 2023). De Janasz and Sullivan (2004) recommended picking mentors for specific needs such as why they do what they do (i.e., identity), how they do what they need to do (e.g., competency), and whom they connect with (e.g., network). Spangle et al. (2021) recommended that mentees seek out mentors who can provide complementary areas of expertise, are trustworthy, and have shared experiences and can empathize with the mentee's situation.

While important, the ability for mentors to empathize with mentees may be limited by demographic characteristics. For example, Cunningham et al. (2022) recommended pairing women together as mentors and mentees, but Cline and Weeks (2020) reported there was a void of women leaders in the discipline to serve as role models. Similarly, Ransdell et al. (2021) reported a lack of mentors for underrepresented minority faculty members.

Pairing mentors and mentees together is important, though there are potential complications. Mentors and mentees value different aspects of the mentorship process (Etzkorn & Braddock, 2020), which creates a potential for disconnect. Fountain and Newcomer (2016) mentees valued learning how to navigate the university system, advice on professional development, and receiving constructive feedback and collaboration, while mentors valued personal and social aspects more.

There are a variety of ways faculty members can connect with mentors (e.g., faculty and peers from graduate school and research projects), but the mentorship networks that develop often come from the work that mentors have done in the past (de Janasz & Sullivan, 2004). The mentees see prospective mentors' identities through the types of work they have completed, where they received degrees and have worked, and awards they have received, which mentees use to try to find the best matches for mentorship (de Janasz & Sullivan, 2004).

A clear emphasis in the mentorship literature is the importance of the relationship between the mentor and mentee (Bean et al., 2014), and there is a need to focus on relationship building (Lumpkin, 2011). Sargent and Rientes (2022) reported that empathy and confidentiality are important for mentorship. Smith (2007) stated that trust and friendship were indicators of the most effective mentoring relationships. Carey and Weissman (2010) provided a list of characteristics of an ideal mentor: demonstrates dedication to mentoring, genuine desire for reciprocal relationship, credible, trustworthy, reliable, altruistic, generous,

and can distinguish their agenda from the mentee's. Davis et al. (2023) reported that great mentors are enthusiastic, compassionate, selfless, act as career guides, commit time and effort, support balance, and serve as role models. Mentors should help mentees build a community network (Spangle et al., 2021), provide feedback across a variety of areas (Carpenter et al., 2022; Spangle et al., 2021), and should nominate colleagues for awards (Spangle et al., 2021). While the mentoring relationship is important, Carey and Weissman (2010) said the onus for managing and maintaining the relationship is on mentees.

As with most relationships, mentorship moves through stages. Carey and Weissman (2010) reported that mentors are selected in the first 6 to 12 months, followed by a protégé stage that lasts 2 to 5 years, and then a breakup stage. Breakups are not inherently bad and can result in lasting friendships if both parties can successfully redefine the relationship.

That said, some relationships are not successful and need to end (Carey & Weissman, 2010). This can be because of relatively benign issues like personality differences, but other times the cause can be more toxic such as unethical behavior that may require the mentee to use formal chains of command to end the mentorship (Carey & Weissman, 2010). Underrepresented groups face a lack of available mentors, and they face barriers related to discrimination and isolation (Ransdell et al., 2021).

While mentorship studies occur across academia, there is a need to understand what mentorship looks like in each discipline because career norms and expectations differ across the academy (Nästesjö, 2021), which in turn is likely to affect mentorship. Research, especially qualitative research, is needed to better understand and meet the mentorship needs of faculty (Minshew et al., 2021; Ruth et al., 2020). Research about mentorship in the broadly defined field of agricultural education is limited. Example projects include assessing mentorship of women in the discipline (Cline et al., 2019; Cline & Weeks, 2020; Cunningham et al., 2022) and assessing mentorship in agricultural communication (Ruth et al., 2020). There is a need to assess what mentorship looks like across the discipline because mentorship can cross subdisciplines (Settle et al., 2024; Ruth et al., 2020).

Theoretical Framework

Social capital is one of the areas that mentorship has been specifically recommended to address (Cunningham et al., 2022). Social capital is the idea that one of the resources people have access to is the connection to other people, and the absence of these connections can negatively impact one's life and career (Woolcock & Narayan, 2000). These connections can serve a combination of bonding and bridging roles that help individuals remain close to others as well as expanding their networks (Woolcock & Narayan, 2000). Social capital is inherently shared between both parties involved, which is unique compared to other types of capital (Coleman, 1990). In other words, both parties benefit from social capital. This fits with mentorship, which has been reported to benefit both parties involved (Ransdell et al., 2021).

Because mentorship is about relationships (Bean et al., 2014), social capital shows up implicitly and explicitly within that literature. Notably, Bäker et al. (2020) stated that one of the roles mentors can play is that of a sponsor, whereby they are extending the mentees' social networks, which has tangible benefits on the mentees' careers. Smith (2007) argued that understanding social capital is critical to the mentorship process.

Within the broadly defined discipline of agricultural education, Settle et al. (2020) addressed coauthorship through the lens of social capital, finding that the majority of the most connected and prolific authors were graduates from three institutions, and the most productive coauthor pairs were usually advisors and advisees. Hur et al. (2023) looked at teaching-focused networks of faculty members at the University of Florida's College of Agricultural and Life Sciences through the lens of network theory and social capital and found that many of the interactions were grounded in individuals seeking mentorship and guidance. Of

note, many of these relationships stemmed from the faculty members' time in graduate school. They recommended university's foster mentoring cultures. Hur et al. (2022) assessed a teaching professional development program in the same college and found that it promoted social capital for participants engaged in the program, though these results were diminished by online meetings during the pandemic.

Purpose & Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to understand mentorship experiences of early career mentees in the discipline, as well as those who are mentoring early-career faculty. The research questions that guided the study were the following:

1. Why do participants engage in the mentorship process?
2. What affects participants' mentorship relationships?

Methods

Semi-structured qualitative interviews were used to accomplish the purpose of the study. The method was chosen because it allows for in-depth responses that delve into participants' experiences and emotions (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) and allows for more flexibility than a structured interview or questionnaire would allow (Flick, 2018). Qualitative research also allows for a naturalistic dialogue (Flick, 2018) and understanding the context of participants (Creswell, 2007).

The interviews were part of a two-stage research project. The first stage consisted of conducting a social network analysis of mentorship in the discipline (Settle et al., 2024). The mentees who responded to the survey were asked if they would be willing to participate in an interview, which is the pool mentees were selected from. The mentors who were interviewed were identified by mentees in the survey. Participants were then purposively selected from those pools of mentors and mentees to ensure that a variety of perspectives were represented within the discipline (Creswell, 2007).

There were six mentors (Ava, Amelia, Austin, Angel, August, & Adam) and six mentees (Ben, Burt, Betty, Bridget, Brianna, & Bryson) interviewed. Because listing some characteristics could make participants identifiable due to the relatively small size of the discipline, specific descriptions are not being provided. Instead, an overall overview of participants will be provided. All but one of the mentors was tenured. The untenured mentor was selected to represent the junior faculty members who were listed as mentors from the initial social network analysis project. All but one of the mentees was untenured. The tenured mentee was untenured at the time of the survey that was used to identify participants and was kept in the study to provide the mentee perspective of someone who had successfully navigated the tenure process. The groups of mentors and mentees were both evenly split between men and women. Most participants in both groups were White. Overall, there were five agricultural communication, five school-based agricultural education, two agricultural leadership, and two Extension education participants, which is reflective of the relative proportions of disciplines from the social network analysis. Sampling concluded after these initially scheduled interviews because data saturation had been reached (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Guest et al., 2006).

Two interview guides were created – one for mentors and one for mentees – though the interview guides addressed the same topics through different perspectives. The interview guides addressed how participants defined mentorship, how they mentor or were mentored, what affected their expectations for mentorship, experiences with formal mentorship, and their experiences with mentorship in general. Questions were developed to ensure they maintained a natural tone (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018; Hermanns, 2004), while follow-up questions were used to gather more depth of information (Flick, 2018).

All interviews were conducted over Zoom. They were recorded for accuracy. Transcripts were automatically created from the recordings and reviewed by a member of the research team who corrected

them based on the recordings for accuracy. The transcripts were uploaded to MAXQDA for analysis using Glaser's (1965) constant comparative method, which involves coding different incidents and comparing them to each other. Codes were merged or separated as boundaries were delineated during the analysis process. Using software-based analysis, such as MAXQDA, aids organization and transparency of the analysis process (Trochim, 2020).

A variety of measures were taken to ensure the overall trustworthiness of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To ensure credibility, data triangulation was addressed by interviewing a variety of individuals across the discipline (Flick, 2018). A member check occurred by providing transcripts for the participants to review for accuracy (Creswell, 2018). Transferability was addressed by providing an account of the methodology so that readers can determine the applicability of the findings (Trochim, 2020). Audio recorders and notes kept during the coding process serve as a documentable audit trail to address confirmability (Flick, 2018). Dependability was also addressed through the audit trail (Flick, 2018). Subjectivity statements are provided in the following paragraph to show the perspectives of the researchers involved in the study to help readers understand any possible influence on the authors' interpretations of the findings, which also helps address the study's credibility (Peshking, 1988; Preissle, 2008).

Quisto Settle is an associate professor in agricultural communications. He has been a faculty member at two universities and received degrees from two others in the discipline, in addition to another degree outside of the discipline. He has mentored and been mentored informally in the discipline but has not engaged in any formal mentorship processes as a mentor. Amy Wampler is student experience coordinator at Oklahoma State University. She earned a Bachelor of Science in animal science from The Pennsylvania State University and a Master of Science in agricultural communications from Oklahoma State University. She participated in a two-year formal mentorship program through Agriculture Future of America and was matched with an industry professional coach and created a development plan that outlined personal and professional goals. She has been informally mentored by multiple internship supervisors and academic advisors. Lauren Cline is an assistant professor in agricultural leadership. She has worked at three universities, land-grant and private. Each of her degrees is from a land-grant institution, with her graduate degrees in agricultural education and bachelor's degree in agricultural economics and business. She has been mentored informally in the discipline but has not engaged in any formal mentorship processes. Her research has mentorship of women in agricultural education. Lauren Quinlan is a content manager for an agricultural publication. She has two degrees at two different universities, both of which are in the discipline. She has been mentored informally in the discipline, her undergraduate capstone project included developing a formal mentorship program for an agricultural organization, and her master's thesis focused on mentorship of women in agricultural communication.

Findings

RQ 1: Why Do Participants Engage in the Mentorship Process?

There were two themes for the first research question: Mentorship is an opportunity to learn, personal experiences and values drive mentorship, and people seek out mentorship for guidance.

Theme 1: Mentorship is an Opportunity to Learn

For mentors and mentees, they often engaged in the relationship for the sake of learning, growing, and expanding their thinking. Mentors valued a mentee with a willingness to learn and ask questions. Similarly, mentees valued a person who is willing to help them and offer a new perspective.

Ben said, "I think there has to be some level of mutual benefit to a mentor-mentee process." Austin said, "[The mentors] challenged my thinking, challenged my assumptions, encouraged me to grow, evidence of belief that I can be successful."

In talking about being a mentor in the future, Burt said,

I also want to be a mentor that challenges in a good way, not challenges everything that the individual has to say, but challenges when it's appropriate to help them see a different perspective or alternative, or, you know, maybe they're looking for, to work on one area, like academic writing, you know, finding resources that are appropriate for them, sharing my insight into those things but letting them know that there are other perspectives.... A mentor should never have a "my size fits all mentality."

August said, "And so inevitably when I am in a mentoring frame of mind, I'm also learning, as I learned a lot from my mentees. In fact, sometimes I mentor people to be mentored myself. To learn from them. To try to elevate my game, too."

This idea of learning from someone showed up in the selection process as mentees chose mentors whose careers they valued. Brianna said she was looking for someone whose career she would like to emulate: "I look for someone who has a good reputation and who is a good researcher and a respective teacher. Because I want to see them as my role model and that I could become someday so I look for excellence in these areas."

Theme 2: People Seek Out Mentorship for Guidance

When a person sought out a mentor, they often looked for someone to provide guidance and advice to move them along in their career. Specifically in a faculty position, individuals identified that they valued guidance from someone who understood the promotion and tenure process and the department in which they worked. By providing support, validation, and advice to someone less experienced, a mentor could help enhance the success of their mentee.

In talking about understanding department culture, Burt said, "And that's someone that, we can, for new faculty just kind of getting to know the lay of the land and understanding, you know, policies and kind of a little bit about culture as well. And I remember going into my first faculty meeting in the department, and it's ran much differently than the faculty meetings I had been in [during] grad school. And just having asked some of the questions.... That was helpful for me to just understand that faculty meeting. And so I wasn't confused the whole time."

In talking about what makes for a good mentor, Ben said,

Someone else who can provide insight or guidance about what works for them or doesn't work for them or issues that have arisen for them or things of that nature. And then also can give me guidance as to how I am perceived or contributing to the greater good of the profession.

In talking about why you need mentors, Bryson said,

Just individuals that I would go to for advice and that kind of stuff about the tenure and promotion process. What I need to do in terms of that, and so that would be my department head. And then a couple of senior faculty here who had gone through the process pretty recently. So I would always ask them questions and kind of bug them about stuff. And then [my advisor] and me are still very close in terms of getting his advice.

Adam, sharing his perspective as a mentor, said, "You're taking an inexperienced person and you're trying to guide them through using your lens of being an experienced veteran advice that you will."

RQ 2: What Affects Participants' Mentorship Relationships?

For the second research question, there were five themes: Personal experiences and values drive mentorship, compatibility influences mentorship, mentorship is a personal relationship, communication preferences vary, and comparisons of formal and informal mentorship.

Theme 1: Personal Experiences and Values Drive Mentorship

How individuals preferred to mentor or be mentored often depended on their experiences and personal values. People identified past mentoring experiences, whether their own or others they knew, to be influential in shaping their thoughts and expectations surrounding mentorship. Furthermore, individuals

said their personal values influenced their mentorship styles. These included faith, improving the discipline, leaving a legacy, and that mentoring is the right thing to do.

August said,

If I really care about my discipline and my profession, then I want to share that with other people, and I want them to be successful. That sort of goes back to that analogy, you know, a rising tide raises all ships.... If I want to be successful, if I want our department or our faculty or our research to be successful, there have to be people who can carry it on and elevate it beyond just what I can do.

When asked about what affected his expectations for mentorship, Ben said,

I would say my Ph.D. program. I had great mentorship in my graduate program and opportunities to serve in a mentor capacity, as well. You know, not only with my major professor but also members of my committee and other faculty members in the department, you know. I considered several of them, in different ways, mentors. And then I [stepped my toes] into mentorship during my third year of my Ph.D. because I was able to work with a master's student through the development process of her methodology for her thesis.... And that allowed me to learn how I need to mentor students through the research process, which allowed me to better frame my questions or issues that I had with my mentor. So I could approach them with actionable questions or actionable issues.

Amelia, talking about what shaped her mentorship, said,

The other big one would be life experience, perspectives, things that I have gone through. Trials, challenges, things that have shaped who I am and how I interact with others and have..., this may go deeper than where you want to go, shaped my view of what I'm here for and what matters in life.

Theme 2: Compatibility Influences Mentorship

When identifying what made a mentoring relationship successful, compatibility of a mentor and mentee emerged. This included someone who was similar to them, in terms of age, stage of life, thinking, value, personality, and so on. When differences arose or a mentor did not meet the expectations of a mentee, the relationship could face turmoil.

Brianna looked for someone who had similarities with her: "Somebody that I can feel that we have a connection. Maybe someone who has [similar working experiences and situations]. Or somebody who has children. Finding somebody who can relate to myself." Amelia discussed how her program differing from the mentor's program led to not being able to act on a mentor's advice:

The advice that the individual gave me was good and definitely stuff that I wanted to do, and I wanted to achieve, but I just felt like we were like just a pretty big space apart.... Like I can't start an [student organization] my first term when we don't even have a major, and we have five students in the minor.

Bryson talked about mentor-mentee conflict with a senior person in a previous non-university position:

I felt like we just had conflicting philosophies. And so that forced mentee-mentor relationship, I didn't find a lot of value in it because I just didn't think that his approach to the program was what I wanted my program to look like. And I think he got frustrated because I didn't have the same mindset as him as well.

Angel said that sometimes fit between individuals would not be present:

And I don't think that we can shortchange that there are some people that you just get along with better. You just naturally have some personalities that click. And you can't measure that very well even if you did personality assessments for everybody.

In discussing a previous mentor in a professional organization, Burt talked about the need to find common ground in mentoring relationships and be intentional when assigning formal mentors:

When I first came into the organization, you were assigned a mentor, and we had nothing in common. They had just done it by random spreadsheet draw and hadn't put any thought into that

process, and so that mentorship existed, I say, one day, the first day of the conference, and then I never have spoken to that individual again even though I see them at things and I say hello, but it's just one of those things that that it never manifested beyond that because there was no there was no intentionality or commonality.

Theme 3: Mentorship is a Personal Relationship

As individuals described their mentorship experiences, they often described characteristics that people value in personal relationships (e.g., trust, honesty, authenticity, friendship, listening, celebrating success, etc.). The mentoring relationship was a professional one but also presented a sense of care and provided a safe space for both the mentor and mentee to be authentic and vulnerable. As such, many individuals identified that their mentoring relationship organically forms.

Bridget talked about the need for honesty in a mentoring relationship:

When you're talking to people in your department, when do you let your guard down... When is it okay just to be honest and say "hey this is just related to work" and, "how do I work with this, how do I make this work or do I make this work?"... I think that's very important, just that relationship piece, that honest relationship.

Angel spoke about how mentoring differs from other professional development experiences:

You probably are not going to have a lifelong relationship come out of having learned from a competency-based workshop. And that's how mentoring is different because you can develop these lifelong relationships that will continue to pay dividends for both people in the relationship long after you know the formality part of it is over.

August said,

Generally, when I'm in that mentoring role, it's not like I'm targeting a person because I want to fix them.... I want to get to know them better. And then through that relationship and rapport building, they start to open up with struggles that they're having or questions that they have, and I start to be seen as maybe more of a resource.

Betty talked about mentorship becoming a form of friendship. Regarding a formal mentorship program at her university, she said, "It doesn't really feel like a mentorship program. It feels like I have a good friend who I lean on for like questions that I have."

Theme 4: Communication Preferences Vary

A key piece to a successful mentoring relationship was the communication between the mentor and mentee. The participants had different styles and approaches to communication. Some preferred a more informal "hallway chat" while others preferred a scheduled meeting. Furthermore, some mentors expected their mentees to reach out first. Overall, mentors and mentees preferred face-to-face interactions.

Angel spoke about how geographically distanced mentoring relationships differ from those you share a building with:

I think on the informal mentoring side, that's just really organic. They're probably people I talk to all the time anyway, and then they will call me up and say "Hey [Angel], I have a question I want to hear from you. Do you have 20 minutes tomorrow that we could talk?" Because sometimes those people aren't co-located geographically.

She also discussed a mix of options, from reaching out via email, talking in the hallway, and having an open-door policy, depending on the needs of the mentee.

Ava said mentees should reach out to potential mentors:

But I do think for people early in their careers, don't be shy about asking somebody for help, and because people, especially in higher ed, that's kind of what we do. We do that for students, probably more often, but it's [being] willing to help those people up through the ranks. And to people looking for mentors, don't be shy about asking because again that's what we do.

While mentees were often reaching out to mentors, Ben spoke about wanting to be intentional about reaching out to mentees to improve the relationship when he begins mentoring junior faculty members:

Maybe being a little bit more cognizant of [the need to engage with each other] and reaching out to them.... Because sometimes you don't want to feel as a junior faculty member that you're always the one asking questions all the time or feeling needy, I guess you could say. And so, taking that off of them or removing that as a potential burden or anxiety.

Theme 5: Comparisons of Formal and Informal Mentorship

Many mentor relationships existed as a formal departmental requirement while others were informal. Formal mentorships could involve matching, being assigned, or being required to find a mentor. Informal mentorships resulted from pursuing a mentor or meeting a mentor through networking. Some individuals indicated that informal mentorships were more successful than those that were assigned.

A common issue mentioned with the formal mentorship programs was the relationships not really taking off. Betty said, "I'm kind of like drinking out of a fire hydrant and then going dry for like long periods of time," and then she went on to explain how a formally assigned mentoring relationship through a professional organization sputtered after failing to get past initial stages. Bryson said,

The forced mentorship model, that has not worked in my past professional experiences, and I just think that mentorship is something that has to somewhat be that gelling together and has to be kind of sought out by that mentee a little bit to be able to be really successful. Because I think at times that if you have conflicting philosophies, beliefs, all that kind of stuff, then that forced relationship is just never going to turn into much. And I'm sure other people have different experiences, but that's just based on my experiences.

Angel said, "I guess formally I mentored junior faculty because I'm required to. That's my most honest answer at [university]. [New faculty] are required to have mentors. That's part of our [university] regulations." Amelia said,

The formal programs I think are really cool. For me, they just like haven't really taken off like the informal ones, though, so I'm not sure. We need to kind of like find the magic of how these informal mentorships occur and then somehow make that more easily accessible to other people.

Conclusions & Discussion

These findings help paint a picture of mentorship in the broadly defined discipline of agricultural education. While many of the findings are present in other fields, this study was necessary to understand what specific aspects of mentorship were and were not occurring our field. Notably in the findings, mentorship was often starting in graduate school, and formal training was absent from mentors' discussions of how they engaged in the mentorship process.

As with previous literature, mentorship was valued by the participants even if it was not always perfect (Fountain & Newcomer, 2016). A key aspect for why participants engaged in the mentorship process was mutual benefit (Ransdell et al., 2021), which is consistent with the shared nature of social capital (Coleman, 1990). Mentorship helped mentees as they were growing professionally and navigating their careers, but mentors also benefitted. This included being challenged by mentees (Carey & Weissman, 2010), having new collaborators (Carey & Weissman, 2010), and even the larger scale of helping their departments and the discipline as a whole improve as a form of giving back (Mendez et al., 2017). While some departments required engaging formally as mentors, many did not, and mentorship in the discipline appeared to be incentivized on a more intrinsic basis as opposed to being a requirement.

Successful mentorship was a successful relationship (Bean et al., 2014; Lumpkin, 2011). Participants were looking for someone they could trust, communicate with, and get good feedback from, which fits with the varied characteristics represented in the literature (Carey & Weissman, 2010; Davis et al., 2023; Sargent & Rientes, 2022). Compatibility was a key driver of success, and mismatches were often the cause of failed mentoring relationships, notably formal ones. For mentees looking for mentorship, they

were evaluating the mentors' personal attributes and their careers to date to find a good fit (Cline & Weeks, 2020; Cunningham et al., 2022; de Janasz & Sullivan, 2004; Ransdell et al., 2021). Mentees were often looking for help navigating their careers, while mentors were often more focused on the overall relationship itself (Etzkorn & Braddock, 2020; Fountain & Newcomer, 2016), and this is something that needs to be considered at the beginning of these relationships because there could be conflict if the parties want different things from the relationship. While an unhealthy relationship is always possible, the more commonly cited causes of unsuccessful relationships were mismatched pairs and finding/making time to meet (Lumpkin, 2011; Minshew et al., 2021). In other words, the more common problems were structural. So even as participants did not always have good formal mentoring relationships, the issues they faced were usually fixable.

As for how mentorship occurred, adaptability was a key aspect that showed up in the findings in various ways (Eisner, 2015). Much of it was adapting to the individuals involved, including when and how meetings occurred and what the mentorship would be about. Ideally, the mentors were engaging with mentees based on their situation instead of hoping a one-size-fits-all model works. And while formal mentoring would inherently mean some structure is in place, problems arose when mentors were not adapting to the needs of their mentees, necessitating some level of adaptability of those programs. How mentoring relationships were initiated was often based on relationships that existed before faculty members were in their roles, notably graduate school experiences. Social capital gained from graduate school has been linked to improved career outcomes (Bäker et al., 2020; Settle et al., 2020). While these connections are good, individuals graduating from smaller programs are at a disadvantage because there is not the same amount of social capital available. If mentees are generally charged with initiating mentoring relationships, this lack of access to social capital could compound through one's career, and an absence of connections has negative impacts on careers (Woolcock & Narayan, 2000).

While formal mentorship was not enjoyed or valued the same way informal mentorship was, there is still a need for it. The biggest reason is because gaps may occur by relying on informal networks. With the onus on junior faculty to seek out mentors (Carey & Weissman, 2010; Spangle et al., 2021), someone who comes to our discipline from a different background or without as many connections as their peers would be at a disadvantage, especially when past research shows that our most prolific authors often graduate from the same institutions (Settle et al., 2020). Formal mentorship programs will not fix all issues of individuals slipping through the cracks, but they can at least lift some of the burden from junior faculty who are trying to get their careers off the ground. So rather than abandoning formal mentorship, improving it would be a better tactic. Training mentors is a common recommendation (Etzkorn & Braddock, 2020; Lumpkin, 2011). Though mentors in the study were asked what influenced their mentoring as opposed to directly being asked if they had been trained, it is notable that no one mentioned training influenced their mentorship, so training either is not occurring or is not happening in a manner that is noticeably affecting mentoring practices.

Recommendations

For mentees looking for mentors, the onus is on them to initiate and manage those relationships (Carey & Weissman, 2010). The results of this study and the literature indicate that when mentees are not being proactive, mentoring relationships often dissolve, even within formal programs. In terms of selection, fit appears to be the most important aspect of mentoring relationships. What that means may vary by individual, though it often includes individuals with similar backgrounds and experiences, as well as similar aims for their careers and academic programs. Ultimately, these are relationships, and not all relationships are successful (Carey & Weissman, 2010). You may reach the point of being lifelong friends, or it may be a poor fit and the mentoring relationship needs to be terminated if it cannot be fixed. That is not an inherently bad thing, just a temporary delay. Mentees should cultivate multiple mentors who can provide a variety of perspectives and potentially satisfy different needs in the process (Carey & Weissman, 2010; de Janasz & Sullivan, 2004; Mazerolle et al., 2018; Ransdell et al., 2021). Even though mentors and mentees spoke of

their mentoring relationships as one-on-one interactions (Moreau-Johnson et al., 2023; Savin et al., 2006), it was clear that mentees were using networks of mentors (Carey & Weissman, 2010; Mazerolle et al., 2018; Sorcinelli & Yun, 2007).

For those wanting to be effective mentors, focus on what mentees are wanting from the relationship to ensure compatibility. If you are giving advice that does not fit their needs, it will be difficult for the relationship to be successful. And if fit is not there, you could aid them in expanding their network of mentors. Because one mentor is unlikely to meet all of an individual's needs, you can recommend other faculty members who could help provide guidance in areas you may not be comfortable providing mentorship. By initiating that connection, you can lessen the burden on mentees in the discipline. On that note, reaching out to your mentees can help lessen the onus on them for managing the relationship. As a participant mentioned, they may feel like a burden when they reach out to mentors, which may help explain why mentees do not take full advantage of opportunities to meet more often (Moreau-Johnson et al., 2023). If mentors reach out at least some of the time, mentees may understand that the relationship is valued by both parties.

While informal mentorship was preferred by the majority of participants, it has limitations. Notably people can fall through the gaps if they do not have connections to mentors and do not feel comfortable reaching out to people in the discipline (Law et al., 2014), and mentees from underrepresented groups are especially at risk of not having adequate mentorship (Ransdell et al., 2021). As such, formal mentorship programs should continue. The biggest issue that tended to thwart formal mentoring relationships in this study was a poor fit between mentors and mentees. The first priority should be ensuring individuals are paired for clear reasons that benefit both parties (Lumpkin, 2011; Minshew et al., 2021). After that, there needs to be a clear structure and goals for the program (Carey & Weissman, 2010; Lumpkin, 2011; Sargent & Rientes, 2022; Spangle et al., 2021). This could be especially important in navigating the initial stages of forming the mentoring relationship, through at least the initial 6 to 12 months before the protégé stage begins (Carey & Weissman, 2010). Even when fit was not a problem, many formal mentoring relationships dissolved because individuals stopped meeting even if they were happy with the relationship, which is understandable given busy schedules in academia, not to mention personal time considerations (Bean et al., 2014; Minshew et al., 2021). Recommending or requiring mentorship pairs meet within a specific interval can ensure that meetings occur, and literature shows that more frequent meetings are associated with more effective mentorship (Beans et al., 2014). There should also be a clear focus on what the individuals should be getting from the mentoring relationships. Within universities, tenure and promotion guidelines are a clear need, but more broadly in the discipline, help navigating unwritten rules of academia would be valuable based on the results of the study. As noted in the literature (Eisner, 2015; Etzkorn & Braddock, 2020; Hundey et al., 2020; Lumpkin, 2011; Savin et al., 2006), the planning, evaluation, and adaptability of these programs is also important because the formal mentorships that failed in this study were typically fixable problems.

And because informal mentorship is valued, the formal programs should not preclude, and should in fact encourage, pretenure faculty from seeking out informal mentors. Networks of mentors are commonly recommended (Carey & Weismann, 2010; Mazerolle et al., 2018; Sorcinelli & Yun, 2007), and formal mentorship programs should not be expected to provide 100% of the mentorship needs. The timing of these programs is also notable in that mentorship programs should probably be occurring as early as graduate school and extending through faculty members' full careers as they navigate new stages. While this research focused on early career faculty, the results showed that many mentoring relationships started in graduate school and past research has shown mentorship needs vary throughout one's career (de Janasz & Sullivan, 2004; Law et al., 2014; Minshew et al., 2021), so different programs targeting different populations is necessary.

Programs should also seek to improve mentors' abilities and incentives for engaging in the mentorship process. There needs to be training for mentors (Etzkorn & Braddock, 2020; Lumpkin, 2011). Being a successful faculty member is not an automatic qualifier for effective mentorship even if mentees use that as a marker to select mentors. When participants were asked what affected their mentorship, no one mentioned a formal training program. Either they did not receive training or any training they received was not worth mentioning, which is also a problem. Incentivizing mentorship should also be explored. While some less tangible rewards may exist in the form of relationships and being pushed by mentees (Carey & Weissman, 2010), the results did not show any formal incentives occurring, which are recommended in the literature because it can improve mentor engagement (Fountain & Newcomer, 2016; Sargent & Rientes, 2022).

This study was an early step at understanding mentorship across the agricultural education discipline. As such, more work is needed to understand nuances of mentorship in our field. Future research should delve into mentorship throughout the spectrum of academic careers given past research showing the mentorship needs differ throughout career stages (de Janasz & Sullivan, 2004; Law et al., 2014; Minshe et al., 2021). As a discipline, we cannot support everyone's needs without understanding what those are at different stages. This also includes mentorship for graduate students who are likely to enter faculty roles because participants in this study indicated that mentorship often began for them in graduate school.

While the participants in this study valued mentorship, there is a need to quantify the value of mentorship in our discipline. In other words, does effective mentorship lead to better teaching, research, and outreach outcomes? There is also a need to quantify how mentors and mentees are valuing individual relationships, and what factors affect those valuations. It may be enough to say that we value mentorship, but it will be easier to justify the time, effort, and energy effective mentorship takes if we can quantify its value in our field as has been done in other disciplines, such as showing improvements in professional development (Bean et al., 2014), retention (Minshe et al., 2021), productivity (Van der Weijden et al., 2015), and grants (Van der Weijden et al., 2015). While those results have been found in other fields, mentorship differs between disciplines (Nästesjö, 2021), which means outcomes could differ in agricultural education.

Finally, while participants valued informal mentorship more, formal mentorship programs still exist. As such, they need to be conducted as effectively as possible. While there are many recommendations available in the literature from a variety of disciplines, the experiences of participants in this study indicated those best practices are not always followed, especially appropriately matching mentors and mentees (Lumpkin, 2011; Minshe et al., 2021). For those programs that are in existence, evaluation is a necessary step for ensuring the program's effectiveness (Eisner, 2015; Etzkorn & Braddock, 2020; Hundey et al., 2020; Lumpkin, 2011; Savin et al. 2006), as well as contributing to academic literature regarding formal mentorship. For the sake of anonymity, the specific programs are not mentioned in this study, but a mentorship program in the discipline was mentioned by multiple participants when they talked about formal mentorship relationships that did not take. Fit between mentor and mentee was an issue in one of those relationships, and for the other two, the individuals stopped contacting each other even though the mentees were happy with the exchanges that did occur. These are fixable problems.

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