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Research

Institutionalizing Faculty Mentoring within a Community of Practice Model

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Abstract

In higher education, faculty work is typically enacted—and rewarded—on an individual basis. Efforts to promote collaboration run counter to the individual and competitive reward systems that characterize higher education. Mentoring initiatives that promote faculty collaboration and support also defy the structural and cultural norms of higher education. Collaborative mentoring initiatives, however, support all faculty to be lifelong learners. We analyze a reciprocal model of mentoring—a community of practice for mentoring—that integrates collaborative mentoring into faculty's daily work. Additionally, we examine the dilemmas, benefits, and costs of institutionalizing a community of practice model for mentoring in higher education. Our analyses indicate that communities of practice can be fruitful sites of mentoring for all faculty when members mutually engage in shared practices required by the institution. Additionally, such communities nurture relationships and emotional support that sustain engagement in practice and reduce isolation. Given these benefits, we argue that communities of practice should be publically recognized at the institutional level as viable mechanisms for faculty mentoring and learning. Institutions of higher education must explicitly support a campus culture of collaboration and lifelong learning. Findings offer guidance for faculty and center for teaching and learning (CTL) interested in starting or participating in communities of practice.

In higher education, faculty work is typically enacted—and rewarded—on an individual basis. Traditionally, faculty members are promoted for their single-authored works, their autonomous teaching, and their distinct

service contributions. As such, efforts to promote collaborative mentoring and work run counter to the individual and competitive reward systems that characterize higher education (HE) (Gourlay, 2011; Morgan, 2014). Go To

Mentoring in academia is typically one-on-one, with senior faculty passing down knowledge and experience to junior faculty (Johnson, 2002, 2007). This top-down model positions junior faculty as less skilled or knowledgeable and reinforces expert-novice dichotomies that can discourage collaboration (Ponce, Williams, & Allen, 2005). Co-mentoring and mentoring networks, however, support more reciprocal mentoring relationships wherein everyone's growth is supported (Beyene, Anglin, Sanchez, & Ballou, 2002; Darwin & Palmer, 2009; Kochan & Trimble, 2000; McGuire & Reger, 2003; Mullen & Schunk, 2010; National League for Nursing, 2006; Sorcinelli & Yun, 2007).

In this paper, we analyze a reciprocal model of mentoring—a *community of practice for mentoring*—that integrates collaborative mentoring into faculty's daily work. Additionally, we examine—through analysis of several examples—the dilemmas, benefits, and costs of institutionalizing a community of practice (CoP) model for mentoring in HE. Our analyses indicate that CoP can be fruitful sites of mentoring for all faculty when members mutually engage in shared practices required by the institution. Additionally, CoP nurture relationships and emotional support that sustain engagement in the practice and reduce professional isolation. Given these benefits, we argue that CoP should be publicly recognized by institutions of higher education (IHE) as viable mechanisms for faculty mentoring and learning. To do this, IHE must explicitly support a campus culture of collaboration and lifelong learning.

Theoretical Framework

Faculty Mentoring in Higher Education

Though the literature on mentoring in academia is growing (Ambrosino, 2009; Lewellen-Williams et al., 2006; Wasserstein, Quistberg, & Shea, 2007; Zellers, Howard, & Barcic, 2008), IHE continue to wrestle with the best approaches for faculty mentoring. We know that a combination of formal and informal mentoring enhances career development (Berk, Berg, Mortimer, Walton-Moss, & Yeo, 2005; McLaughlin, 2010), but formalizing mentoring is seemingly at odds with best practices, which support voluntary and spontaneous mentoring interaction. What's more, can academia support a collaborative climate? Do faculty have time to mentor effectively? These dilemmas push us to move beyond expert-novice models that position mentoring as peripheral to faculty's "required" work. A CoP (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) model for mentoring situates faculty mentoring and development in their shared engagement in everyday practice.

A Community of Practice Model for Mentoring

Wenger and Trayner (n.d.) define a CoP as "a group of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do, and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly." CoP interact within shared domains of knowledge, focusing on common purposes, interests and learning needs (Snyder & Briggs, 2003; Wenger, Trayner, & de Laat, 2011). "[H]aving a problem in common is...a strong motivation for building a shared practice, even among people who share little else" (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002, p. 25). As we move away from expert-novice models of learning and mentoring, "organizations in all sectors are discovering that something unique happens when practitioners become direct learning partners by forming a community" (Wenger & Trayner, n.d.). Over time, the community's collective learning can foster trust and a sense of belonging among the members (Wenger et al., 2011).

In a CoP *for mentoring*, mentoring emerges from members' joint engagement in the shared practices of the community (Eckert, 2006; Wenger et al., 2002). Members deepen their knowledge and expertise as they jointly engage in the community's practices, such as discussing teaching dilemmas or coauthoring manuscripts, making practices that were once completed in isolation observable to others (Gourlay, 2011; Lea, 2005; Morgan, 2014). Expert-novice roles are fluid as members draw on their varied experiences and knowledge to discuss and work through issues of their practice. In traditional models of faculty mentoring, the mentoring supports junior faculty to engage in future practice; in a CoP model for mentoring, however, mentoring occurs *during* the *joint* engagement *in* the practice (Smith, Calderwood, Dohm, & Gill Lopez, 2013).

Institutionalizing Communities of Practice in Academia

CoP have been employed primarily in the business world to maximize knowledge-sharing and production. Calls for more reciprocal and relational forms of mentoring, particularly for faculty of color and women, have spurred CoP in HE (Lea, 2005; McGuire & Reger, 2003; Rees & Shaw, 2014; Tarr, 2010). Case studies on several HE campuses show the potential of CoP for mentoring both new and seasoned faculty (Blanton & Stylianou, 2009; Henrich & Attebury, 2010; Morgan, 2014). Given the potential of CoP to support faculty learning across their careers, and their natural location in faculty's everyday work, it is time to consider how and whether we might institutionalize them in HE. In his seminal work on CoP, Wenger (1998) addresses the benefits and costs of institutionalizing CoP. Citing the benefits, Wenger says that institutionalization makes CoP public and requires organizations to pay more attention to them. It can give CoP access to resources, such as time, travel, and technology. More importantly, institutionalization legitimizes the time members spend working collaboratively and recognizes their important role in faculty and institutional growth. Institutionalization need not require "making [CoP] part of the organizational chart," but can legitimize their role in knowledge creation and provide systems to support them (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 203).

The defining features of CoP, however, raise several dilemmas for organizations seeking to institutionalize them. CoP arise naturally in organizational life, and it is this organic and voluntary nature that make them thrive. Mandating their existence can undermine their very nature and success. "You cannot violate the natural developmental processes and dynamics that make a community of practice function as a source of knowledge and arbiter of expertise, including members' passion about the topic, [and] the sense of spirit and identity of the community" (Wenger et al., 2002, pp. 14). Voluntary participation, Snyder and Briggs (2003) add, is essential to a CoP's sense of shared commitment, and to its ability to openly share or seek knowledge, and build openness, trust, and reciprocity. The dilemmas of institutionalizing CoP in HE warrant analysis of lived examples. In what follows, we analyze three CoP for mentoring with varying degrees of institutionalization.

Method

Background and Participants

The findings build on a self-study (Smith et al., 2013) of our mentoring experiences in a CoP within our school of education, situated in a private Jesuit university. Since then, the authors (two white, female department chairs [Emily and Paula]; one white, female full professor [Pat]; and two untenured professors—one African American female [Stephanie], one white male [Ryan])—have been involved in three additional CoP intended to serve mentoring functions: an intradepartmental accreditation group, a tenure

dossier preparation group, and a faculty leadership group.

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Accreditation

In September 2013 Ryan joined the teacher education department as Director of Childhood Education. Among the many tasks he inherited was revision of the program's accreditation report. Since Ryan was new to both the department and the accreditation work, Emily, the Department Chair, invited Ryan to tackle the report together, as she worked on her own report. The two have been meeting every few weeks since September 2013.

Dossier

In the summer of 2013 Stephanie consulted Pat, director of the university's CTL, about forming a co-mentoring group focused on tenure and promotion dossier preparation. A university-wide invitation yielded a group of five faculty from three of the university's professional schools (nursing, engineering, and education): one African American (Stephanie), three white female and one Egyptian male. Pat, who had experience on the rank and tenure committee, was the sixth member and participated as a co-facilitator and experienced dossier writer.

Leadership

The leadership group was formed as one of several co-mentoring seminars initiated by the CTL. Five mid-career female faculty members (all white, including Emily, Pat and Paula) from the schools of education, engineering and arts and sciences, responded to an open invitation to participate in a leadership group. Two were department chairs; one was slated to be department chair; one anticipated becoming a program director; and one was a former department chair and director of the CTL.

We chose these three cases for two main reasons. Three of the 10 members had coauthored a framework for mentoring in a CoP (Smith et al., 2013) and were eager to add thick description to that framework and better understand the dilemmas they had noted therein. Additionally, the varying success of the three CoP made us wonder about the elements of each CoP that shaped their success (or lack thereof) as a site for mentoring.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data sources include participant observation, document analysis (e.g., participant reflections, group meeting notes), informal interviews, and notes from our ongoing discussions, reflections, and analyses of our experiences.

This conceptual and qualitative work involves grounded theory building (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) as we continue to develop a model for mentoring in a CoP from the examples. We use conceptual categories from CoP (domain, practice, community), CoP for mentoring (joint practice, fluid expertise), and institutionalization (leadership, design, participation) to analyze the three cases (Meyer, 2001, p. 331). We employ the constant comparative method of analysis to analyze, case by case, the fit of these concepts with our experiences (Fram, 2013). Through analysis of the cases we aim to add to existing theory and models for faculty mentoring in CoP and to conversations about institutionalizing it (Miles & Hubberman, 1994; Sheaton, 1990). As five members of the three groups, we collected and analyzed data as participant observers. A key element of data analysis was our collective analysis of our experiences in the three groups. Pat and Emily designed an eight-question survey (Appendix) for each participant to complete (in writing) in order to elicit reflection relative to our conceptual categories. We then participated in two two-hour group analytic sessions, sharing

and analyzing our responses, and identifying patterns and themes across the three cases. Notes from these sessions yielded a 6000-word document that was further analyzed Emily and Pat with respect to the features of CoP, mentoring, and institutionalization in each of the three groups. This second round of analysis included multiple read-throughs to identify themes and patterns in the collective reflections. Patterns emerged that helped us to characterize the degree to which each group exhibited features of a CoP, mentoring, and institutionalization. We returned to participants' individual reflections to identify confirming and disconfirming evidence to substantiate our conclusions (Erickson, 1986). Finally, all authors responded to drafts to corroborate findings and add to the discussion and implication sections.

Findings

Elements of a Community of Practice in Each Group

We began by analyzing each group for its exhibition of the following central features of a CoP. CoP jointly engage in the practices of their domain, employing and developing shared ideas, tools, and language as they continue to learn how to do their job (Wenger et al., 2002). Though members may bring varying levels of experience or expertise, they participate as equal members of the community (Snyder & Briggs, 2003). Central to the well-being of a CoP is its organic and voluntary nature. Analysis of the three cases shows the dossier and accreditation groups exhibiting strong fidelity to these features of a CoP, while the leadership group did not. Though the formation of the leadership group reflected typical CoP development, the group struggled to stay focused on its shared practice as mid-career faculty leaders.

Voluntary participation and shared professional needs

Across the three cases, there was strong intrinsic motivation for joining each group. Each member voluntarily joined a group to focus on a shared learning need or problem—preparing a dossier, tackling accreditation work, and managing leadership challenges. These needs were linked to professional identities (and responsibilities) shared among the community members—as tenured/tenure track faculty members, as program directors, and as leaders—and to a desire to overcome isolation. Members were highly motivated to collaborate with and gain support from others engaged in the same practice, anticipating interdependence from their varying experience and expertise.

Reflections from group members confirm these motivations for joining the groups. Emily, Paula and Pat were all struggling with their leadership roles and thus joined the leadership group to gain community with other campus leaders. Pat writes, “I’ve been trying to understand my approaches to leadership, and to grow more effective as a leader. I wanted to be able to think this through with a small group of trustworthy colleagues interested in the same questions.” Paula and Emily came to the leadership group seeking support from others to process challenges they faced as department chairs. Paula writes, “There are times I struggle with managing department issues. I thought forming a group with others in leadership positions might provide a forum to problem solve...and support one another.”

The desire for support and collaboration among colleagues who shared common goals spurred participation in the dossier group as well. Noting the culture of professional isolation, Stephanie writes, “I began to wonder why faculty prepare their dossiers for tenure and promotion alone instead of making it a community process.” The accreditation group was formed with a similar desire for collaboration. Neither Emily nor Ryan felt competent or confident in their abilities to write accreditation reports; they sought support through collaboration. Emily describes her desire for collaboration and emotional support:

I find it much easier and less stressful to do an overwhelming task with someone else....More importantly, being "in this" with someone else greatly reduces the stress of having to write this type of report. It can be very lonely work!

New to the profession, Ryan was also eager to collaborate on the accreditation work. He writes:

Since I...had never taken part in the preparation...of an accreditation report, I was thrilled to accept Shea's invitation to collaborate. I approached the group as an opportunity to learn the ins and outs of program accreditation...from a colleague who had experience and expertise in these areas.

Across the communities, there was an entering assumption that collaboration and social interaction would support practice and reduce anxiety and isolation. As the groups evolved, the dossier and accreditation groups thrived in their joint engagement in practice. However, the leadership group struggled to stay focused on its work as a leader as personal issues dominated conversations.

Shared practice

In each meeting of the dossier group, members were thickly engaged with particular components of the promotion dossier, such as composing teaching philosophy statements. Articulating a clear and compelling vision of one's teaching is an essential skill of faculty practice. Describing this activity, Stephanie writes, "One of our goals was to write our teaching philosophy statements by the end of the year so that we could give one another feedback." The commitment to the group and its manifest purpose and practice were strong across the group. Everyone came prepared to work, having completed "homework" that included peer review and co-mentoring in person or via email. As the group gelled and relationships developed, the group became committed to everyone's success. Stephanie reflects, "Everyone wanted to be there and was supportive of one another. I felt like everyone wanted the other to succeed."

The accreditation group members shared a similarly strong commitment to each other and to the practice, anchored in their desire to support each other's work. Describing their collaborative engagement in the work, Ryan writes:

During our meetings, Emily and I set goals related to the revision of the report, and then we worked together to meet those goals...We have worked collaboratively to revise existing assessments, brainstorm new assessments, and develop rubrics.

Though the accreditation group began with a focus on the reports, it has evolved to focus on other topics where either member needed support, such as handling difficult students or program situations. At times, the group even functioned as a source of social-emotional support, providing a space to "check in" or connect socially. Emily writes, "We've had some good laughs about how much we don't like this work, and enjoy procrastinating by looking at baby pictures or chatting about our weekends." Thus, their ongoing meetings have become a space for them to regularly connect and support each other around their shared practice as program directors.

The first meeting of the leadership group focused on goal-sharing and understanding members' leadership

roles. At this meeting, the group decided to hold future meetings off campus, over lunch. At Paula's suggestion, the second meeting focused on confrontation. Drawing on her expertise in group processes and confrontation, Paula facilitated a conversation about confronting difficult situations in department meetings. She writes, "I presented some theory and skills and the group shared examples of situations in which we used or should use confrontation." This lunch meeting exhibits elements of a CoP, namely the joint engagement around a common problem of leadership. As time progressed, however, the leadership group struggled to stay focused on the topic of leadership. The third meeting devolved into a lengthy discussion of family issues, despite efforts to redirect the conversation back to leadership. For some members, attending to personal topics took precedence over the exploration of leadership. For others, the inability to stay focused on leadership was a source of frustration. Though the group members had a common interest in leadership, there were varying degrees of commitment to this focus. The move to a social, informal venue may have shifted members' common identity as leaders to more informal ones as friends, thereby shifting the discourse and focus of the gatherings. By the end of the semester, interest in continuing the group dissipated.

With its inability to sustain engagement in shared identity and practice, the leadership group had the weakest fidelity to a CoP. The accreditation and dossier groups, however, both functioned as CoP, providing a regular space where members could learn and support each other.

Elements of Mentoring Within a CoP

Following Smith et al. (2013), we note that mentoring in a CoP occurs during joint engagement in shared practices of the domain, wherein members' knowledge and expertise emerge and deepen. Expert and novice roles are fluid as CoP members draw on varied experiences and knowledge to work through issues of practice. Though the mentoring may or may not be named in the moment, it is experienced as one of many authentic elements of the practice as members carry out their shared vision for and accountability to the CoP. During the two analysis sessions, we scrutinized each case for its exhibition of three CoP mentoring characteristics: mentoring generated from joint practice; development of shared knowledge and expertise; and reciprocal and fluid mentoring roles and expertise. Across the three cases, we see that co-mentoring was the dominant mode in which these CoP mentoring features were enacted, supported by networked mentoring in the accreditation and dossier groups. Reciprocal or co-mentoring was deliberately designed into the shared practices of each CoP; however, only in the accreditation and dossier groups was co-mentoring effective in supporting participants to carry out and become more expert in the shared practices. A closer look at each case illustrates the ways in which each group exhibited and provided (or not) features of mentoring in a CoP. We also found that social-emotional support was an important ingredient for and outcome of mentoring in the accreditation and dossier groups.

Accreditation group

In the accreditation group, Emily and Ryan approached the work as a shared learning endeavor wherein each had domain experience and expertise to share. Emily writes, "I proposed that we work on the report together; this would allow us to draw on each other's strengths—his knowledge of the elementary field and my knowledge of our program and accreditation." Each came to the group expecting to learn from the other, and to become more expert in the practice. When asked to describe the mentoring in the group, both noted the reciprocal mentoring and the fluid expertise. Emily commented:

We took turns educating each other, filling in gaps...[and] taking the lead on particular tasks.... Though we came to the task as new and experienced faculty members, our roles as

“experts” and “novices” were fluid as we took turns sharing knowledge and experience to support our completion of the work.

Ryan's description of the mentoring and expertise is similar:

My experience in the group has been extremely collaborative thus far....I have received a mix of formal and informal mentoring....I hope that I served as a mentor to Emily as well, sharing my background and expertise in early literacy and my experiences teaching elementary school students.

In addition to co-mentoring, Emily and Ryan reached out to an expert outside their group (an accreditation liaison). Reaching out to this expert extended the mentoring outward toward a network configuration.

As they jointly worked on the accreditation report, both Ryan and Emily deepened their professional knowledge and expertise, sometimes in unexpected ways. Emily explains:

Though our primary goal was to revise the report, our working group doubled as a source of mentoring for both of us....[M]entoring arose organically from our joint engagement in the accreditation work and the interdependent roles we assumed. For example, my understanding of the standards deepened as we developed assessments and Ryan explained what each standard looked like in practice.

Likewise, Ryan learned a lot about “the entire process of program accreditation, from assessment development to data collection and synthesis to report writing,” as well as how to create rubrics. Ryan adds that his learning extended beyond their focus on accreditation work. During Emily and Chris' interactions, they were also building Chris' more general competence as a faculty member and a program director. Ryan comments:

What I found to be equally valuable was the informal mentoring that I received from Emily during our group. There were many moments where we discussed topics ranging from course scheduling to...candidates' student teaching experiences...What I quickly realized is that Shea's mentorship was not only helping me to understand the accreditation process; she was also helping me to better understand my entire range of responsibilities as the director of Childhood Education.

The accreditation case exhibits strong evidence of mentoring in a CoP. Emily and Ryan engage in reciprocal mentoring as they jointly tackle accreditation work and share the role of expert. Their work doubles as a source of professional learning for both of them, and they are accountable to both the CoP and each other as they enact their practices. For these reasons, the accreditation case has strong fidelity to the mentoring elements of a CoP for mentoring.

Dossier group

The dossier group also exhibits high fidelity to the mentoring elements of a CoP. At the first meeting, Stephanie shared her understanding that everyone has something to contribute as they worked through this

common task together. Thus, the role of “expert” rotated as various members shared experience or expertise with specific components of the dossier. Stephanie writes, “Our relationship with one another was reciprocal. Everyone mentored and everyone received mentoring openly.” Pat describes a similar reciprocity in the mentoring:

I was a more experienced person offering insights...I was helpful to Stephanie as a co-mentor for facilitating the group, [and]...Stephanie modeled (beautifully) an elegant facilitative stance that was highly sensitive to participants' needs. I soaked that mentoring right up! Other participants modeled genuine caring and appreciation for all as persons and as colleagues...I learned how to be a caring colleague.

Pat's role differed from the others in that she was paying forward decades of mentoring that had guided her own professional development. During engagement in the group activities, she joined in the running commentary, answering questions that arose about filing systems, peer review, and other salient topics. At the same time, the group served as a source of mentoring for her with respect to how groups thoughtfully facilitate and support members' work.

Members of the dossier group co-mentored as they jointly engaged in several key practices of dossier preparation, including preparing their box of supporting materials and writing a teaching philosophy statement. During the second meeting, four of the participants sorted through and compared artifacts for their “boxes.” Group members compared how they thought and wrote about their varied experiences in teaching, scholarship, and service, constructing elements of their own dossiers from what they found useful in each other's. Though Pat didn't have a box to prepare, she was a more experienced member helping others “tell their stories in ways that...would successfully educate readers to understand the nature of the person's teaching, scholarly and service pursuits.”

A second example of co-mentoring occurred around the preparation of their teaching philosophy statements. Stephanie brought expertise to the group from a teaching dossier academy she attended in 2011. During one meeting, Stephanie shared her learning and materials with the group, including her own statement, and led an activity she learned to help draft a statement. This activity was a source of mentoring for Stephanie, too, who received feedback on her statement. She writes, “This process...helped me gauge if what I wrote was accessible to faculty outside of...my area of specialization.” Both examples illustrate how members' joint engagement in dossier-preparation practices served as a source of mentoring for all. Members' knowledge deepened as they worked side-by-side and shared individual experiences and expertise.

Throughout the process, every participant committed earnestly to the community, evidenced by the fact that each member attended every session either in person or via conference call. For example, Pat shared annotations to the rank and tenure guidelines by telephone while on route to a conference, and another member phoned in while receiving medical treatment. These were conscious choices to support the community's co-mentoring. This community commitment enhanced members' mutual accountability. Stephanie writes, “The group helped me to be accountable for my own goals. I didn't want to let myself or my colleagues down.”

From the dossier preparation group, we learn that mutual accountability for and investment in shared practices can develop co-mentoring practices within a CoP that includes mentoring as a signature practice, in addition to its facilitative role in supporting learning how to become more expert in the other shared practices of the group. We also see that a shared vision for the CoP changes accountability for mentoring. The benefits of the mentoring need to benefit the CoP as a whole, maintaining its identity and carrying out its work.

In both group analysis sessions, we note repeated mention of social and emotional support in both the accreditation and dossier groups. Words and phrases such as “moral support,” “connecting with others,” and “togetherness” were pervasive in the notes from these sessions. As Emily said, “We could talk about our anxiety and others would understand.” Pat and Stephanie discussed the comradeship that developed in the dossier group, noting a “kinship” and a “sense of trust” that developed over time. Importantly, we noted that we did not explicitly work to build trust; rather, it happened as a result of our engagement in and commitment to shared practice.

Leadership group

In contrast to the first two, the leadership group did not serve as a source of mentoring or emotional support for its members. Members' responses indicate a low level of fidelity to a CoP for mentoring. Though it was created as a co-mentoring group under the auspices of the CTL, co-mentoring was largely (but not entirely) absent.

During the first meeting, each group member articulated her leadership role and goals for being in the group, such as addressing departmental conflict or learning how to run a department. The second meeting occurred over lunch, at a local restaurant. For part of this meeting, Paula shared a framework for thinking about and confronting conflict. For Pat, this was a powerful mentoring interaction that helped her to understand recent events surrounding her own leadership struggles. Paula was unaware of the profound impact on Pat until months later, during data analysis. Following this presentation, the group struggled to stay focused on confrontation and conflict, as other topics, not about leadership, seeped into the conversation. In the third meeting, attempts to focus the conversation on leadership were unsuccessful. Pat attempted to discuss a paper idea she was developing on mentoring and leadership. However, issues related to parenting and families dominated the conversation.

As we stepped back to analyze the leadership group, we noted several factors that inhibited its mentoring potential as a CoP. As noted above, the group was not functioning as a CoP. Despite members' shared interest in issues of leadership, there was not a tangible shared practice we could easily engage in together. Paula notes:

[I]t quickly became apparent we were more different than alike. I was in my 20th year at the university, while one person had just been promoted and tenured and another was brand new to the university...[Additionally, t]here was no specific shared activity or goal that focused our efforts.

The manifest purpose of the co-mentoring group (learning leadership) was not the actual shared practice of the group. Mentoring within a CoP, then, was difficult to enact, as there was no discernable shared practice present or emerging, and uncertain commitment to a shared communal identity specific to leadership. Further, the familiar routine of going out to lunch and sharing concerns was, perhaps, too familiar and too reassuring, as individual concerns, rather than explorations of leadership, dominated the conversation. The setting was a stronger trigger for friendship conversations than it was for leadership study and analysis. We were a group of faculty with common need, but without an enduring sense of communal co-mentoring responsibility as a CoP. Pat observed, “I don't think the co-mentoring was successfully sustained as far as learning and practicing leadership. However, trust and friendships did deepen among us, based on our openness to seeing each other as whole persons, and not just leaders.”

From this example, we learn that mentoring as a facilitative practice (and, indeed as a shared practice) within

a CoP cannot occur if the group is insufficiently structured to support CoP identity and practice. This group could possibly have become a CoP for mentoring had its members more effectively affirmed a common purpose, identity, and goal, and enacted these consciously, rather than fading out of clarity.

Elements of Institutionalization in the Communities

We examined several factors that indicate the degree to which each group is institutionalized (or not) at the university. We examined how the group was formed: Did the group arise organically or was it mandated? How did it develop over time? In addition, we examine how roles were determined, including leaders or facilitators. We consider the public nature of the group and its work, and whether or not the group's work was recognized by the institution. Finally, we consider the institutional resources available to the group.

Accreditation group

The accreditation group was voluntarily formed by two faculty members seeking support for their accreditation work. There was no mandate to form the group, though accreditation work is required to sustain institutional accreditation. A facilitator was not appointed, and roles were not explicitly discussed. Emily proposed the group, and both she and Ryan now jointly manage the group. Though earning accreditation is recognized by the university, the preparation work goes largely unnoticed and carries little weight in the faculty reward system. "It would be nice," Emily says, "if accreditation work were appropriately resourced—with time, recognition, and value—in the eyes of Rank & Tenure." The meetings are public only to the department, and tangentially to the dean through informal department chair updates. Similarly, the work produced in the meetings is invisible to all but Emily and Ryan, who monitor their own progress. That said, because their meetings and products were not mandated or monitored, there was an organic process to the work that freed Ryan and Emily to explore, learn, and co-mentor.

Though the accreditation group is not part of the university's organizational chart, it is shaped by components of the institutional structure. Ad hoc working groups, which share some features with CoP, are established in HE to serve particular goals, so there is precedent for forming a task-based group. Department chairs and program directors are tasked with completing accreditation work, which is documented in the school governance documents. In terms of resources, few were provided by the university. Emily received a course release to do the accreditation work (since neither report was technically her assignment), which gave her time. As Ryan notes, having common time was crucial:

First and foremost, I think simply having the time to meet was critical, to have those 1–2 hour blocks of time to...make progress towards our goals.

The work "didn't really come with any institutional supports," Emily notes, "unless you count lights and furniture." Individual effort and need facilitated the accreditation work. Given the minimal resources and the low visibility and reward, we see the accreditation CoP as minimally supported by the institution. Though the accreditation work was institutionalized through the requirement to complete it, the accreditation group itself is the least institutionalized of the three.

Dossier group

The idea for the dossier group came from Stephanie, who wondered why faculty prepare their promotion dossiers alone rather than together, "where we could support one another, share resources, and discuss what

we learned about the dossier preparation process.” Stephanie approached Nora, the CTL director, about forming a group. The following year, the CTL initiated several co-mentoring groups, including a dossier preparation group. Pat asked Stephanie to facilitate the group with her, and Stephanie agreed. Describing their roles, Pat writes, “I nominally co-facilitated with Stacy, but she did the lion's share of organizing the group's activities.” As facilitator, Stephanie wanted to ensure she was not positioned as the expert: “I didn't want my role elevated, because we all have something to contribute.”

Participation in the dossier group was entirely voluntary, and, as Stephanie notes, the most significant resource was faculty time. Like the accreditation group, the dossier group was born of and sustained by faculty members' desire for professional and emotional support as they undertook a central job requirement. Though the group was voluntary, preparing a dossier was not. The requirements for faculty promotion and tenure are codified in the faculty handbook, which details the dossier requirements. Short of an annual informational meeting hosted by the rank and tenure committee, dossier preparation is not overseen by or embedded into organizational structures. Faculty identify their own processes and supports for completing this task.

The dossier preparation group was moderately institutionalized through its connection to the CTL, an arm of the institution's academic affairs division, and because of the mandated task itself. Formed under the auspices of the CTL, the dossier group was lightly supported by its resources. Stephanie notes, “The CTL had books we could read about preparing dossiers and access to resources online,” and it “provided space and refreshments in the beginning.”

Though the group was publicized through the university-wide invitation, it was largely invisible campus-wide. There was no institutional recognition of the group, short of the CTL “sponsorship.” However, the CTL's sponsoring of the group is significant in legitimizing the role of CoP as viable sources of learning and mentoring on campus. As Wenger et al. (2002) argue, the goal is not to “institutionalize specific communities,” but rather to legitimize “their role as stewards of knowledge resources by integrating them with other functions, and aligning organizational systems to support them” (p. 203).

Leadership group

The leadership group's formation was similar to the dossier group's, being one of several co-mentoring groups formed by the CTL. Pat invited mid-career faculty interested in leadership to participate in a co-mentoring leadership seminar. Unlike the practices of the other two groups, leadership is largely voluntary. There is no mandate to serve as a department chair or program leader. What's more, the practice is less high-stakes. Faculty whose department leadership is mediocre do not lose their job; faculty who prepare an unsatisfactory dossier likely will. That said, faculty elected or appointed to a leadership role are accountable to the responsibilities of their role, which are typically outlined in school governance documents.

After an initial meeting hosted by the CTL, the five-member leadership group was encouraged to set up a meeting schedule and identify group goals. Emily took the lead in scheduling the meetings; however, there was not a designated facilitator or leader for the group, or any other designated roles.

Faculty across campus were invited to participate in the leadership group; however, the group went largely unnoticed to most people after the initial email. The decision to meet off campus further limited its visibility. There was little recognition for participating in the group, nor was any explicit value placed on the group outside of the CTL's endorsement. Members' decision to develop their leadership skills is optional, not linked to a mandated institutional outcome. Although the CTL's formation of the group sent a message about the value of such groups for faculty learning, it is not clear how loudly that message was heard or valued by those outside of the CTL or leadership group. Regarding resources, the group had access to the CTL's library of

texts on leadership, as well as input from the CTL directors (upon request). Again, faculty time was an invaluable resource, but not one provided by the university. Faculty took time away from other responsibilities to meet. When the group discontinued meeting, no one took note. Go To

Though the CTL was involved in the formation of the leadership group, the group lacks most markers of institutionalization. Participation in the group was entirely voluntary and few resources were provided to support faculty to participate in the group. The group had little visibility and its work and existence were largely unrecognized outside of the CTL. Thus, the group exhibits moderately low institutionalization.

Discussion

Across the three cases, we see how particular features of the CoP supported mentoring within each group, including shared practice and identity, as well as relationships and emotional support. Additionally, we note that while some elements of institutionalization supported mentoring in the CoP, such as internal leaders and institutionalized outcomes, the groups succeeded (or failed) largely outside of institutional structures and supports.

Shared Practice

First and foremost, having a current, shared practice was an important source from which mentoring emerged. In both the accreditation and dossier groups, members' knowledge of the practice emerged and increased during engagement in shared practice—writing an accreditation report and preparing a dossier. While working on the accreditation report elicited and deepened Emily and Ryan's knowledge of professional standards and program assessments, collective peer review of members' philosophy statements developed Stephanie's ability to present her case for diverse faculty audiences. Here, we see how knowledge emerges in the midst of practice (Feiman-Nemser & Beasley, 1997), or through what Schön (1987) calls “knowing in action.” The leadership group, on the other hand, struggled to coalesce around a shared practice, and consequently experienced little mentoring within the group.

Institutionalized Outcomes

We also find that mentoring in a CoP is supported when the outcomes of the shared practice are themselves institutionalized. The dossier and accreditation groups were focused on products of the practice (promotion dossier, accreditation reports) that are mandated by the institution. These products motivated the members of the accreditation and dossier groups to learn, share knowledge, and stay focused on the practice. In the leadership group, however, there is no mandate to develop one's practice as a leader. Department chair and program director are voluntary positions, and the decision to develop one's leadership skills is optional. Thus, the leadership group did not have a mandated outcome to encourage their work or keep them focused on the leadership practice.

Relationship and Identity

Mentoring in a CoP requires more than information-sharing. Mentoring is supported through the development of relationships and affirmation of one's identity as part of the community. As Henrich and Attebury (2010) note, “there is no community of practice without a sense of community” (p. 161). Members of both the accreditation and dossier groups wrote and spoke enthusiastically about their developing relationships with members of the group, repeatedly mentioning concepts such as trust, emotional support, and connection with

others. Thus, these CoP reflect stereotypically female ways of mentoring, providing personal and professional support in a collaborative context (McGuire & Reger, 2003). Perhaps this is not surprising, given that the CoP participants were mostly female, and of the two men, one was a person of color and the other a “minority” in a female-dominated field. However, the developing relationships were an unanticipated byproduct of the joint work. As Tarr (2010) found in her CoP self-study, “we were not conscious of...building relationships; we were focused on the work” (p. 277). The developing relationships were a source of motivation for sustaining participation in and commitment to the group's practice. Consistent with Schulze's (2009) findings, the CoP fostered a “sense of responsibility towards others” (p. 129). Relationship-building in isolation, however, was not enough. The personal topics that dominated the leadership group were a source of frustration, perhaps, because they did not stem from shared practice.

The accreditation and dossier groups also affirmed members' shared or developing identities within the CoP. In the accreditation group, Ryan speaks of his developing abilities as a new program director, and the ways in which participation in the group helped him to grow into this identity that he and Emily shared. In the dossier group, Pat reveals that her participation affirms her identity as a competent faculty member who has something to offer her colleagues. And Stephanie shared the sense of community formed as they realized they were all faculty from professional schools. The leadership group, by contrast, struggled to sustain commitment to a shared identity as leaders; other identities—as parents or spouses—took over.

CoP Roles

The three cases also suggest that defined mentoring roles are not necessary; in fact, mentoring occurred in groups where expert and novice roles were interchangeable. In both the dossier and accreditation groups, the role of expert or “more experienced other” rotated as members shared knowledge or experience, or guided colleagues through particular processes of the practice. The fluid role of expert was not linked to one's status at the university (e.g., department chair, tenured faculty member), but rather to the task at hand. Thus, Pat was an expert when it came to interpreting the rank and tenure guidelines but a novice when observing how to facilitate group interaction. Similarly, Ryan was a novice when it came to crafting an accreditation report but experienced in interpreting standards. In the leadership group, no one felt expert about leadership. With everyone feeling novice, there was no exchange of expertise.

Though mentoring roles were not assigned, internal leadership was important for the group's sustained engagement in shared practice. Consistent with the literature, we also found that internal leadership—though essential—was not necessarily coupled with expertise or experience (Henrich & Attebury, 2010; Wenger et al., 2002). Self-governance, however, was important for honoring and focusing on the experience of the members (Wenger & Trayner, n.d.). In the dossier group, Stephanie handled the logistics and facilitated meetings. With group input, Stephanie identified topics for each meeting that reflected members' needs. In the accreditation group, Emily took the lead in setting up the initial meetings and identifying a plan for tackling the accreditation work. As time progressed, Ryan and Emily jointly handled the logistics and direction of the group. In the leadership group, Emily handled the scheduling of the meetings but there was not a designated facilitator for the group. This likely contributed to their difficulty in sustaining engagement in a shared practice. What's more, the voluntary nature of this group and its practice may have weakened motivation for anyone to take the reins. As Wenger and Trayner (n.d.) write, “A key success factor [in CoP] is the dedication and skill of people who take the initiative to nurture the community. Many communities fail, not because members have lost interest, but simply because nobody has the energy and time to take care of logistics and hold the space for the inquiry.” Absent any institutional mandate to engage in their practice, the leadership group was easily derailed and abandoned.

Institutional Resources

Go To

Wenger and Trayner ([n.d.](#)) hold that institutionalization gives CoP access to resources. In the three cases, few institutional resources were given or identified as essential to support mentoring in the groups. Faculty time was the main resource supporting the groups, and only one member was allotted time. Most of the faculty time given was voluntarily, and was unrecognized. Voluntary faculty time was readily given in the dossier and accreditation groups, as there was sufficient incentive to practice due to the nature of the products at hand. When the leadership group strayed from its focus, members were no longer motivated to give up time.

Our findings indicate that commitment to a shared practice and identity are key ingredients for mentoring in a CoP. Internal leaders are important for organizing the groups and keeping them on track, though the roles of expert and novice are fluid and shared among group members. The successful groups did not require any institutional resources; however, their sustained engagement in shared practice was fueled by their commitment to institutionally-required practices. Finally, we see a symbiotic relationship between engagement in shared practice and the development of relationships and trust.

Implications

In an age of shrinking resources in HE, it behooves IHE to support collaborative mentoring and faculty work through CoP. Luckily, our findings indicate that CoP require few institutional resources. In fact, the most important resource may be institutional recognition of the benefits of CoP for developing knowledge and supporting faculty—both professionally and personally. What's more, because the mentoring is embedded in shared faculty work, it benefits all members and does not require much additional work. The ongoing, collaborative, and authentic nature of the work served to build relationships that supported both engagement in practice and members' social-emotional well-being. However, these features that supported mentoring in the CoP are countercultural in HE, where competition and individual achievement are valued over cooperation and collective success (McGuire & Reger, [2003](#)). Successful mentoring in the dossier and accreditation CoP was collaborative and reciprocal, and supported both cognitive *and* social-emotional needs. Thus, in order to support mentoring in a CoP model, IHE must embrace and support several countercultural norms: (a) valuing and rewarding faculty collaboration; (b) supporting relationships and care for others; and (c) promoting fluid conceptions of “experts” and “novices” among faculty. For these cultural shifts to occur, we must make CoP work public so that IHE see the benefits of collaboration for both faculty and the institution.

Valuing Faculty Collaboration

In HE, independent work is highly valued. This value reflects dominant culture's meritocracy narrative that individuals who work hard—without help—will succeed. Though faculty collaboration is gradually increasing, institutional structures and reward systems suggest that autonomous knowledge-production is more rigorous and valuable than collaborative work. For example, faculty who co-teach a class must get special permission and may have to teach an overload to make up for only teaching “half” a class. Faculty who want to co-chair a department have to split the stipend. And, faculty who coauthor manuscripts must justify their contributions so that they “count.” These structural norms suggest a simplistic view of collaborative work: that it is merely half the work of independent work. Those who opt to collaborate do so on their own time and dime, and on the “edges of campus culture” (Kezar, [2005](#)).

The meritocracy narrative downplays the benefits of collaboration, making it unknown or unrecognized. It is possible that when faculty come together to jointly publish or teach, there is greater potential for innovative ideas to emerge. The IHE needs to recognize that groups are “an indispensable part of a learning organization...that bring...a more diverse set of skills than are found in one individual” (Henrich & Attebury, 2010, p. 162). Administrators can legitimize faculty participation in CoP through “letters or announcements” and support them “through time and leadership support,” as well as their material resources (Wenger, 1998, p. 8).

For collaboration to occur, administrators and faculty must work together to change the formal institutional structures (e.g., rank and tenure, merit, faculty evaluation) that promote an individual goal structure (Austin & Baldwin, 1991). In addition, IHE must have mission statements and administrators that explicitly promote collaboration, as well as centers or units that help to organize collaborative efforts. Finally, IHE must make public and celebrate the benefits of collaborative work (e.g., innovative co-teaching pedagogies, groundbreaking scholarship) so that faculty, staff, and administrators will buy into collaboration and a collaborative goal structure (Kezar, 2005).

Valuing Relationships and Care for Others

In addition to the learning benefits, members of the successful CoP noted the social-emotional benefits of these groups. Developing relationships, care for self and others, reduced anxiety, and moral support were all noted benefits that kept members coming back to the group. What's more, there was great appreciation for the feeling of “togetherness,” for alleviating professional isolation and taking care of each other. Though faculty who are socially connected and emotionally supported tend to be more successful, academic culture rarely acknowledges or supports faculty's need for relationship or social-emotional support. Academia's focus on intellectual pursuits curtails conversations about social-emotional needs. What's more, faculty are not typically recognized or rewarded for helping others. A CoP model for mentoring challenges both “the notion of ‘disembodied work’ in academia” (McGuire & Reger, 2003) and the more masculine model of mentoring, which focuses primarily on professional goals (McKeen & Bujaki, 2007). Institutional support for mentoring in a CoP involves a cultural shift in campus values—supporting both relational and instrumental mentoring. As noted above, these values can be highlighted and recognized in the university mission statement, in faculty orientations and campus-wide events, in mentoring programs, in faculty development events, and in promotion, merit, and evaluation systems.

Recognizing the Fluid Nature of Expertise

In both successful CoP, the roles of learner, novice, expert, and more experienced others were shared among all members. The fluidity of expert-novice roles enhanced the breadth of knowledge and experience available to the group. Such fluid roles run counter to traditional ranking systems in which faculty rank is associated with experience and/or expertise. This assumption is most evident in traditional (and pervasive) mentoring practices that pair senior and new faculty members. Even though new faculty often bring contemporary ideas and practices to campus, typical mentoring configurations presume an expert-novice, top-down relationship. Mentoring in CoP disrupts these expert-novice dichotomies. IHE can support mentoring in CoP by recognizing expertise at all ranks and promoting a climate of lifelong learning and professional development on campus (Blanton & Stylianou, 2009). Such a climate can be supported by administrators and the university's mission statement; in the ways in which it recognizes the contributions and knowledge of all faculty; in the ways in which it promotes and provides faculty development; and in the criteria for tenure and promotion.

In sum, while CoP require few institutional resources to succeed, their long-term sustainability depends on their fit with the culture of the institution. IHE can support and validate CoP by creating a campus culture that values and supports collaboration, relationships, and lifelong learning. Given the potential of CoP for collaborative knowledge production and mentoring, IHE would be wise to support them.

Appendix: Group Data Reflection Questions

1. What made you join the group?
2. How would you describe your experience in the group?
3. How would you describe your role in the group?
4. What expertise did you bring to the group? Can you give an example of a time when you shared your knowledge and skills to benefit the group? When you were looking for others' expertise to assist/guide you?
5. What did you learn/gain/accomplish? Which learning/accomplishments/gains were expected/hoped for vs. unexpected?
6. How would you describe the mentoring you provided or received in this group?
7. What institutional supports helped your group to function? What additional supports would have helped?
What might the university learn from your experience in this group?

Biographies

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Patricia E. Calderwood is a professor of Educational Studies and Teacher Preparation at Fairfield University, and the former director of the Center for Academic Excellence. Building on her book, *Learning Community: Finding Common Ground in Difference* (Teachers College Press, 2000), she has authored or coauthored numerous SoTL and critical self-study papers about university teaching, teacher education, and the social construction of community across varied educational contexts. Her current work focuses on university faculty co-mentoring within a community of practice paradigm.

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Paula Gill Lopez is an associate professor of School Psychology and serves as chair of the Department of Psychological and Educational Consultation and Director of the School Psychology program. Her most recent scholarly interests include mindfulness practices in schools, social-emotional learning and self-care.

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