

THE IMPORTANCE OF INTENTION: A REVIEW OF MENTORING FOR WRITING CENTER PROFESSIONALS

Maureen McBride
University of Nevada, Reno
mmcbride@unr.edu

Molly Rentscher
University of the Pacific
mrentscher@pacific.edu

Abstract

This article reviews existing research about mentoring within writing center studies and other disciplines, including research on traditional and alternative mentoring models for professionals. The benefits of professional mentoring are well documented in other disciplines; however, there is a significant gap in research on mentoring for writing center professionals. The authors examine their own mentoring experiences through three lenses—career advancement, professional identification, and personal development—to discuss how their participation in the International Writing Centers Association Mentor Match Program has benefited them. Based on these experiences, the authors outline recommendations for the Mentor Match Program and the discipline more broadly, including the importance of developing professional guidelines, formal training, and additional resources for mentors and mentees. The article concludes by arguing that the complex and isolationary nature of writing center labor requires an organized effort to support writing center professionals by developing a formal mentoring program.

“A good mentor can help you be your best self” (Lukas). In fact, some scholars speculate that the relationship between mentor and mentee may be one of the most developmentally important for an individual’s professional life (Solansky 676). These simple but important claims highlight the benefits of mentorship. However, access to mentoring is not readily available to many professionals in higher education (Darwin and Palmer). In their article, Anne Geller and Harry Denny discuss how the unique aspects of writing centers impact individuals and may create missed opportunities to professionalize the discipline. Nicole Caswell et al. explain that “the picture of writing center administration work remains blurry. Writing center administration continues to be misunderstood and undervalued, and very few new directors believe they are well-prepared for the actual work of running a writing center” (A3). The complexities of writing center labor suggest that preparing people for this work is difficult and there are few models for disciplinary identity available to new or transitioning professionals.

Within writing center scholarship, many professionals talk about mentoring for peer tutors and graduate students. While this is an important area of research, there is a gap in research and resources for professionals within the field. In fact, most books explore mentoring for peer tutors or graduate students,

but only three of 35 books we surveyed about writing center work over the last 25 years explicitly discuss mentoring for writing center professionals (WCPs). Since WCPs must “navigate the complex rhetorical, political, and pedagogical work” (Rowan 13) as well as oversee the day-to-day responsibilities of their centers—accounting, budgets, human resource concerns, recruiting, training staff, etc.—the importance of professional mentoring is high. For many WCPs, hands-on experiences and mentorship are the primary ways that the complexities of writing center administration are learned; similarly, Katrina Bell claims that experience is the greatest guide for directing a writing center. Ultimately, most formal education programs cannot address the full range of knowledge and experiences that are needed to perform all of the expected job functions (Bell; Murray and Owen), and mentoring can help fill that gap.

In fact, since not all WCPs start in writing center studies, it may be necessary to take a broader view of how to professionalize within writing center administration. Christopher Ervin notes that in 2002, 58% of director positions were held by non-tenure eligible faculty and staff; by 2003, new data suggested that number could be 69% (A8). Caswell et al. state that “writing centers continue to be directed by a diverse set of people from varied backgrounds” and typical routes for preparing future directors (i.e. graduate programs) may not have fully prepared many of the current directors (A7). Writing center directors are required to handle disciplinary, emotional, and daily operational responsibilities (Caswell et al.). With this range of labor, directors may need to learn some skills on the job. Opportunities for reflection, discussions of campus politics and how to navigate them, and scenarios and case studies—all potential topics and activities that occur within mentoring partnerships—may be necessary.

Many WCPs often have to create their own positions and responsibilities, something that few academics have experience doing. While some people may assume that composition is equivalent to writing center studies, first-year and writing in the disciplines (WID) program administrators often have different histories than WCPs, suggesting the need for mentors

within writing center studies rather than colleagues from composition, even if proximity between mentor and mentee are sacrificed (Geller and Denny). As mentors, WCPs can help those new to writing center work advance “their writing centers, themselves, the profession, and the discipline” (Rowan 121). Geller and Denny suggest WCPs need to look at nontraditional ways of defining our discipline, our scholarship, and our professional roles. This call supports the need to develop a mentoring/professional relationship model to help guide this work and to help develop disciplinary identity.

Since 2003, there have been promising efforts to support WCPs with the complexities of writing center administration. The International Writing Centers Association (IWCA) organizes a Summer Institute, a one-week program to allow for new and experienced WCPs “to work with leaders from the field in whole-group workshops, small-group discussions, and one-on-one conversations” (“Summer Institute Leadership Track”). The St. Cloud State University Writing Center Administration certificate program provides four online courses open to graduate students and WCPs to examine issues like navigating institutional relationships and developing research projects (Mohrbacher). And, over the last few years, the IWCA has sponsored a special interest group around WCP mentorship at their annual conference, which has had remarkable attendance. Finally, the IWCA currently offers the Mentor Match Program (MMP), a program connecting new professionals with more experienced WCPs. Certainly, there are many successful stories that have emerged from the IWCA MMP; the authors of this article being an example of a successful MMP mentoring partnership. However, although the MMP uses the term “program,” it primarily serves to match mentors and mentees and has not fostered a formal structure, creating a looseness that is flexible but also inconsistent.

This article examines existing research about mentoring within writing center studies and from other disciplines. Our goal is to use our experiences and existing scholarship to discuss mentoring models that can support the development of professional capacity and confidence as well as develop the discipline.

Literature Review

Mentoring in professional settings, specifically in institutions of higher education, had an upsurge in the late 1970s and early 1980s (Kunselman et al.; Stalker). Mentoring, both formal and informal, has been conceptualized as a partnership with a mentor who guides, sponsors, or has a positive and significant

influence on the professional development of the mentee (Allen and Poteet 62). Stephanie Solansky describes the mentoring partnership as “a complex relationship based on a social exchange between at least two individuals” (676). Throughout mentoring’s history it has been touted as a way for new professionals to increase their networking opportunities, often leading to research and publication, as well as to enhance career opportunities and job satisfaction (Darwin; Darwin and Palmer; Kunselman et al.; Rowan). In fact, any mentoring, either formal or informal, has been shown to provide advantages over people who do not have mentors (Allen and Poteet 70). Frankie Weinberg and Melenie Lankau state, “Mentoring has been found to have profound positive impacts on individuals, and so organizations have attempted to replicate these benefits by implementing formal mentoring programs” (1527-1528). More recently, the traditional models and underlying theories of mentoring have been challenged, specifically with feminist perspectives, such as those of Joyce Stalker and Ann Darwin. The following review of literature provides an overview of traditional mentoring, alternative mentoring, and writing-center-specific mentoring.

Mentoring Models

Traditionally, mentoring has had a history framed from a functionalist perspective in which the goal is to increase efficiency (of an individual’s career trajectory as well as from an organizational perspective of work production) (Darwin; Kunselman et al.). In this model, mentor and mentee are matched in a dyad with the mentor possessing more power than the mentee both professionally and within the mentor-mentee relationship. This top-down model positions a person more advanced in their career, or “wiser,” with a new professional in a one-to-one relationship (Haggard et al.; Stalker). This can be an effective model when new directors enter with little experience, helping them feel less isolated, building their professional confidence, and making them more likely to serve as mentors and in other professional capacities (Hardesty et al.).

The competitive nature of higher education can sometimes influence mentoring relationships to be hierarchical (Darwin and Palmer). Because of the higher percentages of males in senior leadership positions, there is criticism that the functional model perpetuates paternalistic patterns of hierarchy (Darwin). The term “mentor” implies certain interactions, specifically regarding who has power (mentor) and who is the respondent (mentee) (Buckley), which may have constraining effects on the

potential of mentoring relationships to move away from a patriarchal model. These traditional models of mentoring frame the learning as top-down from mentor to mentee; however, viewing knowledge development as a dynamic process that is reciprocal and participatory offers more benefits (Kunselman et al.). Additionally, the cycle of traditional mentoring relationships may risk reaffirming existing power structures rather than providing opportunities to disrupt them (Rowan; Stalker). Advances in technology and increased attention to diversity and inclusivity have changed the workplace and suggest that alternative models of mentoring are better suited to our new workplace situations (Darwin 200-202).

Moving away from traditional models of mentoring provides for a range of mentoring responses, which typically focus on lateral and multi-connection approaches (Stalker 363). Dana Haggard et al. claim that three core attributes play a crucial role in the effectiveness of a mentoring relationship: reciprocity, developmental benefits, and consistent interaction over time—these core attributes lead to a learning partnership instead of a hierarchical structure (292-293). In basic contrast to traditional models, mentoring that emerges organically from existing relationships, such as peer mentoring and collaborative mentoring, breaks with the power structures of traditional mentoring (Bynum). Another approach that focuses on co-learning, rather than a hierarchical, patriarchal approach, the radical humanist perspective, allows for power relations to be challenged and mentoring to be less focused on a role and instead used as a way of characterizing a relationship (Angelique et al.; Kunselman et al.). In this framework, mentoring is collaborative and risks are taken by all members; roles are transcended and language frames members as colleagues rather than using the traditional mentor-mentee terminology (Kunselman et al. 206). Potential limitations of the peer, co-learning approach may be that career advancement benefits are fewer; however, psychosocial benefits are higher (Angelique et al. 199).

With shifts in work life, a collection of mentoring relationships that combines diverse people and perspectives, often described as a mentoring circle, constellation, or mosaic, may better support mentees, specifically women in higher education leadership roles (Searby et al.). Darwin and Edward Palmer offer mentoring circles as an alternative approach because circles focus on collaborative interactions and “typically involve one mentor working with a group of mentees or groups of people mentoring each other” with “a facilitator to keep conversations focused and productive” (Darwin and Palmer 126). The benefits of mentoring circles are the generation of multiple

perspectives (Darwin and Palmer 126) and may include the same benefits of mentoring dyads, specifically the reduction of feelings of isolation, increased confidence, career advancement, and a better understanding of culture and politics within higher education (Darwin). Mentoring circles also disrupt the patriarchal, hierarchical traditional mentoring relationship by encouraging support to come from peers and senior members of the circle (Darwin and Palmer). The advantages to models like constellations, mosaics, and circles is that individuals have access to a network of people rather than just an individual (Darwin and Palmer).

The types of mentoring relationships available to WCPs may naturally disrupt the traditional model by the very nature of distance and difference in institutions (including politics, structure, etc.), and encourage a more collegial relationship in such mentoring models as the IWCA MMP. Julie Kunselman et al. note that looking for mentoring outside of an organization or institution may offer a more holistic perspective of professionalism and career identification. Karen Rowan labels mentoring outside of a home department as network-based, which is likely a necessity for WCPs because of the lack of colleagues in similar positions on their campuses or at their institutions (Geller and Denny). Moving away from the power structures of a specific institution may allow mentoring partners to dislocate themselves from the competitive, hierarchical nature and gain potential for more transformation (Stalker).

In addition to the traditional and alternative models of mentoring, the concepts of formal mentoring and informal mentoring play an important role in understanding the nuances of mentoring as well as being able to effectively develop mentoring programs. For many years, informal mentoring, in which a mentor and a mentee naturally develop a relationship without any third party assistance, was the standard (Allen et al.). In the 1980s, however, with shifts in the workforce, such as more women and minorities and greater need to change jobs or adapt to new roles, companies started considering how formal mentoring programs could be effectively implemented (Murray and Owen). The key distinction with formal mentoring is that the relationship is initiated by a third party (Allen et al.; Wanberg et al.). There are mixed results from studies about the benefits of each type of mentoring; however, many scholars have results that suggest informal mentoring provides more career and psychosocial support than formal mentoring (Allen et al.). Incorporating training and support within formal mentor programs, however, may improve results because training helps participants to establish higher

levels of comfort within relationships sooner (Allen et al.). Voluntary participation has also been shown to improve results, as well as attention to trust, which is particularly important in formal relationships (Chun et al.).

Understanding how the use of e-mentoring, sometimes referred to as computer-mediated communication (CMC), affects mentoring relationships is an important component of any formal program mentoring that uses video chat, email, or phone for participants to engage in the relationship (Ensher and Murphy). Ellen Ensher and Susan Murphy and Haggard et al. claim that e-mentoring helps to cut across institutional and geographic boundaries and may make mentoring programs more egalitarian. There are several advantages to computer-mediated communication: “access to a greater number of mentors, greater flexibility in forming and sustaining relationships, and reduction of demographic and personality barriers in traditional mentoring” (Haggard et al. 297). However, there are also important disadvantages that must be understood, such as the increased amount of time required to establish trust within the relationship and lower levels of commitment to the mentoring relationship (Ensher and Murphy).

Organizations specifically benefit from supporting mentoring relationships because participants end up with a better understanding of the organization or field, leading to higher rates of retention and leadership within the organization (Chun et al.; Ensher and Murphy). Formal programs are especially important when informal mentoring is not readily available (Ensher and Murphy), which is often the case for WCPs. Professionals who have been mentored are also more likely to become mentors, which expands “an organization’s human and social capital” (Chun et al.).

Benefits & Challenges

Mentoring has been linked to several benefits that range from career advancement to increased self-confidence to personal satisfaction (Darwin and Palmer; Wright and Wright). Generally, both mentors and mentees claim to benefit from the relationship. In a meta-analysis of mentoring research, Tammy Allen et al. identified career benefits such as salary level, promotion rate, exposure and visibility, career satisfaction, job satisfaction, career commitment, turnover intentions, and organizational life; they also identified psychosocial benefits such as self-esteem, work identity, sense of competence, role modeling, counseling, and friendship. Anne Blackhurst’s results, from her survey research of women administrators in higher education, confirmed long-standing

assumptions about the benefits of mentoring: Having a mentor reduced role conflict and ambiguity and increased organizational commitment. Ultimately, Blackhurst claimed that mentoring may be crucial to the success of individual women and the elimination of gender inequity in higher education.

Stalker specifically identifies three benefits from traditional models of mentoring: career advancement, personal development, and professional identification. “A mentor who makes available the full range of these three mentoring functions to his or her protegee will provide more valuable mentoring support to his or her protegee, thus resulting in more developmental benefits and more positive mentoring relationships” (Weinberg and Lankau 1531). The ability to make professional connections through mentoring relationships is often identified as the primary career benefit because mentoring leads to opportunities for research, presentations, and publications. For professional development, mentees learn ways to adapt to their academic environments and navigate politically within their institutions and professional disciplines (Stalker 364). The personal development of mentees is often an increase in confidence and a more accurate understanding of personal strengths and weaknesses (Stalker 364). Personal development is seen as the area of mutual benefit for both mentors and mentees because of the self-awareness that is developed throughout the relationship (Stalker 364).

In addition to these benefits, mentoring has been linked to several challenges, one of which is the lack of a clear definition. Barry Bozeman and Mary Feeney explain that without clear distinctions of what mentoring is and what it isn’t, it can easily be confused with other concepts: “In most instances it is not easy to sort mentoring from adjacent concepts such as training, coaching, socialization, and even friendship” (735). The variability of what “qualifies” as mentoring may create gaps in knowledge about how mentoring can most effectively be structured.

Rowan points to several claims that mentoring is a natural, given part of writing center studies. She cautions, however, that we need to be more intentional about mentoring approaches because “good intentions” aren’t always enough. Kunselman et al. caution that mentoring is more than just giving advice (199). Criticisms of formal mentoring programs include participants not knowing what they are doing or expected to do (Darwin and Palmer 132). Most studies that include suggestions for improving mentoring relationships suggest more resources, training, and support for mentors. In Liz Buckley’s research examining email writing center mentor-mentee interactions (focused on graduate students and faculty

members), she notes that mentors requested more guidance and felt unsure about questions and expectations (4). Monica Gandhi and Mallory Johnson note that a robust training program for mentors is typically absent. They suggest that a training program should provide support for mentors in the following areas: maintaining effective communication, aligning expectations, assessing understanding, addressing diversity, fostering independence, and promoting professional development. Buckley highlights the need to have support for troubleshooting technology concerns and for setting expectations. Rowan concludes that having documents to help guide expectations and to clearly define roles within the relationships helps both mentors and mentees. By creating a formal training program, standardization may be achieved which will validate mentoring as an academic activity (similar to research or teaching). Trained mentors also model professional behaviors that are perpetuated throughout disciplines.

Mentoring is distinguished from other forms of support by the focus on a developmental relationship within a career context (Ensher and Murphy). Both traditional and alternative mentoring models suggest that mentors, specifically, and mentees need mentoring specific resources, including options for training (Bynum). Yvette Bynum suggests that “a truly effective mentoring program should be developed and implemented in a comprehensive and well-resourced manner” (71).

Examining Our Mentoring Experiences

In the literature, many scholars suggest that key benefits are career advancement, professional identification, and personal development. We examine our mentoring experiences through these lenses in the following sections.

Career Advancement

Mentee Expectations & Experiences

As a graduate student, I benefited greatly from the relationships I developed with faculty mentors in the writing center and in my composition and rhetoric program. These relationships resulted in several career advancement opportunities, including research, presentations, and publications. When I graduated, I knew that I wanted to continue developing these relationships, but I also realized that I needed to grow my professional network. When I learned about the IWCA MMP, I was thrilled. I was unsure what to expect because the call for participants did not include information such as program objectives or logistics for how mentoring relationships would be developed;

however, I was excited to enroll in the MMP to meet other WCPs and pursue new professional opportunities that might be available through the IWCA.

When I met Maureen in 2017, I was a recent graduate and new writing center director. Although my education and past writing center experiences as an undergraduate consultant, graduate consultant, and administrator prepared me well for the director position, I sometimes felt unprepared for the complexities of writing center labor. I was eager to grow professionally and focus on leadership skills, such as developing strategic plans, navigating complex political situations, and working with faculty across disciplines. Maureen and I met several times at the beginning of our mentoring relationship to articulate professional goals, explore our own definitions of “mentoring,” and discuss expectations. These initial conversations were time-consuming, and I remember feeling so thankful for Maureen’s investment in our relationship. Over time, my conversations with Maureen helped me feel more confident in my writing center knowledge and abilities. They also helped me identify short- and long-term professional development goals and connect skills to these goals, which resulted in increased self-awareness. I pursued goals by engaging in a myriad of activities, such as presenting at local and international conferences, participating in service opportunities, and completing additional graduate coursework that ultimately advanced my career.

In addition to identifying areas for professional development and collaboratively pursuing opportunities for career advancement (i.e., conference presentations and publications), Maureen encouraged me to form other professional connections. At conferences, Maureen introduced me to her colleagues and engaged me in conversations around my areas for development. Maureen’s willingness to connect me with other WCPs led to new relationships within my local network, which were especially important because as a new writing center director in an unfamiliar city, I had much to learn about local writing center communities. These relationships also provided a variety of perspectives that helped me develop a more nuanced understanding of culture and politics within writing centers and higher education more broadly.

Maureen and I have also had important conversations about promotion and leadership during times of change—conversations that took place after trust and rapport had been built. Maureen offered guidance during periods of uncertainty at my institution, including approaches for collaborating with others and navigating my fluctuating roles and

responsibilities, and our conversations helped me gain clarity in these areas and reduced role conflict (Blackhurst). My mentoring relationship with Maureen has advanced my career in tangible and intangible ways, and I can confidently say that I am more satisfied with my career and more committed to the writing center field as a result of our mentoring relationship.

Mentor Expectations & Experiences

I saw participation in the IWCA mentor program as providing me with an opportunity to advance my career in terms of making broader connections with other professionals in my field. With the opportunity to interact with other WCPs, I knew that I would gain insight into how other centers function, their obstacles, structures, values and could use that knowledge to help my center. I believe that this level of professional interaction allows me more flexibility in my career by generating research opportunities, potential future employment opportunities, and the ability to move up within professional affiliations. Additionally, as a woman, the need for professional connections helped me to better identify with my position and reinforced my commitment to my role and institution as seen in Blackhurst's study of women and mentoring in student affairs. Suzanne de Janasz et al. most closely capture the career connections I see in mentoring, which are related to the "boundaryless" nature of organizational structures and specifically of writing center studies.

My participation in the IWCA MMP helped me connect with other people in the field. Through my relationship with Molly, I met other professionals she knows, learned more about alternative conferences, and developed a richer understanding of the ways in which Molly's institutional contexts afford her opportunities and create obstacles that I typically don't face. All of this gave me perspective that I can use at my institution and helped me better understand the complexities of writing center studies. As of this article, Molly and I have presented at one conference together, are planning another conference presentation together, have worked on this article, and will likely plan future scholarly projects together. As Alex Lyman claims, this gaining of perspective is a benefit back to me in my position as well as a way to support other professionals.

Professional Identification

Mentee Expectations & Experiences

As I transitioned from being a graduate student administrator to a full-time writing center director, I was confident in my knowledge and experience, but nervous about my performance in this new position.

My conversations with Maureen were important spaces where I could discuss principles and practices without being evaluated or judged. Of course, I knew that Maureen was an expert in the field, and there is risk associated with vulnerability, especially in hierarchical mentoring relationships, but I viewed our meetings as spaces to be curious, honest, and open. For example, Maureen affirmed my perceived strengths in tutor education and second language writing, but was supportive and kind when I shared that I probably "underestimated the administrative and political demands" of being a writing center director (Healy 37). To my surprise, I learned that I was not alone in this experience—that it's common for directors to feel this way, even with several years of writing center education and experience—and this realization helped me move forward without embarrassment or shame.

The ability to ask questions, explore research, and discuss my emerging areas of expertise in our conversations reminded me of a successful tutor-tutee relationship. In fact, Josephine Koster makes a compelling connection between tutoring and professional mentoring and urges "the IWCA to make an organized effort to help writing center specialists develop these professional skills" (164). Koster explains that "in short, we should do for ourselves as WCAs [writing center administrators] what we do for our tutors: make sure the tools are available to give us the best possible chance to negotiate understanding with our audiences" (164-165). Because Maureen and I talked about institutional culture and structure, professional relationships, and work with faculty, I both learned concepts related to these topics and practiced these skills with Maureen. In turn, I believe these skills helped me develop a strong WCP identity.

Maureen's affirmation of my strengths, enthusiasm for my areas of development, and eagerness to develop a "learning partnership" (Stalker 292-293) gave me a sense of belonging. Our IWCA MMP meetings were also one of the few consistent connections I had with the field, as limited funding meant that I was unable to regularly attend writing center conferences. This sense of belonging was especially important when I decided to make a significant geographical move to oversee the development of a new graduate writing center, which among many things, involved collaborating with institutional stakeholders to develop a disciplinary identity for our center. My mentoring partnership with Maureen not only grounded me as I embarked on this new adventure, but also guided me through important decisions with regard to core principles (e.g., mission, core values, core beliefs) that were important for developing our writing center identity.

Mentee Expectations & Experiences

The isolation that is inherent in so much writing center work means that it is often difficult to have a community of colleagues on our home campuses. To this end, finding a way to have a professional identity requires a sense of a professional community in which that identity exists. Mentoring offered me one of the few opportunities to interact with other WCPs, gaining a sense of disciplinary identity and finding models for professional identities, as discussed in Geller and Denny.

As an established professional, it takes intentional effort to optimize learning opportunities. Mentoring reinforces our understanding and ability to apply knowledge, and builds confidence as a professional. Lyman says, “To be kind to and confident in myself is the best way I can be a role model for others, and by taking on the responsibility of mentorship, I am reminding myself to strive for a higher standard.” By recognizing how I could support one person, I also learned more about my capacity to contribute to the field more broadly: “When you mentor others, you gain critical skills to improve as a leader” (Lyman).

My experiences with the MMP have definitely contributed to me feeling more connected with the writing center studies because I have had to think intentionally about my choices to be able to explain them to Molly and to engage in conversations about our different political climates and institutional structures, which demonstrates how serving as a mentor “gives mentors an audience for their ideas and feelings” (Wanberg et al. 414). Weinberg and Lankau claim “committing to take part in the formal organizational mentoring program” demonstrates commitment to the program and organization (Weinberg and Lankau 1537). I definitely experienced this. Participating in the IWCA MMP was one of the first ways I moved beyond presenting at the annual conference. The experiences I have had have also made me care about the IWCA MMP in a way that I am committed to contributing to the future success of this program.

Personal Development

Mentee Expectations & Experiences

I joined the IWCA MMP in 2017 to expand my professional network, focus on my professional development, and connect with other WCPs. I was also the only WCP on my campus, which was an isolating experience at times, and thus, saw the MMP as an opportunity to develop professional friendships and make a commitment to my professional development.

In addition to the psychosocial benefits described in the previous sections (e.g., affirmation, self-esteem, work identity), my personal development has been an important albeit unexpected outcome of our mentoring partnership. Through our various conversations about writing center work, Maureen and I have discussed work-life balance, self-care, and professional friendships within our institutions. These conversations have been both organic and intentional. It was especially helpful to discuss prioritizing projects, managing requests, communicating boundaries, and developing healthy work habits—topics not often explicitly discussed in graduate school. Further, as I settled into my writing center director position, I found that it was important to have a confidant with whom I could share frustrating experiences, as I am more hesitant to share negative emotions with my campus colleagues. For these reasons and more, Maureen and I have planned to continue communicating and collaborating beyond the MMP’s two-year cycle, and I am glad we have adapted our relationship to extend beyond the designated time frame.

Mentor Expectations & Experiences

The lack of similar writing center colleagues on a single campus is socially isolating, so the opportunity to develop professional friendships is a welcome opportunity. The role of confidant is a common one for mentors (Gandhi and Johnson). In Rowan’s examination of administrative professional development, she notes the importance of the psychosocial aspects of acceptance and confirmation. Helping mentees believe in themselves and find ways to establish routines of self-care are important. Additionally, this becomes a reminder to establish or maintain these strategies for myself.

While many people focus on professional identity and career advancement, the personal connections developed between participants in a mentoring relationship can far exceed the other two benefits. In my interactions with Molly, I have learned that her happiness within her work context and in her personal context are important to me. I care about cultivating a relationship that extends beyond mentor and mentee and settles into personal colleague and friend. In contrast, three other mentoring relationships through the IWCA MMP have actually been disappointing because I have not been able to connect with the other mentees on a personal level in the same ways I have experienced with Molly.

Recommendations

In our own experiences and in the available research about formal mentoring programs, setting standards and having specific goals and expectations are commonly noted as important components of a mentoring relationship. Most scholarship reviewed for this article noted the need for guidelines and training to help support the effectiveness of formal mentoring relationships. We believe that it is imperative for mentoring programs to set up success for participants as much as possible. We are not, however, suggesting that a mentoring program needs to be so rigid as to be without flexibility to adapt to different personalities, goals, and situations.

Professional Guidelines

A mentoring program should develop a set of professional guidelines to support the effectiveness of the program. Shannon Martin and Sarah Sifers explain that “structured programs with established guidelines often result in better outcomes” (940). Guidelines might include an operational definition of mentoring, a set of core values or beliefs about mentoring that anchor the program, a list of objectives, a detailed description of the mentoring program format (i.e., traditional or alternative format) with mentor and mentee roles clearly defined, a set of key skills necessary for mentor and mentee roles, a detailed description of the stages of the mentoring relationship, suggestions for how participants can be involved in the matching process, and a list of mentoring best practices.

The IWCA has identified some guidelines for the MMP. When the IWCA first introduced the MMP in 2011, the program’s goal was to pair “in-crisis writing center professionals with geographically proximal colleagues for ongoing mutual mentoring and collaboration” (“Year in Review”). The 2013 MMP call for participants did not explicitly mention mentor/mentee roles but communicated that the program had a flexible structure: “Mentors and mentees will define the parameters of their relationship, including how and how often to communicate” (Jordan). The 2017 call for participants built on this statement by communicating a traditional top-down format for the mentoring program: “The Mentor Match Program is designed to support new writing center professionals by pairing them with more experienced directors.” This information provided some guidance when beginning our mentoring partnership, but having clearer professional guidelines would have improved our experience in the program. In particular, we believe that the top-down approach

and mutual mentoring language (where mentee and mentor are asked to collaboratively coach one another) was a bit confusing and impeded our understanding of the program’s purpose.

Training Program

Orientation or training for participants of a mentoring program sets consistent expectations for all participants (Cranwell-Ward et al.). Jane Cranwell-Ward et al. suggest that orientations should help participants understand that the mentoring relationship is more about developing potential rather than sharing or providing answers to problems. Orientations can also help participants understand where to start and how to end mentoring relationships. Since mentoring programs are typically formal and the match is assisted by a third party, “an initial orientation event might be used for the mentoring dyad to uncover points of similarity” (Wanberg et al. 421). Martin and Sifers claim that outcomes are improved when the sponsoring agency provides ongoing support/training and specifies a goal for frequency of contacts because training leads to “greater mentor efficacy,” increasing number of contacts and decreasing obstacles to relationship building (Martin and Sifers 940-941).

The content discussed in a training program should include the professional guidelines of the mentoring program and other topics that either permeate or complement the professional guidelines. In Allen and Mark Poteet’s research, the authors noted the potential for “training programs to complement the selection of mentors” and to ensure that “mentors have the levels of proficiency [e.g. communication skills, ability to establish trust, flexibility]” to support mentees (68-69). Additionally, “implementing formal mentoring programs that train participants on emotional intelligence concepts may help to ensure that the emotional needs of formal mentoring program participants are met” (Chun et al. 445). This may be especially important because many mentors self-nominate and may not assess their communication and coaching skills (Allen and Poteet 60). A training program should prepare mentors and mentees to align expectations, assess understanding, address diversity, foster independence, and promote professional development (Allen and Poteet; Gandhi and Johnson).

Beyond the interactive and interpersonal aspects of the mentoring relationship, a training program should discuss the logistics of developing a successful mentoring relationship. Understanding guidelines, scheduling interactions, and troubleshooting technology are a few important topics that should be discussed before a mentoring partnership begins. In our experience, we discussed the frequency of

interactions, scheduling, and technology by email in our first meeting and then again by video in our second meeting. However, two years into our mentoring partnership, we shared that those initial interactions were a little awkward for both of us because although we had “good intentions” (Rowan), we did not know what we were doing or expected to do (Darwin and Palmer).

Mentoring program administrators could employ a variety of pedagogical methods in a training program. For example, role-playing scenarios could be provided to practice providing feedback, how to allow mentoring partners to make their own mistakes, and thinking through ways to receive feedback (Allen and Poteet 70). Martin and Sifer state that providing opportunities for participants to consider how to problem-solve may lead to better mentoring outcomes. A training program that addresses professional guidelines and key skills for a successful mentoring relationship better prepares those involved, which possibly leads to higher retention of mentoring partnerships. A training program also saves mentors and mentees time by creating less ambiguity and confusion, which is important because many WCPs already struggle to find time within their busy schedules to participate in a mentoring program. And, finally, a training program helps professionalize the mentoring program, potentially making it more attractive to future mentors and mentees. Making the training optional could be a way to avoid having too many required components or formalizing interactions too much (Hardesty et al.). Finally, by creating a formal training program, standardization may be achieved which will validate mentoring as an academic activity.

Resources

The third component of a successful mentoring program is access to resources prior to and throughout the mentoring relationship. Resources might include a handbook provided to mentors and mentees, training materials, discussion questions, or a curated collection of external print and electronic resources. The IWCA MMP provided a suggested reading list for mentors, and bibliographies can be useful if participants have adequate time to read the selected literature. Other resources may include webinars about mentoring that participants can access throughout their involvement in the program, online support groups for mentors to discuss mentoring successes and challenges, and discussion forums for participants. Additionally, resources about the importance of active listening, types of successful mentor/mentee behaviors, styles of influencing, and how to receive feedback could be provided if they were not incorporated into

trainings/orientations (Cramwell-Ward et al.). Since most mentoring within writing center studies occurs across institutions and often across geographical areas and time zones, having resources about the unique nature of e-mentoring could also be useful (Cramwell-Ward et al.). Additionally, in times of in-person restrictions due to COVID-19 e-mentoring may be the only option that WCPs have available to interact with mentoring partners. One of the resources we think may be crucial to improve the success of a mentoring program is to take up the concept of roadmaps to determine why participants are seeking professional support and how they can build a mosaic of people to help guide them to their goals (Montgomery 2). A document like this could help participants learn more about each other, which has been shown to lead to more effective discussions and a stronger sense of a personal relationship (Montgomery 2).

Disciplinary Recommendations

Given our own experiences and the lack of available research and scholarship about mentoring for WCPs, we believe our discipline must do more to support WCPs. The range of knowledge a WCP needs to be effective is vast, and as Bell claims, the best support may be a mentor who can offer perspective and friendship during the day-to-day experiences of writing center work. The IWCA took an important step in supporting WCPs by creating the MMP in 2011; this program model frames learning as top-down and pairs new WCPs with more experienced directors. Literature suggests that this hierarchical approach can be an effective model when new directors enter with little experience, helping them feel less isolated and building their professional confidence (Hardesty et al.). While literature also argues that a hierarchical approach may preserve undesirable power structures (Angeli et al.; Darwin; Kunselman et al.; Rowan; Stalker), institutional differences in most WCPs mentoring partnerships allow for a more collaborative partnership (Geller and Denny; Rowan). Additionally, alternative mentoring models offer participants a broader range of mentoring partnerships through more group approaches (Darwin; Darwin and Palmer; Searby et al.). Rather than firmly offering and supporting one approach, the MMP might offer participants more options and extend its impact through diverse pairing options, such as pairing new WCPs together or helping participants build mentoring mosaics.

The MMP model warrants a more robust conversation about professional mentoring within our discipline. The conversations should include program guidelines, processes, assessment, and logistical topics (e.g., geography, sponsored visits to bring mentors and

mentees together, financial sponsorship, and participation costs). These conversations would help support the development of a strong, systematic mentoring program for WCPs: "When proper consideration is afforded to the design of a program, it is possible for formal mentoring programs to provide the same benefits as informal relationships" (Weinberg and Lankau 1530). With our field having over 50% of our directors and staff from non-writing center backgrounds, mentoring can be used to "support recruitment and retention of individuals broadly" (Montgomery 6). Mentoring can help professionals who are new or transitioning into the field to navigate "the gap between where they are currently and the role(s) and/or position(s) to which they aspire" (Montgomery 6). While we know these conversations are starting to occur, the immediacy of addressing these concerns suggests we need to place more attention on WCPs' mentoring opportunities.

Understanding the role that IWCA MMP can play in making WCP mentoring successful is an important consideration. The benefits of a successful mentoring program are immense, leading to improved outcomes for WCPs of all levels of experience, and ultimately, trained mentors model professional behaviors that are perpetuated throughout the discipline (Gandhi and Johnson). A mentoring program is an investment in our professionals and our discipline.

Conclusion

The benefits of mentoring are commonly accepted, even while the complexities of why mentoring is beneficial are still being researched. In the end, writing centers as a discipline need a mentoring program because of the isolationary nature of our work, where we may be the only person on our campus or at our institution doing writing center work, and because of the unique nature of our positions, which though closely connected to other writing program administrators are not the same. Without a formal mentoring program, WCPs will likely go without writing center mentors, especially professionals who are women and minorities. Because there is a need for third party assistance to foster mentoring relationships, programs, like IWCA Mentor Match, need to understand their responsibility within the process and to the field of writing center studies to help make these relationships as successful as possible.

Works Cited

- Allen, Tammy D., et al. "Career Benefits Associated with Mentoring for Protégés: A Meta-Analysis." *Journal of Applied Psychology*, vol. 89, no. 1, 2004, pp. 127-136.
- Allen, Tammy D., et al. "The Role of Interpersonal Comfort in Mentoring Relationships." *Journal of Career Development*, vol. 31, no. 3, 2005, pp. 155-169.
- Allen, Tammy D., and Mark L. Poteet. "Developing Effective Mentoring Relationships: Strategies from the Mentor's Viewpoint." *The Career Development Quarterly*, vol. 48, no. 1, 1999, pp. 59-73.
- Angelique, Holly, et al. "Mentors and Muses: New Strategies for Academic Success." *Innovative Higher Education*, vol. 26, no. 3, 2002, pp. 195-209.
- Archer, Arlene, and Shabnam Parker. "Transitional and Transformational Spaces: Mentoring Young Academics through Writing Centres." *Education as Change*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2016, pp. 43-58.
- Baugh, S. Gayle, and Ellen A. Fagenson-Eland. "Formal Mentoring Programs: A 'Poor Cousin' to Informal Relationships?" *The Handbook of Mentoring at Work: Theory, Research, and Practice*, edited by Belle R. Ragins and Kathy E. Kram, Sage Publications, 2007, pp. 249-271.
- Bell, Katrina. "Chapter 13: Our Professional Descendants: Preparing Graduate Writing Consultants." *How We Teach Writing Tutors: A WLN Digital Edited Collection*, edited by Karen G. Johnson and Ted Roggenbuck, WLN: A Journal of Writing Center Scholarship, 2019, <https://wlnjournal.org/digitaleditedcollection1/Bell.html>
- Blackhurst, Anne. "Effects of Mentoring on the Employment Experiences and Career Satisfaction of Women Student Affairs Administrators." *NASPA Journal*, vol. 37, no. 4, 2000, pp. 573-586.
- Bozeman, Barry, and Mary K. Feeney. "Toward a Useful Theory of Mentoring: A Conceptual Analysis and Critique." *Administration & Society*, vol. 39, no. 6, 2007, pp. 719-739.
- Buckley, Liz. (1999). "Distance Mentoring: The Mentoring Is in the E-mail." *Writing Lab Newsletter*, vol. 23, no. 10, pp. 1-5.
- Bynum, Yvette P. "The Power of Informal Mentoring." *Education*, vol. 136, no. 1, Fall 2015, pp. 69-73.
- Caswell, Nicole I., et al. "A Glimpse into the Working Lives of New Writing Center Directors." *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 66, no. 1, 2014, pp. A3-A8.
- Chun, Jae U., et al. "Emotional Intelligence and Trust in Formal Mentoring Programs." *Group & Organization Management*, vol. 35, no. 4, 2010, p. 421.
- Cranwell-Ward, Jane, et al. *Mentoring: A Henley Review of Best Practice*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.

- Darwin, Ann. "Critical Reflections on Mentoring in Work Settings." *Adult Education Quarterly*, vol. 50, no. 3, 2000, pp. 197-211.
- Darwin, Ann, and Edward Palmer. "Mentoring Circles in Higher Education." *Higher Education Research & Development*, vol. 28, no. 2, 2009, pp. 125-136.
- De Janasz, Suzanne C., et al. "Mentor Networks and Career Success: Lessons for Turbulent Times [and Executive Commentary]." *The Academy of Management Executive (1993-2005)*, vol. 17, no. 4, 2003, pp. 78-93. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/4166008.
- Ensher, Ellen A., and Susan Elaine Murphy. "E-mentoring: Next-Generation Research Strategies and Suggestions." *The Handbook of Mentoring at Work: Theory, Research, and Practice*, edited by Belle R. Ragins and Kathy E. Kram, Sage Publications, 2007, pp. 299-322.
- Ervin, Christopher. "Non-Tenure-Eligible Writing Center Directors and Successful Mentoring of Undergraduate Peer Writing Tutor-Researchers." *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 66, no. 1, 2014, pp. A8-A15.
- Gandhi, Monica, and Mallory Johnson. "Creating More Effective Mentors: Mentoring the Mentor." *AIDS and Behavior*, vol. 20, no. S2, 2016, pp. 294-303.
- Geller, Anne E., and Harry Denny. "Of Ladybugs, Low Status, and Loving the Job: Writing Center Professionals Navigating their Careers." *The Writing Center Journal*, vol. 33, no. 1, 2013, pp. 96-129.
- Haggard, Dana L., et al. "Who is a Mentor? A Review of Evolving Definitions and Implications for Research." *Journal of Management*, vol. 37, no. 1, 2011, pp. 280-304.
- Hardesty, Larry, et al. "Nurturing a Generation of Leaders: The College Library Directors' Mentor Program." *Portal: Libraries and the Academy*, vol. 17, no. 1, 2017, pp. 33-49.
- Healy, Dave. "Writing Center Directors: An Emerging Portrait of the Profession." *WPA*, vol. 18, no. 3, 1995, pp. 26-43.
- Jordan, Kerri. "IWCA's New Mentor Matching Program." Received by Molly Rentscher, 10 Sept. 2013.
- Koster, Josephine A. "Administration Across the Curriculum: Or Practicing What We Preach." *The Center Will Hold*, edited by Michael A. Pemberton and Joyce Kinhead, Utah State University Press, 2003, pp. 151-65.
- Kunselman, Julie, et al. "Mentoring in Academe: Models for Facilitating Academic Development." *Journal of Criminal Justice Education*, vol. 14, no. 1, 2003, pp. 17-35.
- Lukas, Ivo. "The Importance of Mentorship." *Huffington Post*, 02 May 2013, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/the-importance-of-mentorship_b_3179215. Accessed 02 Jan. 2020.
- Lyman, Alex. "Why Mentoring Others Has Helped Me." *Huffington Post*, 31 May 2016, [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/why-mentoring-others-has-b_10214756](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/why-mentoring-others-has-helped-me_b_10214756). Accessed 02 Jan. 2020.
- Martin, Shannon M., and Sarah K. Sifers. "An Evaluation of Factors Leading to Mentor Satisfaction with the Mentoring Relationship." *Children and Youth Services Review*, vol. 34, no. 5, 2012, pp. 940-945.
- Montgomery, Beronda L. "Mapping a Mentoring Roadmap and Developing a Supportive Network for Strategic Career Advancement." *SAGE Open*, vol. 7, no. 2, 2017, pp. 1-13.
- Mohrbacher, Carol. "A Year and a Half Later: A Humble Reflection || St. Cloud State University's Writing Center Administration Certificate Program." *Connecting Writing Centers Across Border*, 9 Apr. 2018, <https://www.wlnjournal.org/blog/2018/04/a-year-and-a-half-later/#more-3428>. Accessed 15 Jan. 2020.
- Murray, Margo, and Marna A. Owen. *Beyond the Myths and Magic of Mentoring: How to Facilitate an Effective Mentoring Program*. Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1991.
- Ragins, Belle R., and Kathy E. Kram. *The Handbook of Mentoring at Work: Theory, Research, and Practice*. Sage Publications, 2007.
- Rowan, Karen. "All the Best Intentions: Graduate Student Administrative Professional Development in Practice." *The Writing Center Journal*, vol. 29, no. 1, 2009, pp. 11-48.
- Searby, Linda, et al. "Climbing the Ladder, Holding the Ladder: The Mentoring Experiences of Higher Education Female Leaders." *Advancing Women in Leadership*, vol. 35, 2015, p. 98.
- Solansky, Stephanie T. "The Evaluation of Two Key Leadership Development Program Components: Leadership Skills Assessment and Leadership Mentoring." *The Leadership Quarterly*, vol. 21, no. 4, 2010, pp. 675-681.
- Stalker, Joyce. "Athene in Academe: Women Mentoring Women in the Academy." *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, vol. 13, no. 5, 1994, p. 361.
- "Summer Institute Leadership Track." *International Writing Centers Association*, Accessed 15 Jan. 2020, <http://writingcenters.org/summer-institute>.
- Wanberg, Connie R., et al. "Mentor and Protégé Predictors and Outcomes of Mentoring in a Formal Mentoring Program." *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, vol. 69, no. 3, 2006, pp. 410-423.
- Weinberg, Frankie J., and Melenie J. Lankau. "Formal Mentoring Programs: A Mentor-Centric and Longitudinal Analysis." *Journal of Management*, vol. 37, no. 6, 2011, p. 1527.
- Wright, Cheryl A., and Scott D. Wright. "The Role of Mentors in the Career Development of Young Professionals." *Family Relations*, vol. 36, no. 2, 1987, p. 204.

“Year in Review.” *International Writing Centers Association*, 8
Feb. 2011,
<https://writingcenters.wordpress.com/2011>

