

# **The Perceived Influence of Mentoring Activities on the Professional Development of Junior Faculty at Two Institutions of Higher Education**

**Keenya G. Mosley, PhD**  
**Assistant Professor of Education**  
School of Teacher Education  
Savannah State University  
Savannah, Georgia

**Emily M. Crawford, PhD**  
**Professor of Marketing**  
School of Business  
Southern Wesleyan University  
Charleston, South Carolina

**Sharon White Johnson, PhD**  
**Assistant Professor of Management**  
Department of Management and Marketing  
College of Business  
Grambling State University  
Grambling, Louisiana

**LaVelle Hendricks, EdD**  
**Associate Professor of Counseling**  
Department of Psychology, Counseling, and Special Education  
College of Education and Human Services  
Texas A&M University-Commerce  
Commerce, TX

**Willie Edwards, PhD**  
**Associate Professor of Sociology**  
Department of Sociology and Criminal Justice  
College of Humanities, Social Sciences, and Arts  
Texas A&M University-Commerce  
Commerce, TX

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## **Abstract**

This study examined mentoring activities and whether junior faculty perceived the activities influenced their professional development. Research previously conducted is on the outcomes of mentoring activities for junior faculty at public Historically Black Colleges and Universities

(HBCUs). Therefore, this study used descriptive statistics to review activities and perceptions by junior faculty as it relates to mentoring. The findings revealed professional service involvement, aspects of teaching and scholarly activities can have a positive effect on the professional development of junior faculty in institutions of higher education.

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Professional development in higher education has become a master tool for improving faculty development, especially for junior faculty in academia (Cramer, 2006; Leslie, Lingard, & Whyte, 2005; Sorcinelli, 1994). Professional development in this sense refers to programmatic and systematic efforts designed to bring changes into higher education through faculty by way of their attitudes, beliefs and instructional pedagogy (Guskey, 2002). Over the years, scholars in educational research have espoused the benefits of faculty development in a variety of forms including, but not limited to mentoring, collegiality and other faculty development activities that have provided career enhancement and psychosocial functions among faculty in higher education. More so, mentoring, whether formalized or informal can be the key component in assisting with collegial relationships, faculty networks, and gender issues among faculty.

Mentoring as a form of faculty development often helps to build relationships among faculty especially across disciplines. Leslie et al. (2005) posited that mentoring as a form of professional development has provided an avenue for junior faculty to establish collegial relationships, especially with senior faculty. Further, if implemented across disciplines, mentoring can be most beneficial for institutional change, especially through collaboration and networking (Wasburn, 2007). Not only has mentoring influenced the building of relationships among faculty and institutional changes, it has also been instrumental in attenuating gender barriers among faculty in higher education (Quinlan, 1999).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the study was to investigate the impact of mentoring relationships on the professional development of junior faculty. The following research questions were addressed:

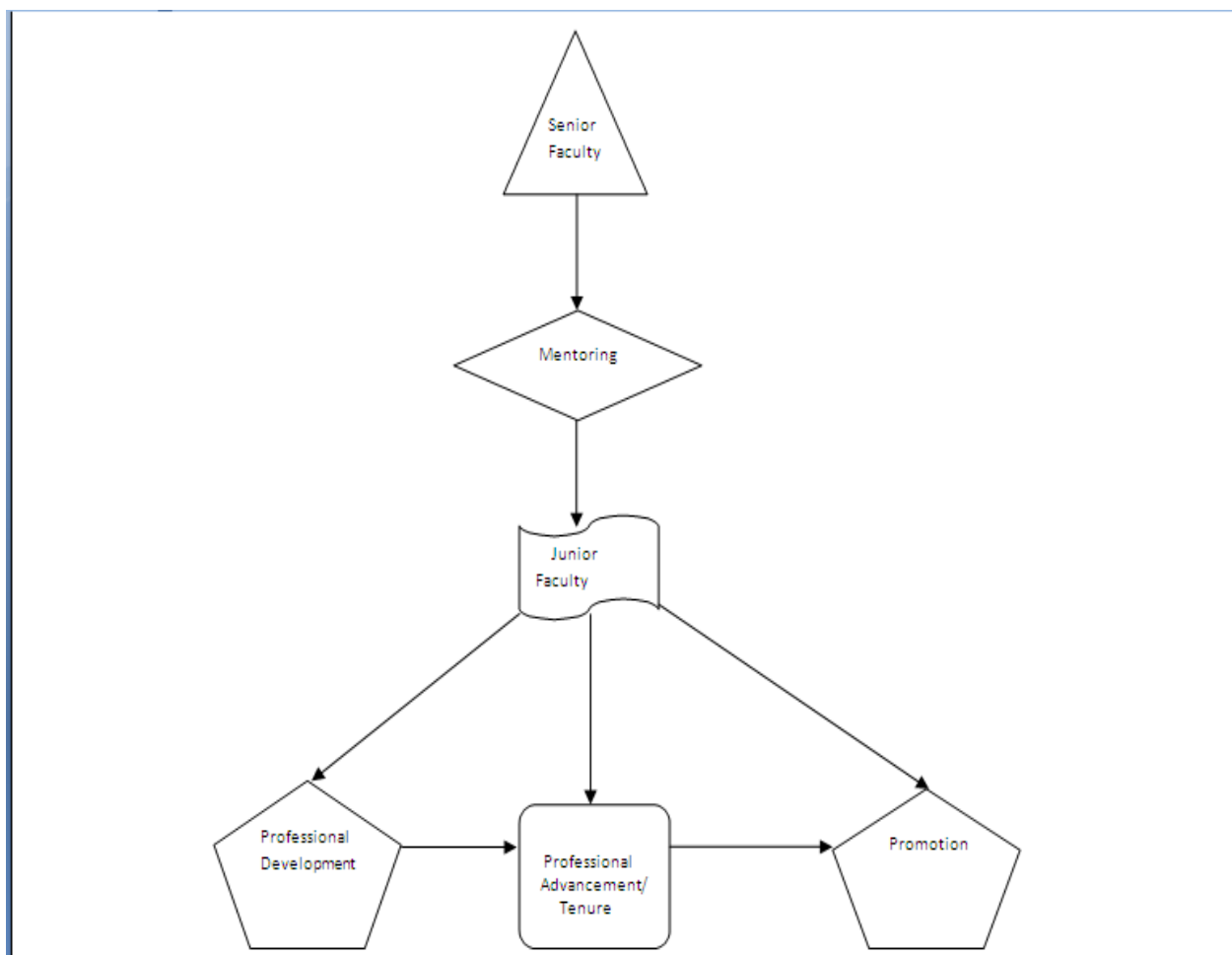
1. What are the primary forms of mentoring available for junior faculty?
2. What forms of mentoring have been perceived to be most helpful by junior faculty?
3. How do academic administrators support mentoring activities at their institution?

### **Conceptual Framework of Social Capital Theory**

The conceptual framework is based on the Social Capital Theory advanced by Lin (2001). It is the production of human capital and economic profit as a result of the investment of education and training that inherently produces skills and knowledge that involves individuals investing in social ties to access resources of others. As a result, this theory best describes the process that occurs in mentoring. Hezlett and Gibson (2007) concurred that the interest in mentoring has expanded because of an increased need for continuous learning, reliance on

informal learning, on-the-job development, and an emphasis on employee responsibility for career management.

These elements have created a demand for employees to direct their own development and for organizations to provide tools and resources to support employees' efforts. Informal mentoring, which evolves as people get to know each other on their own, and formal mentoring, which is arranged through organizational intervention, are means by which experienced individuals can offer more junior colleagues career-related support and assistance. Furthermore, Seibert, Kraimer, and Liden (2001) proposed that career mentoring is one of the key variables mediating the relationship between the characteristics of social networks to include weak ties, structural holes, contacts in other functions, and contacts at higher levels while producing favorable career outcomes.



*Figure 1.* Conceptual framework of Social Capital Theory.

The conceptual framework is used to measure the mentoring activities of junior faculty at HBCUs. The mentoring activities used are not limited to collegiality support in the areas of teaching, research, and service; administrative support; and form of mentoring.

## **Mentoring Activities**

Some institutions have programs that are designed to pair faculty with mentees whereas other institutions utilize a more informal approach. Nevertheless, both methods have been effective through the use of senior faculty assisting junior faculty with preparation required for advanced opportunities in higher education. Tang and Chamberlain (2003) posited that mostly professors who possess high levels of organizational-based self-esteem, skills and experiences are capable of mentoring junior faculty. More importantly, senior faculty at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) should mentor junior faculty by providing them with tools to be effective and successful (Perna, 2001). For example, mentors should remain current on industry trends and literature to provide contemporary resources to junior faculty (Brightman, 2006).

Senior faculty should be formally trained and compensated for their roles as mentors (Greene et al., 2008). Generating scholarly publication can be a challenging task; however, senior faculty can be instrumental in identifying strategies for junior faculty to persist. Ultimately institutions can benefit from formal mentoring programs when junior faculty experiences a smoother process in achieving promotion and tenure and continue in their positions for an extended period of time (Tillman, 2001). Some institutions have engaged in support groups for the purpose of assisting junior faculty with scholarly writing. Research circles are resourceful for meeting this objective by incorporating an interdisciplinary community of scholars that assist faculty with writing and encourage them to take risks in writing (Gillespie et al., 2005).

Faculty mentoring programs can positively impact salary, promotion and tenure for the junior faculty who taught finance courses. In Melicher's (2000) study, having at least one faculty mentor as a variable was critical in explaining satisfaction with promotion and tenure for the respondents. Melicher found it was important for institutions to provide research and teaching mentors for their junior faculty to increase retention and satisfaction. Nevertheless, tenured full professors can be helpful in developing positive mentoring programs to improve teaching effectiveness and research productivity (Tang & Chamberlain, 2003).

Administrators should support senior faculty who perform mentoring activities at their institutions. This is by far one of the most important aspects of implementation on any campus in higher education. Administrators should be proactive in their support of junior and senior faculty collegial interactions for the purpose of mentorships (Wilen, Springer, Ambrosino, & White, 2006). While some institutions may have top down initiatives for faculty development, it is critical that all institutions employ some form of mentoring activities for their junior faculty. In particular, HBCU administrators should commit to developing scholarly junior faculty (Perna, 2001).

Well prepared junior faculty strengthened the scholarly image of collegial interaction and engagement (Gillespie et al., 2005). In addition collaboration influenced the climate to value scholarship activities and outcomes (Cramer, 2006). Ambrose, Therese, and Norman (2005) alleged collegiality was found to be far more important than any other element to positively impact junior faculty. As such junior faculty's interest in teaching, writing and executing their ideas can become invaluable to their longevity at an institution. The social networks junior faculty are able to build, as a result of mentoring, can be advantageous to their future in higher education. Moody (2004) employed mentoring has been described as a challenging process but the introductions to valuable connections and networks are worth the work.

Zhou and Volkwein (2004) averred collaboration among faculty on research projects can retain and attract junior faculty to institutions. There are professional benefits that can be obtained by junior faculty as a result of successful mentoring relationships. Some of the benefits include professional networking opportunities; an increased number of publications; better research collaboration; guidance on how to balance teaching, research, and service; and tenure and promotion support (Tillman, 2001).

## **Methodology**

### **Sample**

This study investigated the impact of mentoring relationships for junior faculty through the use of quantitative processes. The population for this study included tenure track junior faculty at two public four-year HBCUs in the Southeast region of the United States. Tenured track junior faculty was defined as persons with 5 years or less of teaching experience. The population for this study derived from 100 tenure track faculty. The use of a web-based survey allowed quick access to junior faculty at two four-year institutions in the Southeast region of the United States.

The quantitative results were gathered from the use of online surveys. The online survey instrument was sent to 100 faculty via email and from this a total of 52 were returned.

### **Instrumentation**

The online survey used for this study consisted of four sections and a total of 46 items. Section 1 was the background information form which asked demographic information. Section 2 asked primarily about the various forms of mentoring activities followed by section three that asked about the participants perception of their experiences based on the type of mentoring activities the participants felt impacted their overall professional advancement. Section four asked about the nature of mentoring activities.

### **Reliability and Validity**

The instrument used in the study was surveys for junior faculty. The data collected from the surveys provided the means for gauging the trustworthiness of the responses. As a result, conclusions drawn from the statistics provided the information needed to produce a higher level of reliability and validity. The Cronbach Alpha reliability for the survey instrument was .904. Nunnally (1978, p. 245) recommended that “instruments used in basic research have reliability of about .70 or better.”

## Results

The findings for research question one demonstrated that junior faculty was very involved in mentoring activities at their institutions. However, based on the response rate, some junior faculties are more involved with specific activities than others.

### **Research Question 1: What is the primary form of mentoring for junior faculty?**

The data collected to address this research question revealed the following:

1. Participants were mainly mentored by full professors by a response rate of 58.8% as compared to 25.5% who responded they were mentored by an associate professor. In addition, 39% responded they have been participating in a mentoring program for at least three years or more.
2. Participants primarily participated in a combination of formal and informal mentoring program that involved either one-on-one mentoring or group mentoring.
3. Most respondents were mentored by faculty with full professor rank although some may have been involved in mentoring activities from faculty who were associate professors.

The findings for research question one indicated that junior faculty positively perceived mentoring at their institutions. In essence, junior faculty perceived senior faculty as an attribute and willing to assist them in their professional development. However, the results show in spite of the fact that 33% of 52 respondents were males, men predominantly perceived the mentoring activities at their institutions as favorable for junior faculty.

### **Question 2: What form of mentoring has been perceived to be most helpful by junior faculty?**

The data collected to address research question two revealed the following:

1. Junior faculty perceived their mentors were in contact with them on a regular basis through various forms of contact. The amount of accessibility participants have to mentoring activities can play a significant role in the overall impact of mentoring. Out of 52 participants, 31% responded that mentoring was accessible to them.
2. Male junior faculty perceived the advice their mentors provided on service learning opportunities were more helpful than the female participants.
3. Junior faculty perceived the plan of professional development recommended by their mentors was helpful. This seems to be an area that most participants believed they were in need of. In spite of the fact that 43.1% responded they discussed professional development, 29.4% responded they wished their mentors had discussed more of it. More so, 31% of the respondents agreed the plan of professional development was helpful as recommended by their mentors. Also, males returned the highest response for this item.

The findings for research question two indicated that junior faculty perceived their mentors helped them by advising them on a plan for professional development. This survey item returned a response of 31%. The findings also show that the frequency of contact with mentors correlate to why strategies for career success would positively influence the respondents' perception of their professional advancement. The more contact with the mentor who provides a plan for professional development to include strategies for success in their careers, the more likely the participant will enhance their career paths.

### **Research Question 3: How do administrators support mentoring activities at their institution?**

The male respondents had the largest percentage on their responses in which administrators communicated the importance of mentoring, provided adequate resources, and encouraged mentoring activities for junior faculty. This response indicates the perception in how administrators support mentoring activities at the participants' respective institutions.

The findings in this study have demonstrated the perceptions of the participants who are junior faculty. The section summarized the results earlier described within the framework of the three questions. The following discussion section will provide further explanation and recommendations based on the results and the literature reviewed to conduct the study.

### **Discussion**

The study found that as a whole the participants were satisfied with the impact from the relationship with their mentor as it relates to their professional advancement. The study also found that more than half of the participants felt mentoring was valued at their institutions while an even larger percent felt their mentoring relationship positively impacted their overall professional advancement. Benson, Morahan, Sachdeva, and Richman (2002) revealed through their evaluation that both junior and senior faculty strongly preferred voluntary to mandatory participation. Their study reported that junior and senior faculty equally believed the time spent during the mentoring activities was valuable and had a positive effect on their professional life.

### **Conclusion**

Professional development can provide assistance for junior faculty to successfully progress through the pre-tenure process to attain tenure and promotion. Without support from senior faculty, the task set ahead of junior faculty is more challenging. As the workforce anticipates losing senior faculty who are eligible for retirement, it becomes more important to provide professional development to junior faculty to replace the current professoriate. Academia should provide a work environment that is welcoming for junior faculty to be challenged and inspired to grow beyond tenure (Green, et al., 2008). As such junior faculty should be able to

maximize their opportunities in academia through mentorships with senior faculty. Ultimately, the university and the faculty at large will benefit from such collaboration.

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