Positively supporting women faculty in the academy through a novel mentoring community model

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to explore the ways in which an innovative higher education women’s faculty mentoring community model fosters supportive networking and career-life balance. The secondary goal is to better understand the factors that both promote and limit retention of women faculty at a large, metropolitan university.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper examines data from the survey component of an applied research project on understanding and supporting the complex processes of women faculty’s pathways toward self-defined success. Adopting a mixed method research approach, this manuscript focuses on the survey questions related to four key issues related to retention: mentor experiences, gender-based obstacles, a sense of support and community, and goal attainment. In addition to quantitatively examining shifts in perceptions between pre- and post-survey Likert scale questions, the authors performed a qualitative analysis of the supplemental open-ended questions, utilizing a social constructionist lens to further understand perceived influences of the mentoring community on these issues.

Findings – The findings revealed qualitatively important shifts in increased awareness surrounding mentoring, gender-based obstacles, interpersonal support, and career-life choices, offering critical insight into the intangible, and thus often difficult to capture, forms of support a mentoring community model can offer women faculty. Findings also reveal how definitions of success can be integrated into community mentoring models to support retention and empowering women faculty.

Research limitations/implications – This study is limited by its exploratory nature with one mentoring community cohort. Ongoing implementations are in place to increase the participant size and further test the mentoring model, while future research is encouraged to implement and expand the research to additional higher education institutions.

Practical implications – This research offers a model that can be implemented across higher education institutions for all faculty, along with offering insight into particular points that can be emphasized to increase perceptions of support, offering concrete mentoring options.

Originality/value – This paper contributes to the advancement of mentoring models, helping to address concerns for better supporting and advancing women faculty, with implications for further supporting marginalized faculty. It offers insight into the ways in which a mentoring model can help to address key issues of retention. Additionally, analyzing quantitative and qualitative findings concurrently allowed for insight into areas that may otherwise be overlooked due to seemingly contradictory or non-significant statistical findings.

Keywords Mentoring, Career development, Success, Empowerment, Career-life balance, Women faculty

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Women’s perceptions of departmental and institutional support critically influence their decisions to stay or leave higher education institutions, in turn affecting the retention of women faculty. While prior research offers insight into practical models for supporting faculty through mentoring, it also suggests multiple issues with traditional mentoring models in supporting women faculty. Even with increasing attempts to innovatively
address such concerns regarding traditional mentoring models, gaps remain that reflect
tendencies to stay grounded in traditional mentoring structures and/or field-specific
practices. Accordingly, we looked to synthesize innovative mentoring suggestions to create
an alternative mentoring model, grounded in addressing areas important to retention of
women faculty: mentoring, gender-based obstacles, interpersonal support, and career-life
choices. Our exploratory study thus examined the research question:

*RQ1.* How does an innovative mentoring model influence perceptions of points of
importance to retention for women in higher education?

Based in a conceptual framework of “community mentoring,” our innovative community
mentoring model integrated semi-structured large group and open small group meetings,
combining multiple mentors, horizontal (peer) models, networks and community support,
and vertical mentorship. Uniquely, we used a multi-tiered structure to incorporate formal
and informal mentoring elements, emphasizing individual, holistic expertise over
institutional positioning as the groundwork for our mentoring model. We found that
participants perceived increased: critical expectations for mentoring; communal
awareness of gender obstacles, yet empowerment to address them or support others
address them; sense of social support; and confidence in their prioritization of career-life
goals. We conclude by considering suggestions for future mentoring communities and
research on women faculty’s retention.

**Literature review**

Mentoring has been shown to have numerous positive benefits in the realm of academia and
beyond, including the two primary functions of career advancement and psychosocial
support. Mentoring contributes to increasing self-confidence and self-esteem; personal
satisfaction; competence; and for both mentors and mentees, further exposure that can lead
to professional networking, development, and respect from colleagues (Brinia and Psoni
2018; Chesler and Chesler, 2002; Darwin and Palmer, 2009; Lumpkin, 2011; Meschitti and
Lawton Smith, 2017; Wasburn, 2007). As faculty networking is critical to timely career
progression and development, mentoring has also been identified as a strategy to help
address gender inequalities in higher education (Chandler, 1996; Wasburn, 2007; see also
Dobele et al., 2014 on gender inequalities in higher education). In higher education,
mentorship can increase research funding and publication rates (Darwin and Palmer, 2009),
oftentimes critical to faculty advancement. Not only have women been shown to provide
greater guidance through mentoring, but it can offer camaraderie and support related to
particular issues women faculty and women faculty of color face in academic institutions
(Chandler, 1996; Wasburn, 2007).

In relation to the particular obstacles women can face in higher education, past research
has identified an almost greater number of issues with the traditional dyadic mentoring
model[1]. When the term “mentoring” is used, many think of the traditional model, in which
a mentor, identified as having greater experiences and knowledge to impart, is paired
with a mentee (protégé), who is often younger, earlier in their career and seen as lacking
experience. However, research has recognized that such a developmental pairing is based in
a male standard, where one-on-one guidance and advice can lead to paternalistic power
dynamics (Chandler, 1996; Wasburn, 2007). Further, the linear career patterns supported
through a dyadic mentorship may not reflect the current setting of higher education
(Lipton, 2017) – nor, for that matter, women’s experience in academia and complex “career
and life development” (Powell and Mainiero, 1992, p. 215). In today’s knowledge economy
and neoliberal socio-economic context, higher education is increasingly competitive, often
based on earning significant research dollars and a mentality of publishing early and often
(Chandler, 1996; Darwin and Palmer, 2009; de Janasz and Sullivan, 2004; Lipton, 2017;
Many academic tracks are less stable (Darwin and Palmer 2009), which can generate power dynamics and additional issues if one feels reliant on a singular mentor relationship.

Research on retention and reasons why women leave their institutions reveal ongoing, distinct obstacles faced by women in higher education. Women perceive greater social isolation, heavier teaching loads and less support for research (Aguirre, 2000; Johnsrud and Des Jarlais, 1994). Beyond these are issues generally referred to as the “chilly climate” (August and Waltman, 2004, p. 179). A primary reason women state for leaving a university is the issue of respect, as they often feel that their work is trivialized, that they do not receive the same rewards or credit as men for their work, less institutional and departmental support, and personal discrimination (Aguirre, 2000; Johnsrud and Des Jarlais, 1994; Wenzel and Hollenshead, 1998; Whittaker et al., 2015). All of this can lead to women feeling as though they do not belong, on top of less representation at higher ranks for women to associate with or aspire toward (Dobele et al., 2014; Johnsrud and Des Jarlais, 1994; Whittaker et al., 2015). Summarily, women have had “higher rates of attrition from the academy than men both pre- and posttenure,” with satisfaction noted as a “crucial component of retention” for women faculty (August and Waltman, 2004, p. 178). Critically, women act on perceptions – whether disparities can be objectively measured is arguably less important than how women perceive the situation (Johnsrud and Des Jarlais, 1994).

Interactions also occur between gender roles, identities, and mentoring, with social norms and stereotypical gender roles reinforced through such pairings. Women have traditionally been excluded from informal mentoring, due to spaces where mentoring takes place and concerns for the “gossip-factor,” or other tensions that can arise in cross-gender relationships (Wasburn, 2007, p. 59). More broadly, people often select younger versions of themselves for mentoring purposes, as they feel they can help this individual the most; however, this can leave women and women of color at a disadvantage since academia has traditionally been a white male space (Chandler, 1996; Meschitti and Lawton Smith, 2017). Even in the case of more formal mentor pairings, advanced women can experience stressors due to feeling that they: are tokens, need to represent every woman, are over-stretched based in the lack of senior women representation, or may perpetuate stereotypes of the woman as the caregiver (Chandler, 1996; Wasburn, 2007). In part, it remains that there are generally less senior women due to slower career progression (Dobele et al., 2014; Gardiner et al., 2007). This can lead to a lack of time and/or individuals to participate in mentoring initiatives, related to the tensions of attempting to be an “ideal worker” fulfilling the multiple, extended obligations of faculty positions (Sang et al., 2015).

Constricting gendered expectations remain, even considering the progress that has been made. While changes create opportunities for men or women to stay at home, unspoken prioritizations and hidden biases typically still land the duties of emotional, familial, and household care on women. Such expectations can affect ambitions, satisfaction, and definitions of success because women may preemptively foresee career obstacles; as based in women’s socialized desire to prioritize “life” and relationships – suggestive of larger institutional and systemic issues – they may choose different paths and modify their career ambitions (August and Waltman, 2004; Dobele et al., 2014; Gardiner et al., 2007; Powell and Mainiero, 1992; Savigny, 2014). Accordingly, there have been calls for “new, more inclusive peer-oriented models to be developed” (Wasburn, 2007, p. 58) that encourage “collaborative models” (Darwin and Palmer 2009) to better integrate family, caregiving and service into career planning in ways that men often do not adopt (Wasburn, 2007). This trend can be seen in prior alternative mentoring initiatives, including mentoring circles (Darwin and Palmer, 2009), collective mentoring (Chesler and Chesler, 2002), group mentoring (Huizing, 2012) and strategic collaboration (Wasburn, 2007). As the traditional mentoring model has been progressively examined and chipped away at through alternative models, the definition of mentoring has also been problematized (Meschitti and Lawton Smith, 2017).
In leading toward a conceptual framework of community mentoring, de Janasz and Sullivan (2004) offered early insight into faculty mentoring, putting forth multiple mentoring. de Janasz and Sullivan (2004, p. 263) suggested multiple mentoring, which can be understood as having a “portfolio of mentors,” as a way to help address the multiple areas in which academics must be competent in the contemporary academic environment. While helping to bring light to faculty vs student mentoring and areas beyond strict professionalization, such a model can still place pressure on mentor-protégé relationships. This lead into work that incorporated the terms “networks” and “circles” to a greater extent, in which peer-to-peer mentoring is integrated into an expanding model of multiple mentors (e.g. Centre for Teaching Support and Innovation, 2016). While each offers a specific model, one can see the overlapping intents of what has come to be typologized recently as “group and mutual peer mentoring models” and “networks and broader community” (Centre for Teaching Support and Innovation, 2016) and “Group and Multiple Mentoring as a Strategy for Fostering Support and Networking” (Meschitti and Lawton Smith, 2017). Combined, the intent of these models is to pair more than two people together, offering shared resources and wisdom from multiple people at once, and help for addressing tokenism or a lack of senior faculty through pairing multiple junior faculty with a few senior faculty and/or with peers (see also Balint et al., 1994; Dominguez and Hager, 2013).

However, concerns remain across these alternative models. First, they consistently place the initiative on the “mentors” to create a network of multiple mentors and “mentees” (i.e. collective and multiple mentor types, Chesler and Chesler, 2002). Second, they often retain hierarchical traits. For instance, although progressing toward a collaborative model, Darwin and Palmer (2009) still maintain positions reflective of the traditional mentor-mentee model by assigning ~2 mentors per mentoring circle of approximately six members. In turn, the same issues may remain regarding strain on senior women, power dynamics, and restrictive networking. Beyond this, concerns arise that although contemporary research upholds many of the same issues surrounding gender inequities in academia, it can appear that equality has been gained. This may make women hesitant to commit to “women-only initiatives” (Meschitti and Lawton Smith, 2017, p. 168, citing Vongalis-Macrow, 2014).

From this, research supports the ongoing importance of informal networking in academic career paths, especially as higher education faculty respect independence, yet women remain underrepresented and can be excluded from such informal networking and mentoring (Smith et al., 2016). In particular, Smith et al. (2016) more recently brought attention to how mentoring could be performed through a community of practice model. Their work calls for further integrating earlier theoretical propositions that everyone can and should be able to learn from each other (e.g. Sorcinelli and Yun, 2007). There has been a push, in relation to teaching support, for what researchers call a style of “networks and broader community” support, titled as such because it offers academics a broader network of support, as based in multiple mentoring partners (Centre for Teaching Support and Innovation, 2016). Meschitti and Lawton Smith (2017), based on their systematic review of literature on mentoring for women academics, explain that much of the research on group mentoring is in its infancy, at times still lacking empirical data, and thus the relatively recent literature specifically on these alternative models will be limited. Reviews on mentoring for women academics therefore have suggested that formal mentoring can help foster the relationships that otherwise derive from potentially exclusionary informal networking, yet it remains underdetermined as to how the informal components can be integrated into formal programming (Meschitti and Lawton Smith, 2017; Smith et al., 2016).

We therefore further integrate and build from these broad umbrella conceptualizations of group/mutual/peer/networking models to develop a conceptual framework of community mentoring, to put forth an innovative community mentoring model. While increasing research on women faculty focus on mentoring in one discipline, especially in the STEM
fields (science, education, technology and math), mentoring remains an important tool across women faculty to create a community that supports an environment where they feel supported (August and Waltman, 2004; Branand and Nakamura, 2016). Due to the limited studies, an exploratory study is needed to help initiate further research that helps to innovate and specify community mentoring. We therefore looked to further synthesize these alternative models and examine how an innovative model could address the established concerns with mentoring models and retention. We then look to contribute to expanding the early work in this field through a social constructionist lens, in which we examine women’s perceptions of their experiences in the mentoring community. We do so as perceptions are known to be the basis of our socially constructed reality; beyond this, research has pointed that for women faculty, their perceptions of their positions can affect their experiences more than measured objective realities. We believe in the power of expanding on this literature to help bring together formal and informal mentoring, argued to be of great benefit in particular to women and minorities by supporting community building and networking, through this innovative model.

**Community mentoring model**

We implemented the model at a large, metropolitan, southern, university in the USA (hereafter referred to as “LMSU” to protect participants’ identities), which mirrors the broader concerns discussed in the literature review for retaining and advancing women faculty. A center on campus for women faculty (CWF) specifically looks to help support the success of women faculty by addressing these concerns through focusing on mentoring opportunities, building community, creating opportunities for recognition, career-life balances initiatives, and making LMSU more family-friendly. Accordingly, we worked through CWF to construct and implement a women faculty mentoring community that would address faculty needs in an applied, pragmatic manner. During the 2015–2016 academic year, CWF initiated a mentoring community designed to first, support the participants defining their own goals, and through this, second, determine how programming can foster supportive networking and career-life balance, with the subsidiary goal of retention.

The program recruited across campus to create a community of 35 women faculty with a categorical mix of ranks, ages, ethnicities and college affiliations (see Figures 1–4). To offer context to the university, 42 percent of the total faculty are women; of the women faculty, 43 percent are instructors/lecturers, 22 percent are assistant professors, 22 percent are associate professors and 13 percent are full professors[2]. Applicants knew ahead of time what topics would be explored, meeting times, attendance policy, and that completion of the program would garner them $300 in professional development funds that could be used toward academic travel/supplies.

We looked to foster reciprocity, networking and social support systems, and directly address retention issues through the programming structure. The program combined

![Figure 1. Academic rank of participants](image-url)
monthly large group sessions on specific topics, including mentoring, negotiating, and career-life balance; self-guided small monthly groups were intended to be held between large group sessions. We designed the model to incorporate small groups with three individuals representing each of the above categories uniquely, although we strove to group women with children in their lives together, due to distinct career-life balance issues. Minimally, we paired small group members from different colleges to reduce the likelihood of friendships prior to the community’s kickoff. While offering conversation starting points based on the previous large group topics, we urged small groups to dedicate their time to exploring personal definitions of success and broadening their campus networks. While small groups were required to meet monthly and e-mail summaries to offer feedback on points of interest or ideas to share with the larger group, no specific topics were assigned in order to support the integration of informal networking and relationship-building within the model. The model offers further social support, as members can still network within the large group even if small group assignments are not as effective as hoped. Synthesizing alternative
mentoring practices, we designed the model based on a conceptual framework of community mentoring, which integrates components of alternative models.

Whereas the vertical mentoring model embodies the traditional hierarchical relationship between expert and protégé, the horizontal model positions the mentor/mentee relationship as more democratic and fluid in nature (Keinänen and Gardner, 2004). The horizontal model encompasses group mentoring and is predominately defined by peer-to-peer relationships, which can lead to a greater sense of collaboration and perceived mutual benefits within pairings. The multiple mentoring model is the alternative model that "encourages the protégé to construct a mentoring community based on a diverse set of helpers instead of relying on a single mentor" (Chesler and Chesler, 2002, pp. 51-52), or the "portfolio of mentors" (de Janasz and Sullivan, 2004). As such, our model reframes the vertical-horizontal dyad in such a way that encourages collaborative sharing and expertise, to create an environment that promotes mutual support and equal contributions across group members.

We expand from the vertical-horizontal model by defining each participant as a potential mentor and mentee concurrently, emphasizing that everyone can be a mentor in an area of expertise (e.g. Sorcinelli and Yun, 2007). Sorcinelli and Yun (2007) use the term mentoring networks, highlighting that such a model is beneficial because no one person is then required to have all of the expertise, allowing for fluidity and potential for socio-emotional support and career success. Helping to bring together and extrapolate on these terms, Smith et al. (2016) explore institutionalized faculty mentoring through a community of practice model, defining "community of practice" as a collaborative mentoring initiative that supports this "reciprocal model of mentoring." Similar to past research, they argue that having multiple mentoring partners is positive because everyone has something to both teach and learn, and it can be non-hierarchical because people can swap places as the mentor or mentee as needed. Smith et al. (2016) put forth that community is then a byproduct of getting the work done and relationships can be built simply by meeting, without the need to assign specific mentoring roles. In turn, they state that communities of practice are most effective when supporting the fulfillment of "shared practices required by the institution."

We thus put forth the conceptual framework of community mentoring to synthesize these models through a multi-tiered mentoring community. Drawing from Smith et al. (2016), we define this as a mentoring community, in that it supports reciprocal mentoring and has both broader goals to support women academics in areas established to be of particular importance to women, along with offering networking opportunities through the small and large groups. This networking component also allows flexibility (Sorcinelli and Yun, 2007), and is intended to be more collaborative and non-hierarchical. However, the term community has the connotation that it is not just to "network," which can have implications for career-specific, but also the opportunities that arise from group and multiple mentoring for peer-to-peer and greater socio-emotional support, allowing people from the mentoring community to be "mentors of the moment" across competencies and/or to create networks within the broader academic community (de Janasz and Sullivan, 2004).

Our collaborative mentoring model is therefore unique due to its focus on expertise over institutional positions as the basis for defining mentor/mentee relationships, with the intent of minimizing power dynamics and increasing the fluidity of networking and support systems. We specify, however, that expertise is related to the three areas of competencies, so that expertise is not constrained to professionalization, but can span work-life experiences. While senior faculty are traditionally thought to be able to mentor others on more topics due to their greater expanse of experiences, in this model no one person is defined as "the mentor" within the larger community or small groups. Though not intending to treat all issues as equal, we envisioned this formatting to relieve pressure on senior faculty and foster a culture of reciprocity. Although research shows that mentors also benefit from mentoring, participants can initially be hesitant out of concern for time or only giving and not receiving, while those
typically defined as mentees can have apprehension in opening up to others holding higher positions. Accordingly, the model integrates semi-structured, or formal, mentoring components through the structuring of thematic large group sessions and professional development compensation. The large group sessions thus integrate components of communities of practice through sessions directed at common issues faced by women academics and relationships that can be gained from the openness to meet and create networks through the semi-structured nature of the sessions guided by two facilitators. Even so, informality occurs in that the desired professional goals are to be created by the women in exploring their own definitions of success, respecting the independence of the faculty members. Group mentoring integrates vertical and horizontal mentoring possibilities, in that vertical relationships and multiple mentors can derive from the small group pairing, yet peer-to-peer mentoring could take place within and without of small groups.

Methodology
This manuscript draws from pre- and post-surveys distributed in the opening and concluding sessions, inclusive of open-ended responses. The surveys were grouped in themes of career success (including work-life balance topics), perception (gender issues and connectivity on campus), experience (with mentorship), expectations and factors (related to retention and promotion in academia), and career paths (including gender stereotypes). In the post-survey, an additional question was asked following each themed question group: “How do you believe the faculty mentoring community has affected your responses in relation to the above questions?”

Participants’ responses were labeled with unique identifiers so comparisons could be run between the pre- and post-mentoring responses. Following IRB guidelines, faculty members could opt out of the research components, without being penalized and still being able to complete the program. If the women wanted to participate in all components for reflective purposes, they could still request for the information they provided to not be included in research publications. All 35 mentoring community members completed the pre-mentoring survey, while a total of 32 completing the post-mentoring surveys. For the purposes of comparison, the total sample size was limited to the 32 participants who completed both the pre- and post-surveys; all 32 consented for their responses to be used for research purposes.

The study was structured for the Likert-scale items to sensitize the qualitative, open-ended responses, due to the exploratory nature of the research (see also Bryman, 2006 on integrating qualitative and quantitative research). As the open-ended responses were already primed by the quantitative items, using open-ended survey questions allowed for women to expand on and explain their quantitative responses in the same context and setting, offering richer and more immediate insight into their experiences with the mentoring community. Quantitatively, we measured across five categories with Likert-type scales. The categories were intended to measure participant perceptions of: career success (types of accomplishments); experience (with mentoring); expectations and factors (affecting their academic career retention and advancement); perception (of support and gender-related experiences/obstacles); and career paths (related to gendered stereotypes surrounding work and careers).

Participants were asked to rank their level of agreement with items that might promote a positive work experience (e.g. teaching and department chair as reflection of success). Participants were asked to rank their level of agreement on each individual item with a scale of 1–5, with 1 being strongly disagree/not important and 5 being strongly agree/highly important. Due to small cell sizes, the scales were recoded to compare those with disagreement (1−2 = 1), those who agreed with the response (4−5 = 2), and those who reflected a neutral response (3 = 3). They were also given the option of N/A (0). We analyzed the means of each item per category, comparing pre- and post-survey itemized means.
We then used these findings to sensitize the qualitative coding using a form of constant comparison to examine percentage changes that appeared contradictory to past research and/or what items per subcategories the qualitative feedback appeared to respond to most directly. From this, we looked to further examine the effectiveness of the program through the qualitative survey responses.

Qualitatively, we performed a content analysis of the open-ended responses. We drew the open-ended responses from the question included in the post-survey, following each of the five categories, which asked: “How do you believe the faculty mentoring community has affected your responses in relation to the above questions?” Researchers assigned all participants pseudonyms. For the first round of coding, we used in-vivo codes, arising from the wording of the responses themselves to respect the power of the participants’ language, with codes that could be unique or overlapping to each set of responses (Berg, 2009). The authors next performed a second round of coding to determine similarities or differences across each set of responses[3]. We used a hybrid of data- and literature-driven thematic analyses (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006), triangulating between the open-ended responses, quantitative responses and established literature (Guioin et al., 2011). While we allowed themes to develop from participants’ phrasing, we also acknowledge the survey was constructed based in prior research, helping to inform the initial five categories. This led to a constant comparison process (Charmaz, 2006) across the forms of data to determine three primary themes due to connections across the categories of: experience, perception and expectations and factors, and values and career success. These groupings were then determined to offer primary themes that arose within and across survey topics, revealing influences of mentoring, empowerment and awareness.

Findings
Across each theme, women expressed a form of support through the mentoring community as based in increased awareness of resources and positionality, alongside a sense of empowerment through more consciously realizing their career-life goals and ability to address associated obstacles. As traits of the mentoring community created certain research limitations, such as size for sample significance and length of time for longitudinal tests, we used descriptive statistics to examine changes between the pre- and post-surveys. However, paired with qualitative responses, they offer insight into women faculty’s perceptions of what is important to their career-life balance and goals, along with contributing to the development future research instruments and mentoring community models. We acknowledge that forms of support run across these themes, so that titles reflect only analytical distinctions.

Mentoring experiences
First, we asked questions regarding their experiences with mentoring outside of and then in relation to the mentoring community, to better understand the context of mentoring (experience; 23 open-ended responses). Overall, participants described how the community made them more critical of other mentoring relationships. Participants explained qualitatively that it shifted their perspectives on the meaning of good mentorship, with increased awareness of the support mentoring can offer, different types of mentorship, and how to be a better mentor. For example, Madeline stated that “I have seen what good mentorship can provide. I don’t think I’ve had particularly good mentorship in the past, based on what I’ve learned through this program,” while Allison stated that “I am [now] more critical of mentoring. I have higher expectations.” In explaining the quality of and expectations for mentoring, Anita explained how “I see more clearly the important role of mentoring and have tried to be a better mentor to the junior faculty in my department.”
Dawn’s statement revealed positive results from the integration of multiple models of mentoring, and the helpfulness of these different approaches:

It has made me realize that there are many off-shoots/types of mentoring. In our group, we talked about things that relate to mentoring on LMSU institutional knowledge, not on particular aspects of professional advancement because our fields are different. Overall, a valuable and positive experience.

Participants expressed this model offered experiences that made them critical of mentoring success, supporting the need for innovative mentoring models. Adriana highlighted success when she stated, “I finally feel as if I know what I need to succeed and know what to ask for and how to ask for it. Before I had no idea what I didn’t know.” In these ways, qualitative responses suggest that participants learned what to look for and build mentoring relationships. Such discoveries suggest the model offers a space for discovery of what they “didn’t know,” an issue that prior research suggests can arise from a lack of inclusion in informal mentoring or access to institutional knowledge (Lipton, 2017).

Interestingly, 56.25 percent of participants strongly agreed/agreed that their “mentor actively advises and fosters career” in both the pre- and post-surveys. The number selecting neutral responses also remained steady between the pre- and post-survey at 12.5 percent, while those disagreeing/strongly agreeing with this statement increased from 12.5 to 18.75 percent in the post-survey. While at first this may appear to show a lack of change, or it may even appear contradictory due to the increase of those who disagreed, their open-ended responses offer insight that suggests otherwise. Their responses expressed a shift in their perspective on mentoring, including: knowledge of what “good” mentoring looks like, the availability of mentoring; type of mentoring, and their own roles as mentors. We argue that participants became more critical of mentoring and active in their roles as both mentors and mentees. With an increase from 28 to 43.75 percent from the pre- to post-survey of participants agreeing/strongly agreeing with the statement that “mentor critiques scientific work,” the critical perspective on definitions of mentoring and career-life balance may have affected perceptions that outside mentors were specifically helping with their academic work, with participants more actively engaging in their roles as mentees and seeking out information that they now know they can request from mentors.

**Gender-based obstacles and interpersonal support**

Second, we explored perceived obstacles as based in gender, along with stated expectations and factors related to staying in higher education (perception; 26 open-ended responses/expectations and factors; 27 open-ended responses). Generally, participants expressed that the practice of mentoring, experiences in small groups, and the topics covered in large group sessions helped them to understand institutionally available resources and that they can realize their goals with proper support. In relation to gender obstacles, women expressed raised consciousness, with awareness of gender issues at the institutional or structural level. Such awareness led to expressed realizations that they were not having these experiences in isolation and greater empowerment to address such issues.

In the pre-survey perception section, 65.63 percent (21) of participants strongly agreed/agreed with the statement “There are gender-based obstacles in my division to career success and satisfaction of women,” while 59.38 percent (19) strongly agreed/agreed with this statement in the post-survey; numbers also swapped from six “neutrals” and three disagree/strongly disagree in the pre-surveys to four “neutrals” and eight disagree/strongly disagree in the post-survey. In the pre-survey, 62.5 percent strongly agreed/agreed that “In my division I feel like a welcomed member of the institution,” while 56.25 percent strongly agreed/agreed with this statement in the post-survey (one non-response). While the responses remained close, and there was a slight drop of two respondents agreeing, open-ended responses helped to shed light on this trend. As with mentoring, participants expressed the mentoring community...
created greater awareness and more critical perspectives on the issues of gender inequalities – with increased optimism for addressing these obstacles in achieving success. Jodi explained how her perspective shifted alongside awareness:

My current set of answers may be a little on the negative side as opposed to the previous survey for 2 reasons: (1) as a result of participating in the mentoring community, I have become more aware of some of the common gender-based issues in academic environments, [and] (2) I've been in my position for a longer time and had a chance to observe more manifestations of such obstacles.

Rather than necessarily negative critiques of LMSU, as we know higher education is reflective of larger society (Storey et al., 2017), these findings revealed an increased sensitivity to participants' positions in a larger community of women and in a larger gendered institution. More than half of the women (21 participants; 65.5 percent) declared that being a part of the community made them more aware and conscious of gender issues, explaining how they had become aware of issues in other divisions and departments, with two women declaring it made them more appreciative of their department. Women's statements revealed how the mentoring community shifted their perceptions to a broader institutional, if not structural, level. For example, Patricia explained how it made her aware of “substantial issues in other parts of the university, and my own privilege,” while Julia declared that “by acknowledging the gender divide, I have a broader perspective of initiatives and how these can contribute to my positionality.” More participants clarified their understanding of the structural component of gender, such as Sharon who explained how “this community has made me more aware of systemic gender, race and class biases in the workplace/academic community,” and Tamara stated, “I'm more conscious of the gender aspect of work.” Participants’ responses thus showed their contextualization of gender issues, shifting their perceptions and awareness. As Johnsrud and Des Jarlais (1994) show, perceptions make a difference in retention, with the mentoring community model prospectively increasing women's perceptions of the larger institution and their place within it.

Such trends in awareness can also be seen through participants explaining how they now felt more comfortable actively addressing these issues, as Melanie stated, “I see more awareness of some challenges related to being a woman in a male-dominated profession. Some things I have noted and accepted without question in the past are more prominent to me and less acceptable.” Melissa declared:

I have become more aware of gender issues, and I am more vocal about concerns with diversity within my department […] I am now more willing to speak up when I see issues related to gender inequality at LMSU.

Although some women expressed increased awareness of gender obstacles and shared obstacles could influence their perceptions of the academy, they then explained how the mentoring community had a positive effect; for instance, Jodi further clarified the community “helped me become even more persistent and tenacious,” and Leah explained that while common retention issues of isolation, an unsupportive atmosphere, and stress “are all still issues that I'm learning to accept/navigate, [it] feels more manageable.”

Addressing social isolation and support, participants explained how they felt more connected within the university and that they have the resources to be successful, according to their own terms. Courtney explained “I feel that I could contact my mentoring group to discuss issues and gain support,” while Jackie stated “I feel a better sense of community within LMSU, like I am a piece of a bigger whole rather than an island unto itself. I've enjoyed the interdisciplinary aspect and interactions outside of my college.” Relatedly, Melissa explained, “The workshops and supportive environment have helped me feel empowered to work towards promotion and awards.” Julia similarly stated that the community “provided resources and support in regards to a successful academic career” and Melanie declared, “I feel more included at LMSU. I feel more confident that I want to and
can be here in 10+ years.” Participants’ reflections suggest the possibilities for the model fostering a sense of active inclusion and support at the institution, which can in turn foster a sense of belonging – critical to retention (Dobele et al., 2014; Johnsrud and Des Jarlais, 1994; Whittaker et al., 2015). Overall, women explained the critical nature of participation to increasing awareness of gender dynamics, yet also increasing feelings of inclusion, knowledge of resources and support.

Career-life choices
Lastly, questions on career-life choices addressed definitions of success more generally (career success; 30 open-ended responses/career paths; 26 open-ended responses). We found quantitative support that the vast majority of participants expressed the importance of peer-reviewed publications, family relationships, and receiving grants. In the pre-survey, 87.5 percent of participants strongly agreed/agreed that they placed high value in peer-reviewed publications and receiving grants as reflecting their success, while 81.25 percent also strongly agreed/agreed that they place high value in family relationships as reflecting their success. The same accomplishments remained valued in the post-survey, with peer-reviewed publications remaining at 87.5 percent, receiving grants dropping slightly to 75 percent and family relationships rising slightly to 84 percent. Such findings support prior research on the importance of these tasks to faculty (Darwin and Palmer, 2009), and may be particularly relevant to the large percentage of our participants who held the rank of assistant or associate professor (21 participants; 65.6 percent). Qualitatively, findings on success mirrored past themes: although the numbers remained relatively steady, we found that women discussed what can be understood as empowerment in their decision-making, as women discussed greater awareness and confidence in choices that prioritize life and family in relation to careers.

Collectively, women explained how the community influenced their perspectives on work-life balance. Three women’s descriptions help to represent the sense of accepting prioritization of “life” into their career planning, with the community increasing awareness of choices and reinforcing their prioritizations. Madeline stated, “I feel better/safer admitting the importance I place on family and the lower importance I place on administrative work.” Katrina explained how:

It has allowed me to get answers to questions that I had about managing my (departmental work) group and developing an appropriate work-life balance. It has also placed me into discussions about issues that have not shown up in my life yet, so that I am better prepared to address them.

Sonia also expressed that:

I don’t think I’ve changed, but it has allowed me to think about family relationships more, as well as friendships and normal life. I am aware of the guilt I feel for dedicating time to one place or another (work or family) and I try to let it go. Still hard, but I’m aware of it and I feel like I’m not alone.

We found the theme of support and empowerment through the additional question on definitions of career success. It should be noted that two women explained uncertainty as to whether the mentoring community caused changes in their responses, with Michelle explaining that even so, the “community has made me feel more connected and supported” and Patricia explained that based on her personal life the discussion felt more like “advocacy.”

Women more explicitly described ways the community created shifts in their perspectives in relation to consciously considering balance and the “connectedness,” as phrased by Carolyn, between their personal life and jobs. Tamara declared, “It has made me more conscious of the different aspects of success and the value of balance,” while Jackie clarified that “I have thought more about how my outside of LMSU life is an important accomplishment.” Dawn stated, “it has made me more aware of work-life balance and also given me some tools to improve this balance. It has given me a new way to look at and define success in my career.”
Melissa explained that, “from my small group meetings, I have come to see my definitions of success differently. I see more importance in work/life balance, and I have begun to think more about how a more balanced life will lead to less stressful, more productive work.” Adriana expressed changes from a sense of isolation to increased confidence in speaking up:

I feel that faculty mentorship has created a more inclusive environment for me to participate in academic activities where before I felt as if I didn’t belong. Now I am not nearly as intimidated to interact with colleagues and am more interested in university-wide committee work.

Across responses, participants expressed increased awareness in their work-life balance and priorities, explaining reinforcement of their choices that can help them reach their personal definitions of success.

Discussion
We acknowledge that without a comparison group, our knowledge of the causal mechanisms for the positive benefits is limited. However, in relation to the importance of years of experience and as the assistant and associate professor rank was the largest group, we performed additional exploratory analyses to help direct future research on retention. We looked further to find correlations between these ranks and particular points of accomplishment in the career success theme. Using a Spearman rho correlation to measure rank in relation to importance of accomplishments to their definitions of success, there was a significant correlation between the ranks of assistant and associate professor and peer-reviewed publications and faith, religion and spiritual development in the pre-survey (significant at the 0.05 level). Additionally, there was a significant correlation between the ranks of assistant and associate professor and receiving grants (significant at the 0.01 level). In the post-survey, there was a significant correlation between the ranks of assistant and associate professor and work-related community engagement (significant at the 0.05 level). While findings on peer-reviewed publications and receiving grants uphold prior research (Wenzel and Hollenshead, 1998), these findings reveal the importance of spiritual development and work-related community engagement; when offered expanded options for defining success, women faculty uphold areas integrating personal satisfaction beyond the workplace and family life.

In combination with the primary findings, what these findings suggest is that during key points of retention in early careers, a community mentoring model can be critical because it supports empowerment of women faculty. Empowerment, rather than a catchphrase, is critical in early career for retention because it helps women faculty realize their definitions of success in a two-fold manner: they are supported to realize and make their own definitions of success concrete and, accordingly, can discover the resources for realizing those definitions of success. Research supports that women can experience an ongoing sense of the “imposter syndrome,” so that they can experience a lack of confidence or hostility toward either incorporating personal goals, which may be defined as feminine (e.g. the motherhood penalty; Kricheli-Katz, 2012), or business-driven goals, which can appear masculine (e.g. queen bee or “cold;” Cummins, 2012). A mentoring community can offer a “community” that provides multi-dimensional support and “mentors of the moment” according to the ebb and flow of women’s career goals and paths. Questions remain as to explanations for changes over time. It is possible that when larger institutional issues remain consistent, participant foci shift according to academic seasons from the beginning to the end of an academic year; the promise of a new school year and related goals vs the completion of projects may influence particulars in this theme.

Conclusions
Through our innovative model, we explored the themes of mentoring experiences, gender-based obstacles, interpersonal support and career-life choices. We discovered ways
in which a model that synthesizes alternative mentoring models can support increased awareness and expressed sense of empowerment in relation to four areas critical to retaining women (e.g. Johnsrud and Des Jarlais, 1994). While exploratory, these insights offer promising avenues for further development of the model and research instruments that can more thoroughly measure women’s definitions of success, as related to retention.

Through a sensitizing lens of perception, our findings suggest that mentoring communities have the possibility of raising awareness that could be critical to retention of women faculty. While empowerment may appear abstract, participants’ open-ended responses provided concrete examples of ways that the community mentoring model can support an intangible element that can be emphasized in future retention efforts. Two years after the mentoring community, we know certain small groups continue to meet; future research can therefore continue to explore how small groups remain in contact and how these senses of support and empowerment continue over time.

The mentoring community application included further questions that offered insight into potential connections across women for small group assignments, based on a career-life balance perspective (i.e. caring for elderly parents/family members; interest in specific areas common to academics, e.g., experience writing grants, articles, teaching areas, etc.). This provided additional information that, although not used in the first implementation for grouping participants, offered insight into potential community dynamics. Restrictions based in sample size prevented drawing from certain data for research purposes due to concerns for confidentiality, including race/ethnicity, but as we expand our population through additional implementations such information offers further potential explanatory value. Albeit facing limitations of small sample size and a nine-month academic year, the findings support prior research on what women faculty find important, including peer-reviewed publications, funding, and personal life and relationships. This base enables us to expand to further understandings on retention.

Accordingly, we add to literature on and practices of the multiple, vertical, and horizontal mentoring models by defining participants as potential mentors and mentees concurrently, through the integration of personal definitions of success. This expands the possibilities for small-group goals (e.g. expertise in teaching or personal health practices, no matter their institutional position). As developmental relationships go beyond mentor-mentee relationships, in which there is a hierarchical dimension and the mentee typically venerates the mentor as a “hero,” we suggest that groupings drawing from definitions of success offer new organizational approaches to networking, which can scaffold support for faculty otherwise potentially segmented into academic silos. As such, triads and large-group peer mentorship can expand from current understandings of developmental relationships to support for career enhancement (Thomas, 1990). From a sociological perspective such relationships are necessary for organizational advancement (Turner, 1965), showing promising directions for future implementations.

Notes

1. The authors recognize the complexity in referring to a dualistic gender system (women-men); with concern for properly being able to address a gender spectrum within the confines of this paper, since the mentoring community focused on “women,” the present paper draws from past research considering men and women faculty.

2. In comparison, of the men faculty: 23 percent are instructors/lecturers, 19 percent are assistant professors, 30 percent are associate professors and 28 percent are full professors.

3. Primary codes included: awareness, career-life balance, changes, empowerment, family values, group support, growth, information, motivation, relationships, success, support, unawareness work values.
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Further reading


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