

Diversity Issues in Mentoring

Know the Key Findings

Less access to mentors: Women and faculty of color have fewer mentors, face more isolation, and may be less entrenched in informal departmental networks (Fox 2001; Preston 2004; Thompson 2008; Wasburn 2007). Because mentors may unintentionally gravitate toward people like themselves, underrepresented groups like women and minorities may be mentored less frequently and less likely to reap the many rewards of mentoring (Bova 2000). Majority faculty members may also be hesitant to mentor underrepresented faculty simply because they are inexperienced with it (Stanley and Lincoln 2005).

“There is nothing more isolating and alienating than to be the first or only person of one’s race and/or ethnicity to be hired in a department, and a mentoring relationship is one way to escape from that isolation,”
(Stanley and Lincoln 2005, p. 45).

Place more importance on mentoring: Faculty of color and women tend to place more importance on mentoring (Holmes et al. 2007). This is consistent with the U of A’s COACHE survey results – women and faculty of color had significantly higher ratings for the importance of faculty mentoring.

Higher rates of turnover: Faculty of color and women have higher rates of turnover in academia (Callister 2006; Yoshinaga-Itano 2006). Their numbers remain low – especially in some fields like STEM – and mentoring is one important strategy for retaining women and minorities (Stanley and Lincoln 2005; Yoshinaga-Itano 2006).

Inequalities in academia: Minorities and women face unconscious bias in the academy, which can affect many facets of academic careers, such as lower support for their hiring or mentoring (Moss-Racusin et al. 2012), lower teaching evaluations from students (MacNell et al. 2014), and fewer citations received for their work (Maliniak et al. 2013). They may also face hostilities from colleagues and students. Women may also face motherhood bias in which being a mother decreases others’ perceptions of the woman’s competence and commitment to her career, whereas there is no such penalty for fathers (Correll et al. 2007). Women may also struggle more with achieving work-life balance as female faculty tend to spend more time on childcare and other home duties than men (Misra et al. 2011; 2012). Women also spend much more time doing service among associate professors, which hinders their chances at promotion (Misra et al. 2011; 2012). In instances where mentoring is focused on a group such as faculty of color and women, mentoring is intended to help with coping and challenging inequality in academia (Moody 2004).

Race and gender may matter in mentoring relationships: A study of graduate students from underrepresented minority backgrounds found that those with minority mentors felt that they received more psychosocial and instrumental support than students with White mentors. Additionally, mentees and mentors in mentoring relationships in which they both perceived that they held similar values and work orientations were more satisfied and felt more interpersonal comfort. Notably, the dissatisfaction with cross-race mentoring was partially mitigated by lower shared values (Ortiz-Walters and Gilson 2005). Similarly, Gibson (2006) found that a mentor’s gender may matter to the mentee. Some women in her study did not see male mentors as able to address issues particularly salient for women due to a lack of experience and/or understanding. Likewise, in a study at two Research I universities, Tillman (2001) found that the psychosocial functions of mentoring – role modeling, respect, confirmation, and assistance in coping with work demands – were more easily provided by same-race mentors. However, the respondents said support for meeting promotion and tenure requirements was the most important function of their mentors, and what the mentor did was more important than being of same gender or race. Thus, while race and gender mattered in some areas, it wasn’t the most important factor or the only factor that mattered.

However, similarities do not guarantee success: It is often assumed that mentoring is more beneficial when the mentor and mentee are of the same gender and race or ethnicity (Stanley and Lincoln 2005), but that's not always the case. Although it has been found that it is usually easier to develop a relationship with a mentor of the same gender and race, these relationships are not always helpful (Dolan 2007). The Black women in Holmes' et al. (2007) study described both positive and negative experiences with same-race and same-gender mentors, as well as mentors from different backgrounds. The most important factor was the mentor's commitment to the mentee's success, regardless of race or gender. Additionally, some research finds no significant differences in career mentoring or psychosocial support when comparing homogenous mentoring pairs (same gender and race) and diversified pairings (different gender or race) (Smith et al. 2001).

Mentoring across differences requires sensitivity: Cross-race mentoring is necessary because numbers of women and faculty of color among senior faculty remain small (Holmes et al. 2007). Cross-race mentoring requires extra sensitivity because racial, cultural, and ethnic differences strongly influence how individuals view and experience the world (Stanley and Lincoln 2005). White mentors should not assume that mentees of color will have similar experiences to their own, and as Singh and Stoloff (2003) argue, cultural differences regarding communication style, power and authority, individualism versus collectivism, and conflict management may hinder relationships between White mentors and mentees of color. Notably, generational differences (e.g., achieving own goals versus institutional goals, directness and being outspoken, etc.) can also be a challenge to mentoring (Bickel and Brown 2005).

General Tips to Address These Findings

- Notably, following the research-based tips throughout this toolkit will benefit *all* faculty, including women and faculty of color.
- Race or gender differences between a mentor and mentee are often ignored and not discussed (Davidson and Foster-Johnson 2001). However, in cross-race mentoring relationships where race was openly discussed, both the mentor and mentee experienced improved mutual understanding and a stronger mentoring alliance (Thomas 1993). Thus, an open, honest engagement of differences in mentoring relationships may be the best course of action (Davidson and Foster-Johnson 2001).
- Heads should ensure that minorities and women are formally assigned mentors and check in with underrepresented faculty regularly to ensure they have been able to build a network of mentors. Having multiple mentors allows women and minorities to receive different kinds of support (Dolan 2007), including support for coping with inequalities (Moody 2004). If the mentee has not been able to build a network of mentors, heads may want to partner with other departments in the college to facilitate cross-department mentoring, especially in departments in which women or faculty of color are in the extreme minority.
- Input into the faculty mentoring relationship is important. If race or gender matters to the mentee, the mentee can seek mentors like themselves. However, assigning a mentee a mentor simply based on race or gender similarities may be seen as condescending or patronizing, so input is critical.
- Mentors from majority groups can often successfully mentor underrepresented mentees, and these mentors can be strong allies for diversity and social justice (Stanley and Lincoln 2005). However, mentors should not assume that mentees will have career paths that mirror their own or similar workplace experiences. Mentors from majority groups should be sensitive to the challenges faced by faculty of color and women (King and Cubic 2005), such as those outlined above. Faculty can learn how unconscious bias can affect evaluations in this [online module](#) (NetID login required).