

A Case Study for Mentorship and Wellbeing: Transitioning from K-12 to Higher Education

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This case study explores the mentorship of an educator transitioning from PreK-12 to higher education, supported by a faculty member from another university. Framed by cultural identity theory and constructivist grounded theory, the study emphasizes the role of mentoring in fostering professional growth and wellbeing. Informal mentorship emerged as a critical support mechanism for marginalized faculty, helping build trust, self-efficacy, and professional identity. Faculty mentoring is especially impactful for underrepresented and marginalized women pursuing careers in higher education. Scholars highlight the systemic challenges women and faculty of color face in accessing meaningful mentoring. In this case, the mentoring relationship initiated by a college administrator via email evolved into a supportive, collaborative partnership. Despite geographic distance, the mentor and mentee engaged through email, phone calls, and texts, working together on writing projects, presentations, and academic planning. Cultural identity theory helped guide the mentee's development, promoting confidence, clarity, and a strong professional identity. The relationship fostered trust, enhanced learning, and supported career advancement. These elements—trust, confidence, and academic growth—are essential variables for wellness. This case illustrates how mentoring, particularly when informed by cultural identity theory and constructivist grounded theory, can reduce anxiety, improve collaboration, and support mental health in academic settings. Institutions can adopt such mentorship models to foster equity, enhance faculty development, and cultivate meaningful relationships that support the success of women of color and others with marginalized identities.

Keywords: Informal mentorship, dean, higher education, K-12

Introduction

Understanding the complexities of transitioning from K-12 to higher education, a Dean of Education facilitated an introduction between a mentee, an applicant for a higher education position—and a faculty member renowned within her university, department, and program for her mentoring expertise. The mentee was applying for a position at a university distinct from both the Dean's and the mentor's institutions, further highlighting the breadth of professional networks involved. Additionally, the mentee and mentor resided in different states (New Jersey and Connecticut), underscoring the geographic reach of their mentorship connection. This faculty member, also a Black woman, had 36 years of experience in K-12 education before transitioning to higher education faculty over 15 years ago.

While many colleges and universities assign mentors to new faculty, Black women often face challenges in navigating the expectations of academia. This case study explores one such mentorship relationship, emphasizing how an unplanned and impactful mentoring relationship emerged between two previously unknown experienced educators.

Literature Review

Higher education institutions are complex organizational structures which are comprised of academic departments, administrative offices, and auxiliary units. Faculty within these systems are tasked with delivering instruction, producing research, providing service to programs, departments, and the university. Instruction and interviewing require understanding the mission and vision of that institution. However, navigating these structures is not experienced equally by all faculty members. Grant (2012) states "... negative stereotypes and inequity continue to exist and create barriers for African American women as they attempt to gain access and equity in educational environments" (p. 101). This is especially true for educators in K-12 trying to transition into higher education.

In Higher Education, Black women faculty remain significantly underrepresented and often lack equitable access to mentorship and professional support networks. Massaro (2019) explains that academia remains more male dominated and white. As women and women of color graduate with degrees that make them eligible for employment in higher education, their numbers are not reflected in the hiring process in higher

education. Massaro (2019) uses statistics from the National Center for Education Statistics (2016), to demonstrate this phenomenon; "...41% of faculty [in higher education] are white men, 35% white women, and only 3% are Black women" (p. 8). Black female professionals from K-12 schools who aim to enter the institution of higher education face challenges and unique barriers. One such barrier may center around a lack of knowledge on logistics of academic language in developing curricula strategies.

Although researchers are not always clear on the definition of what constitutes mentoring, many recommend mentoring to bridge the hiring gap. The work of Tillman (2001) recognizes that having a similar relationship between the mentor and the mentee greatly improves hiring which builds long-term relationships. Paddon and Harper (2003), as mentioned in Grant (2012), bring the point that African American women in graduate and professional schools often find it difficult to locate suitable mentors to build these connections.

It is important to recognize that race, ethnicity, and gender be considered when informal or formal mentors are assigned. The informal mentorship that emerged from this case study highlights race, gender, and the shared lived professional experience of mentor and mentee. The lived professional experiences of the cumulative years of the mentee and mentor in K-12 schools made the connection relevant.

Program/Project

The Dean who facilitated the relationship by sending this text message "...by way of this email, I'm connecting you with my former EdD student and friend... She's a finalist for clinical assistant professor position and would like some assistance with her teaching presentation. Can you please assist her with this?" (G. Jean-Marie, personal communication, March 8, 2025). The Dean was a woman of color who had advanced through the ranks of academia - from completing a dissertation to serving as a faculty member, program coordinator, department chair and eventually, Dean of the College of Education.

The complex responsibilities of a dean include administrative and academic responsibilities. In addition, deans are responsible for managing research initiatives, overseeing budgetary planning, and ensuring compliance with accreditation standards. As Murray and Miller (2021) highlight, the role of graduate school deans in education is complex and expansive, requiring a balance of strategic oversight and academic leadership. The dean's approach to distributive leadership by creating this connection, empowered her faculty member and illustrated the value of shared leadership in strengthening the mentor-mentee relationship (Yu et al., 2025a; Yu et al., 2025b).

The Dean's support helped establish a meaningful connection between the mentor and the mentee, reinforcing the importance of shared advocacy and leadership in building mentorship relationships.

Furthermore, the dean's recommendation to create this bond demonstrated her understanding of informal mentorship. As Postholm (2019) notes, educational leaders build faculty capacity by fostering distributive leadership, which cultivates trust, which enhances educator wellbeing as well as increased job performance (Yu, et al., 2025a; Yu, et al., 2025b). This approach validated the mentor's strengths in teaching and reinforced ongoing support for Black women transitioning from K-12 to higher education.

The mentor had already transitioned to an academic position within the university as well as demonstrating leadership skills within the university. There was an understanding and sensitivity about the internal ambiguity of the mentee who wanted to transition to an academic role within higher education.

Results

The mentor, through her K-12 experience, had developed a high-level of curricula development, research curiosity, and leadership skills. Having devoted a significant portion of her professional career to K-12 educational settings where innovation, collaboration, and continuous professional development were integral to the institutional culture, she remained steadfast in her commitment to advancing educational excellence. Both the mentor and the mentee embodied the multifaceted lived experience of the role of a K-12 educator. The ability to adapt, apply instructional expertise, and integrate technology driven strategies were well within the capabilities of both the mentor and the mentee.

The mentor's previous experience with formal, as well as informal mentoring, occurred with her own dissertation chair. The dissertation chair provided formal, consistent mentoring throughout the dissertation process. However, this mentorship continued into an informal, collegiate mentoring relationship. This informal mentoring involved offering encouragement and instilling confidence during the initial stages of exploring a career in higher education. For instance, not only in curriculum development, service, and academic writing, but guided the mentor to serve on program, department, and university committees. This mentoring relationship enhanced her ability to receive contracting and continuous employment within higher education. This informal mentoring laid the foundation to lessen anxiety and increase confidence. These are variables that the mentor, in this case study, wanted to extend to the mentee. However, as a Black woman with over 36 years of educational experience, she did not receive formal mentorship upon entering higher education. It wasn't until a fellow Black woman - the current Dean of Education - recognized the leadership potential and appointed her as a Faculty Fellow within the College of Education. This appointment created formal acknowledgment from the Dean of her professional contributions.

The mentoring relationship proved deeply

beneficial for both parties. For the mentor, it reaffirmed her leadership role and her commitment to supporting Black women in academia. For the mentee, the relationship offered validation, practical advice, and a sense of belonging within an unfamiliar environment. Together, they engaged in reciprocal learning, drawing on their shared histories and individual strengths.

This case illustrates that mentorship acknowledging racial and gender dynamics can foster personal growth. Although informal, the mentoring relationship had a significant impact on both mentor and mentee. Both mentor and mentee were challenged to read academic research and write and revise curricula to meet the needs of the faculty position the mentee was applying for within higher education. This case illustrates that informal mentorship acknowledging racial, gender and professional lived experiences, has the potential to lessen anxiety and contribute to higher education hiring.

Discussion

The mentor came from a self-reflective approach grounded in the belief that strong leadership is informed by lived experience, relational awareness, and value-based decision-making (Court, 2007; Madden, 2005). Teaching and mentoring reflect the essential characteristics of this mentor in her professional and lived experiences. These qualities guided her work as a mentor.

The mentee-mentor initial contact began via text messages and was followed by multiple phone calls and emails which included brainstorming, reflection, and sharing of information. Consequently, there ensued many weeks of communication through email and google shared documents between the mentor and mentee. This gradually evolved into a mentoring relationship built on trust, mutual respect, and shared experiences both personally and professionally. These experiences included gender, race, and educational trajectory. It served to weave an educational thread between the mentor and mentee of their lived educational journey from undergraduate education to professional education.

The mentor took time to understand the mentee's professional goals, academic interests, and values. Their shared background educationally and professionally created the foundation for mutual understanding such as when they served as classroom teachers. Both mentor and mentee acknowledged the trust, understanding, and confidence they felt by the mutual validation of their work. As highlighted by Grant (2012) in her narrative research, explains that when participants have a mentor of the same gender and same race, it adds a level of trust to the mentoring experience for both mentor and mentee.

The Dean had firsthand experience with the mentor's capabilities, including her roles in teaching, serving on dissertation committees and program leadership. Similarly, she also knew the mentee's strengths, work ethic, and data driven

instructional knowledge.

Previously, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the dean nominated the mentor to serve as a faculty fellow, a role that expanded her mentorship responsibilities beyond a single program to support faculty across the College of Education. This nomination reflected a belief in the mentor's ability to recognize and nurture the potential in others.

Although the mentee had extensive experience in educational practice and leadership, she was unfamiliar with certain academic expectations, especially the stress of presenting in formal interviews before higher education panels. The pressure to articulate expertise while navigating institutional norms can be overwhelming, leading to heightened anxiety and emotional distress. The mentee demonstrated her expertise professionally in K-12 schools.

The mentor played a crucial role in easing this transition, providing not just technical guidance but also emotional reassurance. By offering support in developing lesson plans, incorporating academic language into interviews, developing professional PowerPoint presentations, and crafting curriculum-aligned discussion posts, the mentor helps bridge the gap between practical experience and formal academic expectations. Through mentorship, the mentee gained confidence, refined her presentation skills, and approached academic challenges with a stronger sense of preparedness, which transformed stress into a structured path toward success.

Implications for Higher Education

- Institutional leaders within higher education can develop informal as well as formal mentorship programs that support talented educators from K-12 environments.
- Institutional leaders can create opportunities for informal mentorship.
- Institutional leaders who know the skills of faculty can promote engagement.
- Institutional leaders can recognize and reward mentorship labor, particularly labor performed by women faculty of color.

Conclusion

When professionals are grounded in cultural awareness of race, gender, lived experiences, and mutual respect, mentorship can empower Black women to navigate and thrive within the complex landscape of higher education. This case demonstrates that informal mentorship, when built on trust and shared experience, can offer essential guidance and support. A commitment of trust, respect, self-reflection, and dedicated time to develop genuine and nurturing relationships must exist for mentorship to be effective.

This mentor-mentee relationship was fostered by an educational leader in higher education; specifically, the Dean within the College of Education. The role of a dean in higher education involves overseeing and administering multiple

aspects of academic life. At this college, the dean is responsible for many programs, managing roles with faculty, budgets, and other administrative operations. Having insight into the skill levels and professional contributions of faculty across these programs is crucial for fostering a culture of well-being and cultural sensitivity. In this case study, the dean's shared racial and cultural identity with both the mentor and the mentee played a pivotal role in facilitating their connection. This intentional act of informal mentoring supported the professional growth of the mentee and created an opportunity for the mentor to gain more confidence, lessen anxiety, and promote wellbeing within higher education.

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