Leveling the Playing Field: A Conceptual Framework for Formal Faculty Mentorship in Social Work

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Abstract: *Despite the numerous benefits of formal mentorship for all faculty, it remains underutilized within the academy. Specifically, this lack of critical support leaves historically marginalized groups, particularly women, underrepresented minorities, as well as part-time, intermittent, adjunct, or non-tenure track faculty, to struggle with navigating the challenging climate of higher education. To counter these inherent power differentials, this article asserts that formal mentorship is the responsibility of social work educators. This article presents a conceptual framework that integrates Relational Cultural Theory (RCT), the National Association of Social Work (NASW) Code of Ethics' core values, and the Council on Social Work Education's (CSWE) Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) as a mechanism to support faculty through formal mentorship practices. This article advocates for an amendment to the EPAS to include formal faculty mentorship within accredited programs.*

Keywords: *Formal mentorship, Relational Cultural Theory, NASW Code of Ethics, CSWE EPAS, social work faculty*

The benefits of formal mentorship are widely accepted within the context of higher education as an integral part of supporting faculty professionally and personally (Allen et al., 2018; Brady & Spencer, 2018; Holosko et al., 2016; Jackson et al., 2017; Schmidt & Faber, 2016; Sheridan et al., 2015; Smith et al., 2016). Formal mentorship assists in offsetting challenges faculty face when navigating a career within the complex structure of the academy (Holosko et al., 2016; Wilson et al., 2002). Additionally, formal mentorship is considered particularly critical for women, underrepresented minorities, and those in non-tenure track, part-time, adjunct, or intermittent faculty positions as it serves to counteract the uneven political and power differentials, implicit racial bias, gender discrimination, and rank/status disparities existing within higher education (Brady & Spencer, 2018; Denson et al., 2018; Espino & Zambrana, 2019).

Despite numerous benefits, formal mentoring in the academy remains underutilized (Carmel & Paul, 2015; Ellison & Raskin, 2014; Wilson et al., 2002). Robbins' (1989) seminal study found only about one-third of social work faculty within higher education received formal mentoring. These results remain unmoved over the past 30 years despite significant changes to the landscape in higher education. According to Zerden et al. (2015), though mentoring is recognized as the most common form of faculty development, it is scarce in many institutions. Holosko et al. (2018) indicates that formal mentoring programs are absent in many schools of social work. Further, few institutions are noted to provide formal mentorship supports to new instructors (Brady & Spencer, 2018).

The rates of formal mentorship are even lower for women, underrepresented minorities, and non-tenure track, part-time, adjunct, and intermittent faculty members

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despite the benefits being significantly greater (Allen et al., 2018; Brady & Spencer, 2018; Clark et al., 2011; Denson et al., 2018; Espino & Zambrana, 2019; Holosko et al., 2016; Hoyt et al., 2008; Simon et al., 2004; Sorkness et al., 2017; Tower et al., 2015; Webber, 2018; Webber & Rogers, 2018; Zambrana et al., 2015). Without formal mentorship supports, these faculty groups often experience significant barriers when transitioning to the academy and may experience further marginalization (Pifer et al., 2019; Ronfeldt & McQueen, 2017; Sanders, 2011; Staniforth & Harland, 2006). Numerous studies note women disproportionately face challenges related to isolation, sexual discrimination, work-life imbalances due to caregiving responsibilities, and gender bias within teaching evaluations and research agendas (Denson et al., 2018; Holosko et al., 2016; Rivera & Tilcski, 2019; Webber, 2018). A substantial body of literature illustrates the challenges underrepresented minority faculty members face navigating implicit racial bias, feelings of otherness, and inequitable political power structures that are based on exclusion (Chadiha et al., 2014; Denson et al., 2018; Espino & Zambrana, 2019). Finally, despite a substantial increase in and reliance on non-tenure track faculty, this population often experiences feelings of isolation, a lack of understanding related to institutional and performance expectations, and a sense of disenfranchisement when expressing their views in department and institutional governance (Clark et al., 2011; Fagan-Wilen et al., 2006; Hoyt et al., 2008; Shobe et al., 2014).

Social workers are called to be a voice for those who are marginalized by actively working to dismantle systems of oppression. Likewise, social workers are strong advocates for equity and justice within all practice settings. Challenging systems of oppression is particularly important in the academy as the purpose of social work education is to promote human and community well-being. As such, the purpose of this article is to respond to these disparities within the academy through the presentation of a conceptual framework for formal faculty mentorship that integrates principles of Relational Cultural Theory (RCT), the core values espoused in the National Association of Social Work (NASW) Code of Ethics, and the purpose of social work education as identified in the Council on Social Work Education's (CSWE) Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS). An argument is made that formal mentorship is a responsibility of the professoriate and as such social work educators should advocate for formal mentorship practices within their respective institutions to rectify inherent disparities amongst faculty members. To underscore the importance of formal mentorship, this conceptual framework is presented. One consideration of its implementation may be to amend the EPAS to include a provision for formal faculty mentorship.

The topic of formal mentorship is vast in nature and the scope of this article cannot serve to address all areas. It is beyond this article's scope to operationalize how institutions should create or implement formal mentoring programs. Also, it is beyond the scope of this article to quantify or prescribe specific mentorship curricula. Decisions related to developing, implementing, and evaluating such endeavors should be explored on an institutional level as each has unique needs, challenges, goals, available resources, and a diverse set of campus and community climates to consider. Finally, this article uses RCT as a theoretical framework, though there are numerous theories and constructs that could

be applied in developing formal faculty mentorship practices. To understand the topic of formal mentorship in the academy further, an overview of the literature is presented.

Literature Review

Despite substantial research on the positive benefits of formal faculty mentorship within the academy, these programs remain underutilized in higher education (Carmel & Paul, 2015; Ellison & Raskin, 2014; Wilson et al., 2002). This literature review explores four major themes reflected in the research: a) The various concepts of mentorship; b) the benefits associated with mentorship for all faculty, faculty from marginalized backgrounds and institutions; c) the importance of fit between the mentor and mentee; and d) the challenges of implementing and sustaining formal mentorship practices. Gaps in the literature are also explored.

Concepts of Mentorship

There has been a lack of consistent definition and conceptualization of mentoring (Schmidt & Faber, 2016). For example, Schmidt and Faber (2016) conducted a systematic literature review and identified over 50 varying definitions of mentoring. Some definitions focus on roles and functions involved in mentoring, others concentrate on the mentors' responsibilities, while still others explore the structural considerations of developing such a relationship.

This lack of consensus has been noted in social work and other fields in academia (Muschallik & Pull, 2016). According to a mixed-methods study conducted by Zerden et al. (2015), the term faculty development and mentoring are often used interchangeably and though related, are different. Despite the lack of an exact definition, researchers widely agree on the basic principles (Muschallik & Pull, 2016). The consensus in the field is that mentors contribute to the mentee's overall achievement and acquisition of knowledge, provide emotional and psychological support, and engage to ensure professional development (Schmidt & Faber, 2016).

It is critical to reach an agreed-upon definition of formal mentorship. Without a clear definition, barriers to studying formal mentorship, understanding the intricate nature of these relationships, and developing best practices will persist. As such, the definition of formal mentorship for purposes of this article is two-fold. First, formal mentorship is considered to be a relationship where a more experienced mentor acts as a guide for a less experienced mentee by providing the mentee with career relevant support and advice (Muschallik & Pull, 2016). Further, formal mentorship includes the provision of emotional and psychological support as well as increasing the mentees; level of knowledge to ensure professional development (Schmidt & Faber, 2016). These areas of formal mentorship serve as the guiding principles of formal mentorship and were intentionally selected for this article as each focus on relationship building through providing connection and guidance to faculty as they navigate the inherent challenges of the academy.

Benefits of Formal Mentorship

The benefits of formal mentoring have been extensively studied. For example, Brady and Spencer (2018) indicate mentorship helps to orient and include new faculty members. Faculty members who participate in formal mentoring report higher levels of collegiality and commitment to departmental and institutional relationships and experience more satisfaction with the promotion and tenure process (Jackson et al., 2017; Schmidt & Faber, 2016). In a quantitative meta-analysis of literature related to formal mentoring relationships, Allen et al. (2004) found the presence of formal mentoring to be positively related to an increase in salary level, promotion rates, and job satisfaction.

Additional benefits of formal mentoring include having a designated person to provide support and direction, becoming acclimated to the university system, and receiving help with course and curriculum development (Brady & Spencer, 2018; Schmidt & Faber, 2016). In a qualitative study that focused on informal interviews, document analysis, and participant observation, Smith et al. (2016) found that formal mentoring increased participants' social collaboration, reduced anxiety and isolation, and led to shared responsibilities for faculty projects. Mentoring assists faculty members in prioritizing and obtaining work-life balance as well as gaining moral and psychological support (Schmidt & Faber, 2016). Further benefits for faculty include a clearer direction for scholarly endeavors, an increase in research confidence, and an overall increase in career recognition (Eby et al., 2008; Schmidt & Faber, 2016; Sheridan et al., 2015). Junior-level faculty benefit from formal mentorship whereas mid and later career faculty often find personal satisfaction from serving as a mentor (Schmidt & Faber, 2016; Webber & Rogers, 2018). Given the substantial benefits to faculty who participate in formal mentoring, it is imperative that the professoriate engage in these supportive practices. Such practices should be embraced within social work departments and the larger institutional structure.

Impact of Formal Mentorship on Faculty from Marginalized Backgrounds

Substantial literature indicates formal mentoring is particularly important for women, underrepresented minority faculty, and those who are in non-tenure track, part-time, adjunct, or intermittent positions. Women are more likely to report lower satisfaction within the academy, have a shorter career trajectory, struggle with feelings of isolation and sexual discrimination, and have difficulties in balancing their work and personal life (Holosko et al., 2016; Webber, 2018). Women are also disproportionately represented in non-tenure or part-time professoriate positions and often women and minorities receive less mentoring compared to their white male counterparts (Sorkness et al., 2017; Webber & Rogers, 2018). Research indicates women benefit from access to female mentors as there is often a shared lived experience related to issues of access, sexism, and discriminatory or oppressive organizational cultures that are disproportionately punitive towards women (Simon et al., 2008). Formal mentorship has been noted to provide supports to alleviate many of these stressors (Denson et al., 2018). Formal mentorship for women has proven critical in aiding female faculty to navigate the gender biases that exist within the academy, providing a safe space to have honest discussions around these barriers, and to support women in challenging these noticeable power imbalances (Alvarez & Lazzari, 2016).

Finally, formal mentorship has been identified as a supportive mechanism to lessen the career impediments within institutions for women (Tower et al., 2015).

Formal mentoring is beneficial for underrepresented minority faculty members as it provides skills and knowledge on how to navigate implicit racial bias and political power structures based on concepts of exclusion often found in the academy, particularly in predominantly white institutions (Espino & Zambrana, 2019). Formal mentoring relationships amongst faculty of color are critical as underrepresented minority members benefit from a space to share their lived experiences regarding prejudice and discrimination (Chadiha et al., 2014). Mentors of color transfer knowledge on the institutional norms and behaviors, means to access social capital, impart information on how to navigate systems of oppression, acknowledge feelings of isolation, and address issues related to the hidden agenda found within higher education (Espino & Zambrana, 2019; Zambrana et al., 2015).

This mentoring support is particularly important for women of color. Davis (2009) describes formal mentorship for African American women as critical to achieving promotion, being socialized to formal and informal norms, and in reducing barriers that allow for advancement into administrative and leadership positions. However, this type of mentorship often does not occur and despite the significant benefits, minority faculty members receive even less formal mentorship compared to their white counterparts (Sorkness et al., 2017; Webber & Rogers, 2018). Access to mentors of the same racial or ethnic background is often impossible as there are a limited number of minority faculty within positions of leadership, particularly women of color (Denson et al., 2018; Simon et al., 2004; Zambrana et al., 2015). Across higher education, only 16% of full professors belong to an underrepresented minority group meaning that even when mentoring is present, these faculty are often mentored by white colleagues (Denson et al., 2018). While mentorship can still be helpful, there may be difficulties with mentors relating to the experience of mentees based on differences in racial/ethnic background (Espino & Zambrana, 2019). To combat these challenges, and to increase effective mentorship practices, evidence-based cultural awareness training and skill development is critical to provide for mentors of all races and ethnicities (Byars-Winston et al., 2018; National Center for Faculty Development and Diversity, n.d.; National Institute of General Medical Science, 2020).

Finally, formal mentorship for non-tenure track, part-time, adjunct, and intermittent faculty is also crucial, though these faculty receive significantly less mentorship support when compared to their tenure-track and tenured faculty counterparts. An exploratory survey conducted by Hoyt et al. (2008) found that only 19% of the adjunct faculty participants surveyed were assigned formal faculty mentors. In another exploratory survey, Clark et al. (2011) indicated that approximately 29% of social work programs provide formal mentoring to adjunct faculty. This lack of formal support has significant implications for the quality of teaching in higher education as there has been a shift in the culture of the academy to use more part-time and non-tenure track positions to fill teaching loads (Brady & Spencer, 2018; Webber & Rogers, 2018).

Non-tenure track faculty members often express difficulties understanding the curriculum, course structure, and overall progression or scaffolding of courses (Clark et

al., 2011). Further, non-tenure track faculty often indicate being unclear about the policies and procedures of the university and lack a sound understanding of various teaching pedagogies (Clark et al., 2011). Shobe et al. (2014) note non-tenure track faculty members repeatedly experience poor working conditions such as not having an office phone, desk, or workspace. Non-tenure track faculty report increased feelings of isolation from colleagues and the overall institutional environment and are often alienated from discussions around change or governance (Fagan-Wilen et al., 2006).

Much research has been conducted on the critical function of non-tenure track faculty within the academy. However, despite the vital need for non-tenure track faculty, there are limited supports provided that demonstrate a commitment to their contribution within departments and higher education institutions. Formal mentorship is a critical step towards supporting and valuing non-tenure track, adjunct, part-time, and intermittent faculty and can serve to alleviate many of the issues noted (Clark et al., 2011; Fagan-Wilen et al., 2006; Hoyt et al., 2008; Shobe et al., 2014). Given the profession's ethical commitment to social justice, equity, and inclusivity, it is critical to provide this group of faculty members with the formal mentorship supports necessary to feel respected and valued.

Institutional Benefits

Not only are there benefits of mentoring to faculty members, but these also extend to the institutions themselves. Institutions benefit when there are intentional investments made in formal mentoring practices to assist all faculty members in achieving a work-life balance (Jackson et al., 2017). Institutional benefits of formal mentorship include higher rates of faculty recruitment, retention, and commitment to their institution which culminate in an overall richer environment for students (Allen et al., 2004; Miller et al., 2016; Sheridan et al., 2015). An additional benefit of formal mentorship includes enhancing faculty diversity (Chadiha et al., 2014; Sheridan et al., 2015). This increase in diversity is noted to extend to retaining faculty and students of color, as well as enrolling higher numbers of underrepresented minority students (Chadiha et al., 2014). Having a diverse faculty prepares students for participation in an increasingly diverse society and workforce (Chadiha et al., 2014). An increase in prestige indicators, such as program rankings and attracting quality students, are also noted as an institutional benefit of formal mentoring (Miller et al., 2016). Overall, institutional climate, work environment, and scholarship productivity is noted to be higher when mentoring is present (Gilroy, 2004; Schmidt & Faber, 2016).

To successfully implement mentoring practices, institutions must create a culture that encourages and promotes mentoring (Chadiha, et al., 2014; Espino & Zambrana, 2019; Pifer et al., 2019; Salinas et al., 2020). Institutions must be committed to facilitating multiple mentoring opportunities and building support mechanisms to ensure individual and organizational success (Sheridan et al., 2015). Further, institutions must have appropriate infrastructure supports that align mentoring relationship goals with institutional goals as well as clear mechanisms in place to match mentors and mentees (Sheridan et al., 2015).

The Importance of Fit

In addition to institutions having clear structures in place to support formal mentorship programs, arguably the most important predictor of success is the match between mentor and mentee. Ragins et al. (2000) state that while dysfunctional and harmful mentoring relationships are not the norm, there is potential for these challenges to arise. While serious issues are uncommon, some mentoring relationships are described as only marginally satisfying and at times challenges from the mentor's personal life can spill into the relationship, causing dissatisfaction on the part of the mentee (Ragins et al., 2000).

When engaging in formal mentorship relationships, it is critical to address any challenges related to hierarchy or superiority. Angelique et al. (2002) assert that mentoring relationships can lead to replaying dominant, hierarchical power structures found in the workplace. Concerns have been raised regarding the dyadic relationships formed in mentorship (Waddle et al., 2016). It is critical to be mindful of the expectations around formal mentorship as some mentors may take advantage of a mentee by having unrealistic expectations of the relationship, place excessive time demands on the mentee, or engage in inappropriate sexual relationships (Angelique et al., 2002).

To promote the best mentor-mentee match, Allen et al. (2004) suggest that mentors focus on providing career and psychosocial supports which encompasses a more holistic relational approach. Bozeman et al. (2008) also adds that aligning mentor and mentee expectations, preferences, communication, learning styles, and personality types are critical in assuring a good fit. Without this, mentees may experience increased levels of stress which decreases the positive impact formal mentorship can have.

Challenges of Implementing and Sustaining Formal Mentorship Practices

Despite the multi-faceted benefits of mentoring, there are several obstacles to implementing and sustaining these practices within academia. There is often a lack of institutional support and resources to implement sustainable formal mentoring programs (Sheridan et al., 2015). Institutions are facing financial challenges leading to deep department budget cuts (Pifer et al., 2019). Due to these budget constraints, tenure-line positions may not be replaced when a faculty member leaves the institution, is promoted, transitions to a new position, or retires. This might decrease the number of experienced faculty at an institution to serve in a mentor role.

Institutions often lack a methodological approach to mentoring that is individualized and collaborative (Zerden et al., 2015). Frequently, there is no prescribed curriculum for mentors, and some mentors struggle to adequately provide help to underrepresented scholars (Lewis et al., 2017). Mentors often lack awareness of their own privilege and may not know how to connect with those from a diverse population (Lewis et al., 2017). Further, mentoring check-ins and meetings can be difficult due to scheduling conflicts, particularly if the faculty member being mentored is part-time and not on campus during traditional hours (Brady & Spencer, 2018).

Despite these challenges, mentors' express feelings of personal satisfaction in giving back to faculty (Salinas et al., 2020; Schmidt & Faber, 2016; Webber & Rogers, 2018). However, mentors resoundingly indicate mentorship would be a more sustainable practice if institutions were intentional in this process and provided additional staff or release time to assist in mentoring efforts (Brady & Spencer, 2018; Schmidt & Faber, 2016). To truly actualize the goal of higher education, institutions must commit to living their mission and values through the relational connection provided by formal mentorship practices. While these practices may have an associated cost to implement and sustain, faculty turnover, poor morale, and lower institutional outcomes also have a cost.

Gaps in the Literature

While qualitative research has been conducted to shed light on the experiences of faculty mentors and mentees, quantitative research is limited (Andreanoff, 2016). Additionally, there have been minimal studies that specifically explore the attitudes of those across social work departmental leadership positions on the impact of formal mentoring and the apparent disconnect between the benefits and the underutilization of mentorship in the academy. Research that explores this area would be valuable as those in positions of leadership create the department and institutional culture, set program initiatives, and prioritize where resources and energy will be expended.

Further, there has been minimal research that explores formal mentorship programs that specifically employ principles grounded in the RCT framework as well as how this perspective impacts faculty, social work departments, and institutions. There is a substantial body of literature on the positive impacts of formal mentorship on all faculty as well as literature on historically marginalized groups such as women, underrepresented minorities, and those in non-tenure track, part-time, adjunct, or intermittent positions. However, there is a lack of research on how formal mentorship grounded in RCT principles compares to other theoretical frameworks. Further, since this conceptual framework proposes a new set of integrated components, it is vital to determine its viability and impact through further research. Additional areas that would be beneficial to explore are the development and implementation of a formal mentorship curriculum for mentors and mentees using the components highlighted in this conceptual framework.

Proposed Conceptual Framework

To respond to this need within the academy, this conceptual framework is offered as a mechanism to support formal mentorship practices within social work departments. The conceptual framework presented provides a roadmap to assist in the creation of formal mentorship practices based on professional values such as respect, inclusion, and empowerment that may significantly improve overall faculty and institutional culture. Through the integration of RCT principles, the core values identified in the NASW Code of Ethics, and the purpose of social work education as defined in the CSWE EPAS guidelines, formal mentorship can serve to address inequities situated within the academy in a manner that is consistent with our professional and professorial responsibilities. In this spirit, this author strongly urges those at institutional and departmental levels to employ

formal mentorship practices with all faculty members; however, attention should be paid to those from historically oppressed groups within the academy.

To understand these components more thoroughly, each will be explored individually. Following this, a discussion will be presented identifying how each component is integrated into this framework. Finally, a diagram of the conceptual framework is presented.

Relational Cultural Theory

The main theory integrated within this conceptual framework is Relational Cultural Theory. RCT, originally developed by the well-known feminist scholar and activist Dr. Jean Baker Miller, asserts that growth occurs through connection, mutual and empathic relationships, and empowerment (Jordan & Hartling, 2008; Miller, 1986). RCT has three implicit assumptions that fit well within a formal mentorship paradigm focused on the inclusion of marginalized groups in the academy. This theory is unapologetically pro-social justice oriented and focuses on marginalized and oppressed groups by utilizing a depathologizing perspective to view relational approaches in non-judgmental contexts (Comstock et al., 2008; Duffy & Trepal, 2016). Explicit assumptions of RCT also connect to formal mentorship endeavors. The core belief of RCT is that people seek connection, which can be achieved through empathy and empowerment (Jordan & Hartling, 2008). Growth-fostering relationships are actualized by increasing a person's sense of worth as well as the ability for each person to view him/herself more clearly within the context of the relationship (Jordan & Hartling, 2008). Finally, RCT emphasizes the necessity of environments to be responsive to individual needs through outwardly recognizing and correcting power differentials and oppressive imbalances (Comstock et al., 2008). Employing formal mentoring practices that apply components of RCT directly allows for the acknowledgment and challenging of structural power imbalances that are often perpetuated within the academy.

Core Values of the NASW Code of Ethics

The second component within this integrated conceptual framework on formal mentorship uses the six core values of the NASW Code of Ethics which serves as an anchor for the profession. The purpose of the NASW Code of Ethics (2017) is to provide the profession with a basic set of values, ethical principles, and standards that guide the conduct of social workers, regardless of practice setting. Formal mentorship within the academy fits squarely within each of these six core values: service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, the importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence.

The value of service requires social workers to help those in need, which directly relates to acclimating faculty throughout their career to the many responsibilities within the academy. A lack of formal mentorship within the academy disproportionately impacts the groups that are the focus of this article, an issue connected to the value of social justice. Systems of oppression that further marginalize groups within higher education must be confronted by social work educators. This is accomplished through employing formal

mentoring practices that respect the inherent dignity and worth of a person through mindful consideration of individual differences, appreciation of diversity, and connection through relational practices.

Next, social workers recognize the importance of human relationships by strengthening, restoring, maintaining, and enhancing relationships with all people to ensure overall well-being and belonging. This value is clearly demonstrated through the authentic connection and empowerment found within formal mentoring practices. The value of integrity requires social workers to act in a trustworthy manner that promotes ethical practices particularly within the institutions they are affiliated with. This value can be demonstrated within formal mentorship practices. The mentor-mentee relationship is critical in acclimating faculty to the department and the larger institution's practices. Finally, competence is demonstrated through the development and enhancement of professional expertise, transmitted through the mentor-mentee relationship.

Council on Social Work Education's Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards

The third component integrated within this conceptual framework is the 2015 CSWE (2015) EPAS which is the basis to view social work education. It should be noted that the 2022 EPAS is in draft form and as it is currently written includes no provisions for formal faculty mentorship. Adding this provision should be considered. According to CSWE, the purpose of social work education is to promote human and community well-being, respect human diversity, and enhance quality of life through the pursuit of social and economic justice. Within these standards, there are sections related to the implicit curriculum where formal mentorship would clearly serve as a benefit to educators and social work programs. Specifically, sections related to the culture of human interchange, support for difference and diversity, and the recruitment and retention of personnel support the inclusion of formal mentoring. Embedding formal mentorship into the accreditation standards and embracing a commitment to this in the academy would ensure all social work programs are firmly grounded in the core values of the social work profession, which is the obligation of all accredited programs. Living the core values of the profession and espousing, through actions, the ethical principles of social work, the professoriate is called to make substantial change to address the inherent disparities noted within the academy. In achieving this systemic change, the professoriate would be fully recognizing the overarching purpose of higher education. Formal mentorship, through its endeavor to level this uneven playing field, therefore, is a means to actualize this goal.

Integration of Components

When considering integrating the three components of this conceptual framework, the author sought to connect the core values of social work with the educational practices that guide social work programs. Equally important to the author was the focus on relationships and empowerment as the catalyst to impact change and sustainable outcomes on an individual, departmental, and institutional level. RCT serves as the theoretical underpinnings of this conceptual framework and connects seamlessly to the profession of

social work and to the overarching goals of social work education. By using a relationally-based framework that connects to the social work profession's core values, and to the purpose of social work education, formal mentorship can serve as the beginning point to empower faculty who are often excluded. Marginalized faculty members are often silenced within the academy. This exclusion is noted in disparities related to the overall culture, voice in governance, and true belonging within the structure of the academy (Clark et al., 2011; Fagan-Wilen et al., 2006; Hoyt et al., 2008; Shobe et al., 2014).

This framework is a step towards beginning the critical work necessary to rebalance uneven power structures, oppression, and marginalization found within higher education. By integrating these components, a supportive departmental and institutional culture can be created where the explicit curriculum can be fully recognized. Within this framework, the implicit curriculum is transparent and no longer a secret that only some faculty gain access to. As such, providing formal mentorship for faculty is a necessity that should be fully embraced by social work educators as it aligns with the profession's responsibilities and values. Figure 1 depicts this integrated conceptual framework.

Discussion

Providing formal mentorship supports for all faculty is critical to actualizing the purpose of higher education and to fulfilling the responsibilities of social work educators. Social workers should be committed to advocating for and implementing inclusive, relationally-based practices on a mentor-mentee level and institutional level for historically marginalized groups within the academy. Examples of inclusive and relationally-based mentor-mentee practices include developing reciprocal relationships built on mutual respect, empathy, and empowerment; providing intentional connections and guidance for mentees navigating the challenging climate of higher education; and acknowledging and actively addressing inherent power differentials often based on concepts of exclusion (Alvarez & Lazzari, 2016; Angelique et al., 2002; Chadiha et al., 2014, Denson et al., 2018; Miller, 1986). On an institutional level, social workers should be committed to advocating for flexible and inclusive policies to meet faculty life obligations; recognize and celebrate faculty contributions; challenge practices that are exclusionary and based on privilege; and actively seek to recruit and retain underrepresented faculty (Chun & Evans, 2008; Duntley-Matos, 2014).

Formal mentorship practices are a vital part of empowering, supporting, recruiting, and retaining a diverse faculty. There is a substantial body of literature that demonstrates the positive impact formal mentorship has on faculty, institutions, student outcomes, and the social work profession. Despite these benefits formal mentorship remains woefully underutilized, particularly for the most marginalized groups within the academy. To counter these power differentials and disparities, this author strongly argues for the inclusion of formal mentorship, based on the integrated components of this conceptual framework, to the EPAS guidelines.

Figure 1. *Formal Mentorship Conceptual Framework for Social Work*

Principles		
Connection achieved through empathy & empowerment	Responsive environment	Rebalance power differentials
Mentor Relationship — Mentor & mentee engage in a reciprocal relationship where each are seen as a whole person. Mutual respect & trust are formed within the context of a growth-fostering relationship. Empowerment occurs through building confidence & success.	Mentor provides connections for mentee & assists in professional development. Coaching & professional advice is provided to assist the mentee in navigating the institutional & political environment.	Intentional focus on hierarchical relationships & historical marginalization. Power differentials in relationships acknowledged & work towards balancing. Differences in background recognized with commitment to life-long learning that is inclusive. Trust is built by acknowledging each person is an expert of their own experience that are honored & valued.
Institution — Policies are flexible & inclusive. Policies reflect real-world challenges faculty encounter & are responsive to their needs. Institutional leadership expresses gratitude & demonstrates that faculty are valued.	Faculty input sought & pro-active approach is taken to reduce barriers. When issues arise, institution responds appropriately. Department & larger institution provides faculty with tangible supports to meet developmental goals. A thorough examination of historical policies that prioritize/ privilege only a few while excluding others occurs with a commitment to change exclusive policies & practices	Acknowledge inherent structural power differentials that continue to marginalize groups within the academy. Commitment to eliminating patterns of marginalization & enhancing efforts to recruit & retain underrepresented faculty.
Outcomes — Faculty are more connected to their institution & experience feelings of belonging, understanding, success, & are valued.	Justice oriented environment that meets individual, department, & institutional needs.	Creation of a more equitable & justice-oriented culture where difference & diversity are celebrated.

Implications for Social Work Education

The impact of formal mentorship cannot be overstated and is repeatedly demonstrated within the literature. Recruitment and retention of a more diverse faculty body, a more positive department and institutional work culture, and a more satisfied and engaged faculty body are present when formal mentorship is intentionally employed. Formal mentorship that is consistent with this conceptual framework would positively impact these outcomes and work to shift the paradigm within higher education. As the landscape and culture of higher education is changing, it is more important than ever to implement formal mentorship supports to ensure faculty, departmental, and institutional success. There are significant implications and challenges presented within higher education due to this shifting landscape. These challenges can be mitigated by implementing formal mentorship. It is imperative that the profession continue to maintain its focus on the guiding purpose of social work education, which is to promote human and community well-being, respect human diversity, and enhance quality of life through the pursuit of social and economic justice. Given this charge, it is our professional duty to provide formal mentorship supports to all faculty, particularly those who are often the most marginalized. Therefore, we are called as a profession to re-affirm our commitment to the purpose of social work education.

Limitations

The topic of formal mentorship is complex in nature. Thus, there are multiple avenues to explore what approach is the best in terms of supporting faculty within the academy. As this article is conceptual in nature, it presents one perspective on how to view, organize, and study the phenomenon of formal mentorship. This approach may not work for all departments or types of institutions. As noted previously, multiple approaches to formal mentorship have been considered with varying levels of success. This conceptual framework adds to the existing body of literature on the topic and warrants further exploration and testing to ascertain its viability within departments and institutions.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Advocating for marginalized groups is a fundamental responsibility of the social work profession. Historically, social work's roots and ethical obligations are grounded in a commitment to social justice, equality, and inclusivity. Considering this focus, it is a professional imperative that those within the academy advocate to mitigate the disparities that exist within higher education for women, underrepresented minorities, and those in non-tenure track positions. The literature on the positive impact formal mentorship has, particularly for these marginalized groups, is well-established and compelling. Despite this, there has been a lack of response from the majority within the academy to address these inequities. This silence has further disempowered those most vulnerable within higher education.

In response, this integrated conceptual framework acknowledges the disparities and presents a path forward that mitigates the inequities through the inclusion of formal

mentorship practices for all faculty members. By instituting formal faculty mentorship practices consistent with this conceptual framework, inherent power differentials within the academy are brought to the forefront. These issues are explicitly recognized in the mentor-mentee dyad, as well as at an institutional level. This recognition and active work towards addressing these disparities begins to move the needle towards an inclusive system where diversity is respected and true growth-fostering and connecting relationships are actualized. The author proposes that formal mentorship practices should be included in the EPAS guidelines to address these disparities. These practices solidify a commitment to support faculty, departments, and institutions. This addition should be viewed through a supportive lens and not as an infringement on academic freedom or as a mechanism to prescribe a strict matrix of activities and tasks that must be completed. This addition would ensure that all accredited social work programs provide formal mentorship supports to faculty but leaves the implementation of such practices to the individual schools' best judgement given their unique position in understanding their faculty as well as their departmental and institutional needs.

Future Research

While formal mentorship is not a new concept within higher education, further study regarding this topic is needed. There is a lack of literature related to implementing formal mentorship based on the integrated components put forth in this conceptual framework. Both quantitative and qualitative research is needed to explore whether this framework is a viable model for faculty mentorship. Further, creating a curriculum based on these integrated components would provide concrete support and a professional knowledge base to mentors and social work departments who wish to implement a formal mentorship program based on these principles.

Additionally, there is a lack of research on institutional and departmental leaderships' commitment to implementing and sustaining formal mentorship practices. This author is engaged in exploratory research to ascertain a deeper understanding of the attitudes toward formal mentoring among those in leadership positions. To date there is limited literature available on how this population views formal mentorship opportunities. This is a critical voice to capture and thus warrants further investigation. Understanding the value those in leadership positions place on mentoring is essential in identifying the apparent disconnect between the benefits and implementation of formal mentorship. Finally, it is imperative that those in departmental and institutional leadership positions value and promote formal mentorship opportunities throughout the careers of faculty. Formal mentorship, based on relational concepts, should be aligned with the vision, mission, and core values of the institution, and be viewed as an integral part in achieving educational excellence.

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