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Mentoring as Consulting: A Study of the IWCA Mentor Match Program Reflection

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New writing center professionals (WCPs) often need to look outside their own academic institutions and to their national organizations for support that helps orient them to their writing center work. Writing center scholars such as Anne Ellen Geller and Harry Denny, Dawn Fels et al., and Nikki Caswell et al. have focused on the challenges faced by WCPs and on the need for mentoring opportunities to help WCPs address these unique challenges. The International Writing Centers Association (IWCA) sought to meet this need by developing a mentoring program to match new professionals with more experienced professionals. The IWCA Mentor Match Program was initially founded in 2011; we took over as co-chairs in 2014 and recruited a new round of participants, attracting 32 mentors and 47 mentees. (The program has since grown to over 100 participants.) Our exploratory mixed-methods study based on initial interviews and a follow-up survey focuses on this program, which we co-chaired from 2014-2018. Our study was generously supported by a research grant from the IWCA.

Initially, we set out to understand the benefits to both mentors and mentees of participating in the IWCA Mentor Match Program. In the spring of 2018, we conducted ten interviews with participants who had been involved with the IWCA Mentor Match Program for almost two years: five mentors and five mentees. Interviews were semi-structured, lasting between 20 and 40 minutes, and conducted using Zoom or Skype. We asked both mentors and mentees the same questions, focusing on their expectations for mentoring, their actual experiences, and their personal definition of a mentor. After conducting the interviews, variations in mentoring descriptions led us to refocus our study. We redesigned the study protocol and IRB application to include a survey. We developed separate surveys for mentors and mentees, with each survey consisting of nine

Likert questions; we focus this article on the six statements we posed to both mentors and mentees. Each question provided a statement designed to capture the participants' perspectives on whether their mentor or mentee was meeting their expectations, who should initiate and maintain the relationship, and how to strengthen the relationship both personally and professionally. Fifty-seven participants (72% of the total program participants) completed the survey.

In our analysis of interview and survey responses, we found some similarities but also some differences between mentors' and mentees' definitions of and expectations for mentoring. When we interviewed participants, mentors described using mentoring techniques that we interpret as facilitative and intentionally non-hierarchical, which can be comparable to techniques often used in writing center tutorials, especially with undergraduate peer-to-peer tutoring contexts—for instance, when the tutor asks guiding questions, prompts the writer to think of new language, or asserts the writer's right to accept or reject their suggestions. While the approach used by the mentors we studied might not reflect the full range of approaches to writing center tutoring, we saw how they applied an approach that is similar to writing center tutoring in order to resist a hierarchical, traditional mentoring exchange. However, because their approach was not directly named, some misalignment in expectations among mentors and mentees emerged from the surveys. Because of this variation, we argue for the value of a mentoring model for WCPs—and for writing centers more broadly—that makes a mentoring approach informed by writing center praxis more visible and intentional.

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS: INTERVIEWS

Different qualities or traits of mentoring emerged in our interviews with mentors and mentees. Some emphasized the motivational aspects of mentoring, such as the "desire to connect and be helpful," "willingness," or "being sincere." Others highlighted affective aspects, such as "empathy" or "being a good listener." Additional mentoring traits that emerged were knowledge-related, such as "experience and understanding of the field, its resources, its organizations," and facilitative, such as the ability to create structure.

This range of mentoring qualities aligns with some of the common definitions from the mentoring literature. Highlighting the characteristics of what W. Brad Johnson calls emotional intelligence and what Andrew Hobson et al. describe as emotional and psychosocial support, interviewees described the importance of "compassion and empathy" and "a sense of being able to identify the other's

needs." For instance, one response, typical of both mentors and mentees, describes empathy as "understand[ing] where the person's coming from so that the information that's given back addresses the question being asked as opposed to coming at it from, here's what I want to offer to this person." Other elements of mentoring that are discussed in the literature, such as openness (Hobson et al.) and a willingness to mentor (Gisbert-Trejo et al.) are also described by the interviewees, who talk of the need for mentors to "desire to connect and be helpful," to have "open-mindedness" and "trustworthiness," to be "sincere" as well as "willing to listen," or to "be a good listener."

Fostering a relationship that is non-hierarchical and encourages autonomy, something Hobson et al. also note as crucial to mentoring, was also discussed in the interviews: one mentee thought that their mentor might "[j]ust tell me what to do . . . but that's kind of what I'm hoping he'll be like . . . . [Instead] he doesn't like to try to push me anywhere. But he asks a lot of questions to help himself and me . . . [to] understand the larger picture." Another mentee offered an understanding of what Hung Yun et al. call "mutual mentoring": "I was kind of hoping it would be what it has become, to be honest. Someone that I could bounce ideas off of." Finally, participants described mentors as needing to balance interpersonal skills and practical or technical knowledge; mutual respect is also seen as important. Thus, without referencing any mentoring scholarship explicitly, the interviewees highlighted evidence-based qualities of effective mentoring: emotional intelligence, emotional and psychosocial support, openness, willingness to mentor, being non-hierarchical, and encouraging autonomy.

Many of these characteristics of effective mentoring are also apparent in the writer-tutor relationship that occurs in writing center tutorials; notably, the complicated role of collaboration in contexts in which there is the potential for hierarchy, well documented by early writing center scholars such as John Trimbur, Andrea Lunsford, Muriel Harris, and Nancy Grimm, as well as more recently by Dagmar Scharold and John Nordlof, among others. In addition to collaboration, writing center praxis emphasizes fostering agency and independent decision-making, as discussed by Harry Denny and in tutor training guides written by Paula Gillespie and Neal Lerner or Michelle Ianetta and Lauren Fitzgerald. The importance of a collaborative, facilitative relationship between mentor and mentee was recently chronicled by Maureen McBride and Molly Rentscher, who were participants in the Mentor Match Program at the time we were co-chairs. Not only was their mentoring relationship collabo-

rative, but also the mentoring led to additional collaborations on conference presentations and an article.

McBride and Rentscher talk about how their partnership thrived, but they emphasize that it did so in the absence of guidelines for how to proceed with their mentoring relationship. Mentoring scholars such as Hobson et al. and David Clutterbuck argue for the importance of providing guidelines for mentoring interactions. However, in the Mentor Match Program, by intentionally giving partners the flexibility to create their own agendas and guidelines for interactions, we did not provide more detailed guidelines. In the absence of these guidelines, some mentors took an approach that we note is similar to a common type of writing center praxis; for instance, letting the mentee set the agenda for what to focus on is similar to how a writer helps set the agenda in a writing tutorial, and fostering collaboration that occurs between the mentor and mentee is similar to what occurs between the tutor and the writer. However, the surveys revealed a lack of awareness that this approach was being used, which may have added to a lack of clarity for some mentoring partnerships on how to proceed and who was responsible for which aspects of the mentoring relationship. The variety of mentoring definitions also reveals different expectations among participants.

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS: SURVEYS

Extending from the interviews with selected participants in the Mentor Match Program, the survey was intended to capture the perspectives of all participants. The survey first asked respondents to list three words they would use to describe the role or disposition of a mentor. The mentors' most commonly referenced words were "supportive" and "available" or "accessible" (5 out of 10 responses, or 50%). The mentees' most commonly referenced words were "experienced" or "knowledgeable" (18 out of 36 responses, or 50%). Only four of the 36 mentees (11%) used the word "supportive." While three of the 10 mentors also wrote "knowledgeable," none wrote the word "experienced." While there is some overlap here—both mentees and mentors believe that being knowledgeable is important—mentors emphasize being supportive and available.

In our Likert-scale questions, we sought to gauge the expectations of participants and to understand if mentors and mentees shared those expectations (see Table 1 for results).

These responses show that both mentors and mentees value regular meetings and the opportunity to connect socially in order to build rapport. Other responses, particularly to the statements

about who should set the agenda for meetings and who should make initial contact, vary: regarding agenda-setting, most mentors believe that this is not their role, and regarding initial contact, most mentees believe the mentor should reach out. What these differences reveal is the potential for misunderstanding and a lack of clear expectations about mentor and mentee roles.

Table 1: Percentages of Mentors and Mentees Who "Agreed" or "Strongly Agreed" to Mentoring Relationship Statements

Mentoring Relationship Statement	Mentors	Mentees
I like regularly scheduled meeting times with my mentor/mentee.	56%	58%
It would be beneficial to me to interact with my mentor/mentee socially to build rapport.	69%	65%
I should set the agenda for our meetings.	8%	47%
My mentor/mentee should establish a system to keep our communication ongoing.	67%	46%
My mentor/ mentee should reach out to me and establish contact early in our relationship.	46%	87%

Note: The response rates for this survey includes 13 mentors and 37 mentees.

Given these results, we wonder if mentees are coming into the program with the idea of mentors as experts and themselves as novices, aligned with a hierarchical model of mentoring as discussed by Lilian Eby and Nuria Gisbert-Trejo et al., among other mentoring scholars. This idea may be based on their previous experiences of mentoring but also because the program was organized to pair up an experienced writing center professional with a new writing center professional. On the other hand, mentors—experienced directors but possibly inexperienced mentors, especially in contexts outside of their institution—seem to be approaching their mentoring with a collaborative, writing-tutorial-style interaction in mind, one in which mentees (writers) are invited to set the agenda and reaction or response is favored over direct advice.

CONCLUSION

Mentors and mentees in our study emphasized different mentoring qualities and the need for more structure to support their mentoring relationships. The surveys revealed some misalignment between mentors' and mentees' expectations for certain aspects of the relationship, such as who establishes contact, determines a system for communication, and sets the agenda for the interaction. We observed from our analysis of the interviews that mentors were

using an approach to their mentoring that was congruent with the approach to writing center tutoring that uses a non-hierarchical, peer-to-peer model, yet mentees were expecting mentors to approach their interactions from a more traditional, "mentor-as-expert" orientation.

While the survey received a high response rate (72%, n=57), with such a small number of interviews (n=10), we are cautious about making broad recommendations from our findings. However, we do recommend explicit discussion between participants about the nature of their mentoring relationship. McBride and Rentscher, drawing on their experiences as participants in the Mentor Match Program, recommend that this program—and other mentoring programs like it—develop professional guidelines, offer training for participants, and provide resources. Many of these suggestions have already been taken up by the current co-chairs of the Mentor Match Program as it continues to grow. For instance, the current co-chairs coordinate a series of workshops to support and enhance the one-to-one mentoring relationships; more information about these workshops is available on the IWCA's website at www.writingcenters.org.

The growth of the IWCA Mentor Match Program, recommendations from McBride and Rentscher, and our own research confirm the value of mentoring models that offer alternatives to the traditional hierarchical model, which often emphasizes one-directional expert to novice advice. Monica Higgins and David Thomas offer the framework of a mentoring "constellation" to describe a networked set of mentoring relationships an individual can tap into to help them with various aspects of their professional and personal development (310). Another alternative to a traditional hierarchical arrangement is Jeannette Alarcón and Silvia Bettez's Muxerista's mentoring model. This model creates space to work with intersectionalities of race, class, and gender, as it relates to LatinX and other marginalized people. This partnership becomes mutually beneficial, with participants cognizant of mitigating power differences within the mentoring relationship, validating and drawing on each person's strengths to maintain the mentorship. Both of these models are beneficial for all who participate in mentoring but are particularly important for writing center professionals from underrepresented groups. For instance, people of color in predominantly white institutions can experience both workplace isolation and social isolation, as Dwayne Mack et al. discuss. This is the case for WCPs and also for tutors of color working in writing centers that are predominately white.

We note that the ways that IWCA Mentor Match mentors draw on writing center praxis challenges traditional mentoring hierarchies. The program itself has evolved since we conducted our study to focus on more preparation for new mentors and a more intentional approach to mentoring; this change is occurring as we reflect on our mentoring approaches in our professional conferences and in our daily writing center practices. Given how central non-hierarchical collaboration is to the writing center ethos, we recommend participants in any formal or informal mentoring relationship take time to develop a framework for their mentoring that clearly articulates expectations and highlights how the mentoring relationship aligns with the values and practices of our field.

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