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# **Career development in higher education through group mentoring.**

## **A case study of desirable attributes and perceptions of a current program**

### **Abstract**

Although group mentoring is not widely utilised in higher education settings, it has been viewed to successfully help the research careers of academics (Walkington, Vanderheide and Hughes, 2008). This paper explores the results of a qualitative and quantitative study about perceptions of one university-based group mentoring program. The results enable an understanding of challenges that might exist in attracting potential participants to a group mentoring program. Results indicate that organizations implementing a group mentoring program need to make sure goals and outcomes of the program are properly communicated, and that these also need to align with academics' priorities for career development.

### **Introduction**

Group mentoring is rarely utilised, with one-on-one mentoring the more favoured tool for a mentoring program, despite substantial research evidence that group mentoring is an effective career development tool (Walkington, Vanderheide and Hughes, 2008). Approximately eighteen years ago, a group-mentoring model was introduced into an Australian university. Programs for academic and administrative staff ran concurrently, but separately. Although academic participants find it a very useful experience (Walkington, Vanderheide and Hughes, 2008) there appeared to be anecdotal evidence that non-participants had a negative opinion of the program. Furthermore, participation by academic staff was lower than that by the administrative staff members. To understand whether these negative views were in fact prevalent among academic

staff and what could be done to enhance the program and improve its image among potential participants, this research was undertaken. The program at this particular university was assessed in depth by McCormack and West (2006), however this was based on reviews by participants, rather than the perceptions of staff who had not undertaken the program.

The objective of this paper, therefore, is to provide a series of recommendations for organizations seeking to implement a group mentoring strategy, focusing on program goals, structure and promotion. This paper commences with an overview of the program, and in doing so, highlights some of the literature related to mentoring. The study and its findings is then discussed, concluding with implications for organizations seeking to implement a similar program.

### **An overview of mentoring**

In 1999, the Women's Group Mentoring Program (WGMP) was developed at an Australian university, seeking to improve networking across the university, and enhance career development for women. Although the program is targeted toward all female staff at the university, at the time of this study more non-academic staff had participated than academic staff. Consequently, our focus in this study was on academic staff only. The authors of this paper participated together in the program. Without this program they would not have met and they have found it was very successful in developing skills and networks, and meeting professional goals.

Mentoring generally involves the relationship between someone of greater expertise in a given setting, working with someone of lesser experience (Walkington, Vandeheide and Hughes, 2008). The most common approach is a one-to-one relationship and is focused on assisting the 'novice' to grow and learn as a professional (Walkington, 2005), however there is increasing

research on group mentoring (Mitchell, 1999; Angelique, Kyle and Taylor, 2002; Level and Mach, 2005; Osgood Smith, Whitman, Grant, Stautz, Russett and Rankin, 2001; McCormack, 2006; McCormack and West, 2006 and Wasburn, 2007): The literature suggests group mentoring can provide support for promotion and tenure through the development of a network of relationships and the use of peers as mentors (Walkington, Vanderheide and Hughes, 2008 and Osgood Smith, et al, 2001): Group mentoring can support career development (Dansky, 1996), due to the expertise and knowledge of a variety of people within the group (McCormack and West, 2006). Everyone in the group acts as a mentor and a mentee (Clifford, 2003).

Research indicates strong support for a relationship between mentoring and career advancement (Ehrich, Hansford and Tennent, 2004). Mentoring in higher education addresses areas such as research, teaching, working towards tenure and striking a balance between work and life (McCormack, 2006; Gardiner, M., Eliasson, Berggren, Bondestam, 2000; Anifotos, M., 2002; Baker, 2002; Gibson, 2004 and Kram, 1988). While retaining the benefits of one-on-one mentoring, the group mentoring model removes many of the hindrances of the more traditional mentoring model, including unsuccessful mentor matching and lack of expertise (Angelique, Kyle and Taylor, 2002; Wasburn, 2007 and West, 2004).

There is a lack of empirical evidence regarding group mentoring programs in higher education, however a small number of recent studies serve to dispel the initial perceptions of many workplace supervisors that group mentoring is “just a woman’s chit chat session” (Level and Mach, 2005; West and McCormack, 2003 and Quinlan, 1999) with positive outcomes evident. Given the lack of studies in this area, the major objective for this study was to determine the characteristics of a desirable group mentoring program to foster academic staff’s participation in

such a program, or their likelihood of recommending participation to their colleagues. We were also interested to note whether perceptions of the program matched up with the desirable characteristics reported by respondents. To do this, a research study was implemented, which will now be discussed.

## **Methodology**

Due to the exploratory nature of the study, we utilised a mixed methods approach, with a survey followed by in depth interviews exploring some of the concepts in more detail. An online survey (hosted at [www.questionpro.com](http://www.questionpro.com)) explored perceptions of the WGMP among academic staff, and motivations for and barriers to participation. A series of open ended questions were also asked, giving respondents the opportunity to elaborate on themes throughout. We then undertook a series of targeted, semi-structured interviews to further enrich our understanding of the issues raised in the survey.

Our broad research objective was to determine the perceptions of the program, to identify barriers to participation, creating the basis for a series of implications for the introduction of a group mentoring model in a higher education setting.

The two authors had both participated in the program, and in fact met each other through the program. This provided a greater understanding of both the program's structure and some of the perceptions other staff had regarding the mentoring program. Their experiences with the program may have created a bias and therefore they employed a research assistant to conduct interviews. Based on the literature review and the authors' own experience of the program, therefore, a questionnaire was developed with 21 items. These items fell into 5 broad domains:

- Demographics
- Awareness of the program
- Beliefs about program's aims and structure
- Barriers to participation/recommending others to participate
- Additional questions about respondents' beliefs about academic women's career paths

The survey was amended slightly after an ethics committee review, consultation with an Information Technology expert and a pilot test of the initial questionnaire. Once finalised, a list of academic staff were reviewed and those in our immediate work groups were removed from the list. Random sampling was then undertaken and 349 academic staff (both men and women) at the university were emailed an invitation participate. As involvement in a staff development program is frequently dependent on the support of supervisors, males were also invited to participate. We gave all respondents the opportunity to provide contact details in order to be able to participate in subsequent interviews.

In total, 33 completed responses were received and initial analysis of our data found that this included a range of academic levels and disciplines, and a minority of male respondents. The self-selection bias meant that there would be a larger proportion of respondents who already had an interest in the program and these issues of sample bias, and how they affect interpretation of our results, are discussed below. Approximately 10 per cent of the university's academics responded to the online survey. We believe this low response rate was influenced by the university's fairly frequent use of online staff surveys about a range of issues, and while this promotes staff familiarity with online questionnaires, it may have affected the willingness of staff

to complete our survey due to time constraints. Furthermore, this response rate is fairly typical for online studies with approximately 10% a common response rate. In this paper, we focus only on those survey responses received from staff who had not previously participated in the program (n=21).

Once the quantitative surveys were analysed, semi-structured interviews were conducted. The sample for the qualitative interviews (n=11) was collected using the snowball sampling method, commencing with approaches to those survey respondents who had provided their contact details, and then asking respondents to suggest other suitable interviewees. Our aim in choosing respondents for interview was to cover as far as possible the range of views around the program that were represented in the results of the survey, and to make sure that respondents came from as many different academic backgrounds and demographic groups as possible. Many of those contacted agreed to participate, with the main reason for refusal being lack of time, rather than any particular objection to sharing thoughts. The list of questions and themes for the interviews were developed from the analysis of the quantitative data. It enabled the researchers the opportunity to probe more deeply into areas of interest from the qualitative data.

Although the sample size was small, the data gathered and the use of indepth interviews has provided a good understanding of perceptions of the mentoring program.

### **Data analysis**

SAS software was used to manage and analyse the quantitative data. Most responses were fully complete, and records for which a very small number of responses were missing were still included in our overall data analysis. Where any data was missing on responses this is reflected

in reported sample sizes in our presentation of results. Interviews were recorded with permission by the interviewee, and transcribed by a research assistant. The qualitative data was then analysed both manually (thematic analysis) and through the use of Leximancer computer software, giving a less biased view of the results, and assisting the researchers to clarify their thoughts. Leximancer identifies core concepts within the data, and illustrates how they are related (Leximancer Manual 2005) and is increasingly being used as a data analysis tool for qualitative data. It identifies themes or concept groups in text data, representing the clustering of key words (Fisk, et al, 2009). “The output produced by Leximancer provides a visual representation of these concepts and relationships and a means of quantifying and displaying the conceptual structure of a set of documents” (Fisk et al, 2009). This method of combining the concept analysis tool Leximancer and thematic analysis has been utilised by researchers in the past (Galea and Loosemore, 2006) to provide a rich understanding of the data and ensure no aspects are missed in the analysis stage. In order to ensure a purity to the thematic analysis, this was undertaken prior to the computer analysis. Though the data was analysed in two differing ways, the results are discussed in an overall context, rather than in two distinct analyses to ensure a more complete understanding. This can be seen in the next section of the paper – findings.

## **Findings**

### *Survey sample characteristics*

As participation in the survey was voluntary, it was anticipated that the majority of respondents would be aware of the program, and this was evident when analysing the results. Qualitative data, however, indicated that there was some confusion about the program, and some participants stated they were aware of the program when they were not. A mixed group of academics



responded to the survey, and their characteristics are shown in Table 1, which provides data about the whole sample, as well as the sub-sample of respondents who did not believe they had previously participated in the program. The two groups are fairly similar, although the non-participant group had a somewhat lower proportion of respondents who had been at the university for more than three years, and a somewhat higher proportion of respondents who had completed a doctorate. While nearly 70 per cent of our respondents were female, a somewhat smaller proportion (just over half) of the non-participant group were female. Unfortunately, our sample size was too small to be able to make meaningful quantitative comparisons between responses for men and women, although some interesting patterns emerged in the qualitative data, as discussed below.

Table 1 Survey respondent characteristics

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Proportion of total sample (n=33)</b>	<b>Proportion of non-participant sample (n=21)</b>
Female	69.7	52.4
Aged less than 35	6.1	0
Aged 35 - 54	63.6	66.7
Aged 55 or more	30.3	33.3
Married or partnered	84.9	85.7
Main caregiver of a child	42.4	42.9
Employed full time	87.5	85
At university =>3 years	48.5	38.1
Highest qualification doctorate	45.5	52.4
Highest qualification masters	24.2	19.1
Academic Level A	12.12	9.5
Academic Level B	51.52	42.9
Academic Level C	18.18	28.6
Academic Level D or E	18.18	19.1

Source: Attitudes to group mentoring survey responses

*Attitudes toward the program*

In order to gain an understanding of program attitudes, respondents were asked to rate a list of attributes describing the program. Analysing the perceptions of only those respondents who had not reported previous participation in the program (although as noted above, analysis of qualitative data indicated that some respondents who had identified themselves as having participated in the program on the survey may in fact not have done so), we found substantial uncertainty and misunderstanding about the key program goals, reflected in both our quantitative and qualitative findings. These results demonstrate that while some of the program goals (network building, fostering of friendships) were widely viewed by respondents as important characteristics of the program, perceptions of a number of other aspects of the program were not nearly so clear. The survey asked respondents to rate a number of characteristics in relation to how well these characteristics, in their view, described the group mentoring program, with available responses being ‘very much’, ‘somewhat’, ‘not at all’ and ‘not sure’. These findings are shown in Table 2 and demonstrate that well under 10 per cent of the sample identified leader development, skills acquisition and research collaboration as key program characteristics, and only 9.5 per cent of previous non-participants believed that career development was a strong characteristic of the current program.

Table 2 Perceptions of current group mentoring program

<b>Program feature</b>	<b>Percent perceiving feature to be ‘very much’ descriptive of the current program</b>
	%

Supportive	42.9
Goal-focused	4.8
Focused on building networks	42.9
Focused on developing leaders	4.8
Fixed term	5
Skills acquisition	5
Empowering	14.3
Interactive	9.5
Fostering friendships	28.6
Career development	9.5
Research collaboration	4.8

*Note: Data only relates to respondents who were not previous program participants. Sample sizes for these sets of questions ranged between 17 and 21. All items listed were actual characteristics of the existing program.*

Source: Attitudes to group mentoring survey responses

While the majority of non-participant respondents identified the program as supportive, and focused on network building, a majority of respondents were unaware that the program ran for a fixed term (important knowledge in terms of time management and scheduling for potential participants). In addition, very few respondents saw opportunities for research collaboration as a key part of the program (indeed, in results not shown, almost one-quarter of previous non-participants rated this feature as ‘not very much’ or ‘not at all’).

Some participants commented in the qualitative interviews that they had participated in the WGMP, however this turned out to be simply an informal mentor-mentee program (non-group mentoring), unrelated to the WGMP, indicating confusion about what the program actually is. Another participant initially felt that she had some knowledge of the program’s timing and structure, but as the interview continued it became clear that she was not in fact familiar with the program as her impressions of the program were incorrect. Other interviewees had been under the impression that the program was aimed more at non-academic staff. Interviews also indicated that participants were generally unaware of any concerted effort by program organisers to

disseminate information or recruit participants, with several respondents stating that they did not receive information about the program, and only heard about it through participant discussion.

Despite this confusion, there was an understanding, or at least an impression, about the benefits a group mentoring program could provide. One male believed the WGMP was one way of improving communication across various parts of the university. He felt that a major strength of the program was the ability to bridge different faculties and disciplines, something that was reinforced by other respondents who felt networking was a major benefit.

#### *Gender focus*

Despite the acknowledged benefits, there was a perception in the qualitative interviews that there might have been a “secret club” perspective to the group. One respondent stated:

*“I think there is probably a bit of suspicion from other women but more so males perhaps as a secret women’s group and that destroys the purpose of it, what they’re trying to do and so I’d like to see an effective marketing campaign”.*

Despite this, interviewees in general felt it was appropriate for the university to operate a women’s only mentoring program. The women only focus of the program was explored with all interviewees, but it did not appear generally to be a problem. One respondent felt that the program was ‘sexist’, but others felt it worked well being female only. Very few felt the programs should be mixed, with women saying they would feel less confident undertaking a program with males in it, and that males would tend to “take over”. There was, however, a perception from both men and women, that a program aimed at men was also required, as illustrated by this statement from one participant:

*“I’d like to see something for younger males, a reflection of what to do, where to go, career advice”*

#### *Return on investment*

Supervisors commonly commented on the fact that former participants do not communicate back to other staff members the benefits of the program, perhaps due to discomfort about the program’s image, or the difficulty of articulating somewhat intangible outcomes. Either way, several interviewees commented on the way the program was not promoted by participants, and that communication about the program should be improved. Giving staff “time” to undertake the program, it is important that supervisors feel there is a benefit, not only to the staff member, but to the organisation. It is good to note that negative views of the program by colleagues and supervisors rated as much less important in terms of deterrents, and supervisors tended to report positively on the program. One female supervisor, however, did comment that their team got a lot out of the program, but it did not feed back into work performance:

*“My only real concern is that currently people develop and grow but this is not fed back into their workplace performance properly.”* Another supervisor was surprised that one of his staff members, who was undertaking the program, had not returned to him with her views, drawing a link to perhaps more skill based activities:

*“Yes, I’m surprised that (staff member) didn’t come in and say oh thanks for sending me away on that, that was great or whatever, because (staff member) would normally do that if I sent her away on a... PowerPoint ... workshop or something. She would normally say oh this was really good and I think I can use this skill”*

Perhaps the outcomes of the program should be more clearly communicated to participants so they can feed this back to their supervisors more effectively, therefore driving increased supervisor support.

*Desirable program characteristics: perceptions versus reality*

Exploring the relationship which the perceptions survey respondents and interviewees had of the program’s characteristics with their views of what characteristics of a mentoring program would appeal to them revealed substantial differences between respondents’ preferences and their perceptions. In Table 3, we compare these two sets of survey results. The column on the right repeats the perceptions data presented in Table 2, while the column on the left shows the value which respondents placed on these characteristics. The left column data is based on a survey question which used a list of possible program characteristics (some of which described the WGMP and others which did not), and asked respondents to rate each feature in regard to whether or not the feature would encourage them to attend and/or recommend the program (with an additional option allowing respondents to indicate that they did not consider a feature to be applicable to the program).

Table 3 Characteristics likely to encourage attendance or recommendation for others to attend and perceptions of current program

<b>Program feature</b>	<b>Would encourage attendance/recommendation</b>	<b>Percent perceiving feature to be ‘very much’ descriptive of the current program</b>
	%	%
Supportive	77.8	42.9
Goal-focused	72.2	4.8

Focused on building networks	77.8	42.9
Focused on developing leaders	68.4	4.8
Fixed term	27.8	5
Skills acquisition	68.4	5
Empowering	63.2	14.3
Interactive	64.7	9.5
Fostering friendships	66.7	28.6
Career development	85	9.5
Research collaboration	73.7	4.8

*Note: data only relates to respondents who were not previous program participants. Sample sizes for these sets of questions ranged between 17 and 21.*

Source: Attitudes to group mentoring survey responses

The results shown in Table 3 suggest that existing program characteristics (although participants are not necessarily aware of them) appeal to the academics who completed our survey, with particularly strong endorsement of the support, goal-focus, network-building and career development features. An exception to this was our responses for the ‘fixed-term’ characteristic – only just over one third of respondents considered this an incentive to participate or recommend participation, with the remaining responses evenly divided between ‘would not encourage me’ and ‘not applicable. However, it is evident from the results that the attitudes of respondents indicate that they perceived the current program as seriously under-performing in all categories that would encourage recommendations or attendance. Career development, in particular, ranked the highest in terms of attributes that would drive an endorsement of the program, yet less than ten per cent of respondents felt that the program delivered strongly in this area. This holds true both for more concrete, objective attributes, such as research collaboration, as well as for less tangible concepts, such as empowerment.

These quantitative results are also reflected in our interview data, in which respondents often appeared to view the program as somewhat nebulous and very informal, rather than relatively

structured and geared towards key features of academic career development. This did not mean that they considered the current program was of no value – rather that they perceived its operation and potential impact as somewhat different to that which in fact was the case. For example, one participant emphasised her understanding that such a program’s effects would be related to confidence-building:

*“I think increasing your own confidence and being affirmed by other people in what you are doing and your abilities and your achievements is going to help you have confidence in applying [for] high[er] position[s] or believing that you deserve them”.*

Similarly, another participant stated *“my impression is that it is more of a process than specific outcomes....on the whole it’s mainly a mutual support situation”.*

### *WGMP Participation*

The survey also asked respondents to identify characteristics which would discourage or prevent them from attending the WGMP. These results are shown in Table 4 and again, a sense that the program was perceived as lacking a clear purpose was evident, with respondents being unsure about what the program was trying to achieve. A lack of understanding of the program’s purpose was a disincentive for over half the previously non-participating respondents. In addition, over 40 per cent of respondents reported that they preferred one-on-one mentoring, suggesting that part of their lack of understanding of the program may be related to a lack of interest in or appreciation of the potential benefits of group mentoring. Practical issues related to time were also prominent disincentives, and these were also reflected in qualitative responses:



*“I think the time factor is really critical, creating a program that will allow people to attend it, given that everyone is terribly time poor and can’t even do the things they have to do, let alone the things that are optional”.*

The need for a women’s mentoring program to offer practical assistance to women, as well as mutual support, was emphasised in a number of the interviews, and these types of responses further reflect concerns about a lack of clear purpose. One respondent, for example, identified issues such as support regarding “how you fit in your career and your role as primary care giver” and developing “interviewing techniques, and preparing your CV [for] promotion” as key features of an ideal program.

Table 4 Characteristics likely to discourage attendance or recommendation for others to attend

Issue	Would discourage/prevent attendance/recommendation
	%
<b>Program image</b>	
Don't think it would help my career	36.8
Don't understand program purpose	52.6
Program is not well-regarded by my supervisor	0.0
Program not well-regarded within my division	10.0
Don't know other academics who have completed program	15.0
Have heard negative things about the program	25.0
Feel that the program sounds uninspiring	47.4
Feel I don't know enough about the program	31.6
<b>Personal preferences/perceived need</b>	
Prefer one-on-one mentoring	42.9
Don't feel in need of mentoring	25.0
Already happy with career path	15.8
A women's only program does not appeal to me	31.6
Don't want my supervisor to think I need mentoring	0.0

Don't feel I have anything to offer other participants	30.0
Possibility of domineering fellow-participants	35.0
Possibility of lack of participation of other group members	30.0
<b>Practical issues</b>	
Not enough time to attend	66.7
Meetings not at suitable times	66.7

*Note: data only relates to respondents who were not previous program participants. Sample sizes for these sets of questions ranged between 19 and 21.*

Source: Attitudes to group mentoring survey responses

With an understanding of program desired attributes, an understanding of where research respondents felt the program did not perform, and an understanding of barriers to participation, a series of implications for service delivery can be provided.

### **Implications for creating a group mentoring program**

Seeking to explore attitudes toward a group mentoring program and barriers to participation, this study had a relatively small sample representing a limitation of this research. Despite this, there was a strong diversity of views on the perceptions of the program among respondents, providing useful data relevant to the program. In addition, as noted earlier, our sample is likely to have been biased towards academics with an existing interest in or knowledge of the WGMP. We also had a gender bias in our sample, although this was less prominent than expected at the outset of the project. These sample issues should be kept in mind, however, when interpreting our findings and considering the generalisability of the results. In addition, while we argue that the recommendations we discuss may be relevant to any voluntary mentoring program, they were developed in the context of a specific project, and further research would be needed to be confident of their applicability in other settings.

Key implications of our results for the development of group mentoring programs generally, including the program which was the focus of this case study, relate to program structure, program promotion and key program goals. In particular, it would be interesting to determine how group mentoring could be used in other industry contexts. Questions surrounding the similarities and differences between academia and other industry sectors could be answered and career development needs assessed.

While there is useful literature on group mentoring (for example, see McCormack and West, 2006; Darwin and Palmer, 2009 and Huizing, 2012), this literature generally reviews the perceptions of participants, rather than non-participants. For the success of a corporate program, it is essential to have the support of co-workers and supervisors, in particular. Our study, therefore, considered the perceptions of those who had not participated in the program.

In relation to program promotion, there is clearly a need for accurate and full articulation of program goals and characteristics in program promotional material. A strong theme of our findings was that respondents had only very vague notions of the way the program worked, and what participants would be likely to get out of it. Even respondents who were very positive about the program and its benefits tended to discuss these in terms of characteristics such as the support and confidence it might offer women, rather than seeing it having (in addition) more concrete outcomes such as opportunities for research collaboration and skills development. In a time-poor environment, it would appear that potential participants (and their colleagues and supervisors who might recommend the program to them) need to understand that key career development outcomes can be achieved through participation in the program.

Issues around program goals, our findings suggest, may not necessarily be limited just to adequate promotion, but also the need for organisers to focus particularly in program planning and goal-setting on those outcomes which potential participants and their supervisors rate as high priorities for career development. The importance of building strong publication records, for example, was referred to on numerous occasions in the interviews conducted for this project, and the importance of this is reflected in our quantitative results. This is the type of concrete and relevant outcome which could be clearly developed and promoted as a program goal in order to attract more academic women to this or other group mentoring programs.

In terms of program structure, the idea of a women's only program appeared to be widely accepted and approved by both men and women participating in our study, and overall our findings did not support the abandonment of a women's only model. A number of interview respondents referred to the particular challenges that women academics face in moving up the career path, and the benefits that the atmosphere and space that a women's only program can provide. However, there was a strong sense among many participants that male academics are also in need of mentoring, particularly at junior levels. These results suggest that organisations considering a women's-only mentoring program may not have difficulty in having such an initiative supported, but may want to also consider the mentoring and career development needs of male academics. Another issue that emerged in relation to program structure was some sense that a fixed-term program (as currently exists) may not necessarily be a strong preference for potential participants, and a general sense that issues around timing and time commitment were important potential barriers to program.

A mentoring program designed to enhance networking and assist staff in reaching their goals is definitely something achievable. The program has worked well in the university, however this research suggests that goals women's mentoring programs in an academic setting need to be clearly articulated, and both goals and program structure need to be strongly based in the expressed needs of potential participants. Career development, research collaboration and network building need to be emphasised as key program goals in promotional material. The development and promotion of concrete outcomes which encourage academic staff to devote time to a program such as the one which was the focus of this case study are a key challenge and should be a major priority for university-based group mentoring.

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