

Please cite as: Bell A and Treleaven L (2011). Looking for Professor Right: mentee selection of mentors in a formal mentoring program. *Higher Education* **61**(5): 545-561. The final publication is available at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s10734-010-9348-0>

**Looking for Professor Right: mentee selection of mentors in a formal mentoring program**

Amani Bell<sup>1</sup> and Lesley Treleaven<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Institute for Teaching and Learning, Level 3, Carlaw Building (F07), University of Sydney, NSW, 2006. Ph: +61 2 9351 3725; fax: + 61 2 9351 4331; email: [amani.bell@sydney.edu.au](mailto:amani.bell@sydney.edu.au). Corresponding author.

<sup>2</sup>Office of Learning and Teaching in Economics and Business, University of Sydney.

**Abstract:**

Finding a suitable mentor is crucial to the success of mentoring relationships. In the mentoring literature, however, there is conflicting evidence about the best ways to support the pairing process in organisational mentoring programs. This paper presents a detailed analysis of the pairing process in an academic mentoring program that has implications for building a mentoring culture in higher education. The program which began with a pilot and has continued for five years with one hundred and twenty one participants, was conducted with mentees selecting their own mentor from a pool of mentors who volunteered to be part of the program. In the pilot program, where mentors and mentees first met as one group, some mentees reported that the process of selecting and approaching a mentor was uncomfortable and intimidating. Nine of twenty-three potential mentees did not form mentoring relationships. Analysis of subsequent program evaluation data pointed to the importance of two factors in the pairing process: personal connections and facilitation of the selection process. This study at a research-intensive university demonstrates that when the pairing process is tailored to individual mentees, they are comfortable selecting a mentor and to then develop a successful mentoring relationship.

**Keywords:** academic development, flexible mentoring, mentor-mentee choice, pairing process

### **It's all in the handbook**

The challenges of being an early career academic may be recent memories or long past but most of us will recall stumbling through the maze of unfamiliar rules and regulations, coming to know our way around a new discipline, and eventually finding our feet within the school and university. For many of us, this can be a time-consuming and confusing process, at a time when we need to focus on teaching a new cohort of students in what is often a course put together by someone else, or worse, by us a week ahead of the students. We have so many questions – and yet no handbook or orientation guide ever seems to have just what we need at the time – knowing in practice. And more experienced academics even feel ‘stuck’ sometimes, unsure how to progress their career amidst conflicting personal goals and institutional demands.

Some academics have been fortunate in having colleagues who make time to assist them, or having an informal mentor with whom they can share ideas, labour over a research grant and seek ‘just-in-time’ guidance. For others, a formal mentoring program provides such opportunities for getting started and for career development. But how can an academic facing any of these challenges, especially early in their career, be paired with Professor Right?

Our focus in this paper is on the pairing process within a formal academic mentoring program. Our aim is to respond to what Boice aptly identified in 1992, as “one of the seemingly most daunting tasks of setting up mentoring projects...forming effective pairs of mentors and mentees” (1992a p53).

The first author of this paper co-ordinated a pilot mentoring program for academic staff, where mentees selected their own mentors. Contrary to the project team’s intentions, 40% of the potential mentees did not form mentoring relationships. As the program evaluation clearly identified, participants found the initial pairing process to be awkward. This discomfort is recognised by Zachary:

One of the most sensitive and toughest mentoring practices is the actual ‘pairing dance’ itself... meeting potential mentor candidates can be a disquieting and uncomfortable process (Zachary 2005 p43).

The second author, an academic working as a senior adviser in academic development, developed subsequent iterations of the mentoring program. Together, we investigated how best to assist each mentee to select an appropriate mentor and develop a supportive and successful relationship.

The paper is organised as follows. Our literature review briefly summarises research into mentoring within the context of higher education and then focuses on pairing in mentoring programs. The study context and operational details of each program in relation to the pairing processes are presented descriptively and then three sets of data are provided from the 2005-2007 programs, followed by our results, discussion and implications of the findings.

### **Mentoring: to match or not to match**

We found it useful to view mentoring broadly, as Ferman defines it:

...a process whereby one is assisted, guided and advocated for by another...[usually] more experienced... person... It can lead to and overlap with networking and other collaborative endeavours and can occur in many and varied modes, ranging from frameworks characterized by hierarchy and formality to those marked by informality and a peer relationship (Ferman 2002 p147).

A meta-review of the literature on mentoring in higher education (Ehrich, Hansford and Tennant 2004) concludes from 159 studies on mentoring in schools and universities, that mentoring has many positive outcomes for both mentors and mentees. Benefits include developing collegiality, networking, reflection, professional development, support and assistance, and personal satisfaction. Additional benefits for mentees can include higher rates of retention and promotion, higher success rates in receiving external research grants, higher publication rates and better perceptions of themselves as academics (Gardiner et al. 2007).

Traditionally, mentoring in universities has been informal and “[a]s such, it may be invisible, unrecognized, unrewarded and hence under-utilized” (Ferman 2002 p153). This may, in part, be due to one of its informal strengths : that such mentoring is situated learning (Lave and Wenger 1991; Handley et al. 2006) and occurs within the everyday life of participants. However, there are examples of formal mentoring programs in higher education for staff induction (Boice 1992b), to improve teaching (Harnish and Wild 1994), to assist early career researchers (Johnston and McCormack 1997) and to actively facilitate academic women’s development (Gardiner et al. 2007, Quinlan 1999, Treleven 1994).

There are several forms that mentoring can take: dyadic (one-to-one), group and peer-to-peer (Mullen 2008). The focus in this study is on dyadic mentoring within a formal mentoring program.

### **Pairing in mentoring programs: previous studies**

There is a range of ways mentor-mentee pairs can be formed. In informal mentoring, the pairs are spontaneously and voluntarily formed (Clarke 2004). A senior staff member may approach a newer or more junior staff member and offer an informal mentoring relationship, or the junior staff member might informally identify a senior staff member as a mentor. Participants in such relationships may not even consider them as mentoring relationships but rather as ‘naturally occurring’, even serendipitous, supportive or strategic working relationships. Informal mentoring relationships are generally regarded as having outcomes superior to those achieved in formal relationships, though further research is needed to confirm this viewpoint (Blake-Beard 2001). A downside of such an approach is that the benefits of mentoring may not be available to those staff without access to networks of senior staff. Addressing the opportunity for staff to participate, formal programs arguably enable successful mentoring relationships to be more widely available to a more diverse range of staff.

In formal mentoring programs, mentee-mentor pairs are often formed by the program coordinators. This matching is usually achieved by considering the interests of the mentees and the expertise of the mentors. This approach can be useful where mentees would not normally have access to senior staff. It was used in the mentoring program for female academics at Flinders University where the project team considered that junior female academics may not have much contact with senior academics (Gardiner 1999). However, there are negative aspects associated with allocated pairing, including “an inequality of status...with communication usually being one-way” (Clarke 2004 p123), “contrived collegiality” (Lawson 1992 p167) and personality clashes (Murray 1991).

In some formal programs, mentees are able to select their own mentors. The benefits for mentees in being able to choose their own mentors are twofold. First, mentee choice reduces the likelihood of mismatches, and second, increases their agency thereby positioning them more comfortably in the relations of power that are inevitably present within organisations and thus in mentor-mentee pairs. However, there are risks associated with mentees selecting their own mentor, as Metros and Yang raise:

Will a professional or personal relationship be damaged if the prospective mentor turns down the request? Will a potential mentor perceive the request as an honour or as an obligation? Will the mentor’s own sense of security be threatened by an ambitious mentee who might compete for future positions? Does the mentee understand how others in the organization will perceive his or her choice of mentor? Is the mentor well regarded within the organization and within the broader profession?... If the mentor fails professionally, will the mentee also fail by association? (Metros and Yang 2006 p7).

For mentees to be able to make a choice when selecting their mentor, it is necessary to gain expressions of interest from a greater number of potential mentors. However, the downside of such an approach is that inevitably some potential mentors are not selected. In these circumstances, the program coordinator needs to manage possible feelings of disappointment and rejection.

Nevertheless, irrespective of how the pair is formed, there are sometimes problems with the matching of mentee and mentor. In their review of mentoring within the fields of education, business, and medicine, Ehrich et al. (2004) found that “professional expertise and / or personality mismatch” was one of two most frequently cited problems with mentoring relationships. For mentees, this problem was mentioned in 12.6% of studies and for mentors 17%. Similarly, Long’s review (1997 p120) of the negative aspects of mentoring lists six studies that report unsuccessful matching between mentor and mentee.

Several studies have examined participant feedback on, and evaluation of, the pairing process in mentoring programs. All of these studies are in the US, with the exception of one (Madison et al. 1993). They show conflicting results for approaches to the pairing process. Some studies of mentor pairs formed by a program coordinator achieved satisfactory relationships (D’Abate and Eddy 2008; Boice 1992a; Ragins et al. 2000),

while other studies demonstrated that participant input into the pairing process was preferable (Viator 1999; Ragins and Cotton 1999; Allen et al. 2006). In a program where the coordinator matched mentors and mentees based on informal knowledge and biographical data about participants, mentors were extremely satisfied with the pairing process (D'Abate and Eddy 2008). Random allocation of mentees to mentors was successful in a comparative study led by Boice (1992a). Half his participants formed pairs without assistance and the other half he assigned to a mentoring pair. While Chao et al. (1992 p634) propose random allocation of mentees to mentors is “analogous to blind dates; [with] a small probability that the match would be successful”, Boice (1992a) found that most of the pairs had successful mentoring relationships. Similarly, Ragins et al. (2000) found no support for their hypothesis that participation by mentees and mentors in the matching process would yield more positive attitudes and would be viewed as more effective than programs which assigned participants to mentoring pairs. The majority of Australian academics surveyed by Madison et al. (1993) thought that ‘chemistry’ between mentee and mentor was not a factor in a successful mentoring relationship.

In contrast, the importance of participant input into the pairing process was identified by Viator (1999): mentees who had no input into the pairing process were much less satisfied with their mentor. Similarly, Ragins and Cotton (1999) found that informal mentoring relationships spontaneously formed by mentees had greater benefits and mentees had more satisfaction with their mentors than mentees in formal programs where the pairs were formed by a program coordinator. Perceived input into the pairing process is arguably important for mentees and mentors. Allen et al. (2006) suggest:

By perceiving that they have a voice in the matching process, mentors and protégés may start to invest in the relationship prior to its official beginning. Accordingly, both parties are likely to feel greater motivation to maximize the relationship. This greater investment may explain why perceived input into the matching process appears to be a key component of effective formal mentoring practice (Allen et al. 2006 p575).

The conflicting results described in the literature suggest that further research into the pairing process, and its operational details in particular, is necessary. Our paper addresses this gap by providing an in-depth analysis of qualitative data on the pairing processes in a formal program in which mentees selected their mentor.

### **Pairing principles in practice**

Our study of a formal mentoring program is located in The University of Sydney, a research-intensive university with 3,081 academic staff and 46,054 students (University of Sydney 2009a). A pilot mentoring program, conducted jointly between the Faculty of Economics and Business and the Faculty of Education and Social Work (Ewing et al. 2008), led to the establishment in 2006 of an ongoing academic mentoring program in the Faculty of Economics and Business. Within our Faculty, there are 194 continuing and fixed term academic staff (Statistics Unit 2009b) and close to 7,000 students (Statistics Unit 2009c) working and studying in ten discipline areas.

The mentoring program aimed first, to support mentees in goals of their choice (for example in research, teaching, orientation, promotion) and second, to create a culture of mentoring through the involvement of senior academics and encouraging mentees to subsequently mentor others in future iterations of the program.

The guiding principles of the pairing process were mentee choice of mentor, that no one be assigned to a mentor or a mentee, and that the pairing process not be rushed. The pilot program tested these principles and collected feedback from participants on their experiences of the pairing process. We then refined the pairing process in the mentoring programs of 2006 and 2007. Our study is therefore based on three sets of data relating to the pairing process in the first three years of the program. We now present an overview of these three phases and then present the data analysis.

#### *2005 Pilot mentoring program*

In 2005, academics staff were contacted via email, flyers and in person and invited to attend a half day forum to establish a shared understanding of mentoring, to facilitate the development of relationship-building and to help clarify what each participant wanted from the mentoring program. The project team did not expect that trusting relationships would necessarily form at the forum but hoped it would provide the opportunity for participants to begin to get to know each other. We also held an informal lunch two weeks later in order to provide another opportunity for potential mentees to meet potential mentors.

During this introductory phase, a list of available mentors' names, contact details and areas of expertise was updated and circulated several times to potential mentees. Also circulated were a mentoring agreement template and a FAQ sheet with responses to frequently asked questions that addressed issues such as 'how do I approach a potential mentor?' and 'what if one party doesn't agree to the relationship?'

Fourteen mentoring pairs formed from 26 participants: 21 women and five men (two mentors had two mentees each). Mentoring partnerships took place for the duration of one semester. The project team contacted participants about once a month to ask if they wished to discuss any aspects of the mentoring relationship. Three full-group meetings were held. At the first meeting, participants discussed the mentoring process and worked on their mentoring agreements. At the second meeting, progress and emergent issues were discussed. At the final meeting, two focus groups explored issues raised during the mentoring process and provided feedback on the program.

#### *2006 Mentoring program*

In 2006, each Faculty ran its own program. In the Faculty of Economics and Business, invitations sent to participants of the pilot program and senior academics asked them to consider becoming mentors. The program was then announced via email to all academics; staff who had joined the Faculty of Economics and Business in the previous two years were particularly encouraged to submit expressions of interest. In a one-to-one meeting of 15-25 minutes, the program coordinator, who was an academic developer, initiated a dialogue with the mentee who clarified his/her mentoring goals. The

confidential list of potential mentors was offered to the mentee to consider several mentors who might be a suitable match with their goals. The mentor details included why they wanted to participate in the program, expertise they were willing to offer, contact details and their web page. Once mentees had selected a mentor, they notified the coordinator (ensuring the spread of mentees across the available mentors) and in the very few cases where mentors did not feel that they were comfortable with the mentee, the coordinator managed this process on their behalf. The confirmed pairs then completed a mentoring agreement together and submitted it to the coordinator. 12 mentoring pairs formed from 23 participants: 14 men and nine women (one participant was both a mentor and a mentee). In response to mentor requests, two short articles on mentoring were provided to mentors in preference to attending any sessions. An end-of-program lunch was held for mentees.

### *2007 Mentoring program*

In 2007, some small changes were made to the program based on feedback from participants and the program team in the Faculty of Economics and Business. There were 13 mentoring pairs from 25 participants: 13 women and 12 men (one mentor had two mentees). A mid-program development opportunity for mentors was held with a highly experienced mentor from another Faculty, to develop the mentoring culture through their open reflections and to provide the mentors with some mentoring that expanded their horizons across the University. An end of program event held for mentors and mentees continued building the mentoring community. The program continued in 2008 and 2009: however, as the pairing process was well-established by this time, further data were not collected specifically on this aspect of the program.

### **Gathering reflections on the pairing process**

At the end of the program each year, participants were asked to complete an individual reflective writing activity based around 17 questions, and most participants followed this format (see Ewing et al. 2008, Appendix 1). These reflective statements formed the primary source of data for our analysis of the pairing process. While the full statements were examined for any comments about pairing, we paid particular attention to the responses to the following questions:

- Q1. Describe the mentoring process – what happened? How did you get paired?
- Q2. What were your reactions/feelings throughout the process (before the process, during and now?)
- Q3. What difficulties did you encounter with the mentoring process, if any?
- Q16. In terms of how the program was run, what went well? What could be improved?

In 2005, we received reflective statements from 13 mentees and 10 mentors; in 2006 from six mentees and six mentors; and in 2007 from 12 mentees and 11 mentees. All 58 written reflective responses contained comments about the pairing process.

We also drew on other sources of data including conversations with participants, project team meeting minutes and emails, and transcripts of the two, 2005 mid-program focus

groups. The focus groups, each an hour in duration, were facilitated by members of the project team. The following questions loosely guided by the exploratory conversations:

- a. Did it help to create time (via agreement and funding)?
- b. Comments on the mentee/mentor selection (mentee choice, unstructured)
- c. Professional learning about mentoring – was it helpful? Was it enough?
- d. Recognition of participation – was it helpful? Was it enough?
- e. What do you think is important in order for the program to continue?

In the first focus group, 23 comments about the pairing process were made and 25 in the second focus group. Each focus group had eight to ten participants.

All data sources were examined and comments about the pairing process were compiled and analysed thematically according to the six phases described by Braun and Clarke (2006): 1) familiarising yourself with your data; 2) generating initial codes; 3) searching for themes; 4) reviewing themes; 5) defining and naming themes; and 6) producing the report. One of us worked alone on the first three phases, with the other then reviewing the themes. Together we then agreed on the themes and worked on the final three phases together.

### **Understanding experiences of pairing**

Four themes relating to the pairing process are evident in the data analysis of the three year study. First, in the pilot program, initial awkwardness and uncertainty in selecting and approaching a mentor for both mentees and mentors was a strong response. Second, in the subsequent programs, the role of consultation with the academic developer brokering the formation of mentoring pairs was highlighted. Third, across all three years, personal connections were important in mentee choice. Finally, established mentoring pairs successfully completed the program with outcomes for all three cohorts. Table 1 provides a summary of the program demographics, pairing processes and thematic analysis for each year.

Insert table about here

#### *Initial awkwardness: it felt like a country dance*

In their reflections, six of the 13 mentees in the 2005 pilot program wrote that they felt awkward and uneasy about the pairing process, and this was echoed by 14 comments in the focus group discussions.

Before the process I felt very awkward because I felt like I wanted to work with somebody mainly to get advice about my work – my research in particular. But I wasn't sure who to ask. I found the meeting we had...a bit weird...It felt like a country dance where everyone sat around the outside of the hall waiting for someone to ask them to dance – I was nervous that no-one would ask me to dance (mentee 1, 2005).



I was quite unsure about the process to start with. To be honest it was a bit embarrassing in the initial stages, trying to make a 'pitch' to find a mentor. It felt a little bit like a 'meat market', where I felt like I had to sell myself. I know that others who were involved in this initial stage were a bit put off by this (mentee 8, 2005).

At the initial information session we had no information about the people in the room. Thinking back we had no idea who was there (focus group, 2005).

Recalling the confronting nature of the process one mentee believed she would not have persisted if her first attempt had been unsuccessful:

I found the pairing process a little bit intimidating. One of the reasons for wanting to find a mentor was to develop networking skills – so having to approach someone directly was a little bit off-putting. The group sessions aimed at finding mentors were a good idea – but did not work very effectively – because it was difficult to identify who may or may not be suitable. I paired up with my mentor by contacting her via email and arranging to meet over coffee – where we agreed on working together. I think if this had been unsuccessful I may not have tried again (mentee 12, 2005).

Indeed, nine potential mentees did not form mentoring relationships:

Some others dropped out because they couldn't cope with [the matching] process and lost confidence as a result (focus group, 2005).

There was a level of discomfort that some people couldn't handle and others bullied [forged] their way through (focus group, 2005).

Interestingly, only one of the 10 mentors who provided reflections wrote about this discomfort and awkwardness experienced by some of the participants:

There was a difficult aspect in the early part of the program where there was an uncomfortable aspect of seller and buyer. And this was a bit difficult in the teas/lunches provided. Perhaps this was unavoidable (mentor 10, 2005).

Another mentor recognised the difficulties that mentees experienced with the pairing process, but still thought the process was worthwhile:

I think it was interesting how long the 'matching up' of mentors and mentees actually took and that some people were frustrated during this. It's still important, however, for mentees to have an active role in who they are paired with (mentor 3, 2005).

The program team also noticed and discussed these issues:

Participants commented that the pairing process was disorganised and that they were frustrated that they didn't find someone ...Many mentors left early or did not attend [the workshop]. Mentees felt unsure how to approach mentors. Large group gatherings

can be inhibitive for pairing. Formal pairings have probably occurred despite the large workshop rather than because of it – although one pair occurred at the workshop (project team meeting minutes, 15.11.04).

*Facilitated pairing: what do you hope for in this mentoring?*

From 2006 onwards, we offered one-to-one support to potential mentees in selecting a suitable mentor. Mentees made a time to meet with the academic developer and explore their goals and the potential mentors. This support made it easier for mentees to approach potential mentors, with six mentees (of 21) reflecting on this aspect of the pairing process in their written statements:

I visited...the project coordinator and she asked what I hoped to achieve from the program. I felt that she really heard what I was saying and was able to reflect back to me the goals I hoped to achieve (mentee 4, 2006).

I contacted the two mentors suggested by [the academic developer] and discussed with each of them individually about my expectations from this program. Since my key intention is to improve teaching skills, I thus decided to work with [my mentor] more closely. The pairing process worked well for me (mentee 4, 2007).

[The academic developer] paired us up, after a consultation. I think it was great as we were very well matched and [the academic developer] clearly understood what I was looking for (mentee 5, 2007).

Fewer mentors commented on the facilitated pairing process, perhaps not surprisingly as they were not directly involved. Three (of 19 mentors) reflected on the process:

I think [the academic developer] suggested a mentor (or mentors) and the mentee came to my office for a conversation. We thought we could work well together so we proceeded. Seemed like a good process to me (mentor 5, 2007).

The consultation varied greatly according to the mentee's expressed need for support, familiarity with the mentor and confidence in approaching potential mentors. The mentee and academic developer discussed a range of approaches that would feel comfortable for them to contact their potential mentors, how to manage the process of making their selection, what preparation they could do before their meeting, and any other considerations that mentees wanted to raise. Some mentees then chose to phone their mentors after looking through their web page, to explain that they were keen to meet several mentors before making a decision about who matched their mentoring goals; others arranged an appointment by email to meet over coffee and find out whether they felt comfortable with a potential mentor; a few asked if they could chat to a former mentee and that was arranged with the permission of the mentor.

*Building on existing personal connections: at least we were on nodding acquaintance*  
Many participants in the 2005 program, eight of 13 mentees and four of 10 mentors, referred to the importance of a pre-existing personal connection with their mentee or

mentor. The personal connection ranged from a slight acquaintance to knowing the mentor well:

I had met [my mentor] once at a Faculty function and so we were at least on 'nodding terms'! So [my mentor] seemed like the best bet, although it was a little awkward getting in touch with someone I did not know (mentee 3, 2005).

I had known [my mentor] for many years and was very pleased to have the opportunity to 'formalise' a mentoring relationship with her. I do not know that I could have been able to form such a relationship with a 'stranger'. Although both formal and informal meetings were set up as part of this program, there was very little time to really get to know other potential mentors (mentee 13, 2005).

Personality is very important – [the mentor] needs to be someone I like and respect (focus group, 2005).

The importance of personal connections in the pairing process was also emphasised by 10 of 21 mentees and eight of 19 mentors in the 2006 and 2007 programs:

I approached a senior colleague who would be amenable and had expressed interest in my progression earlier in a less formal manner. This was a simple process and was conducted in a professional sensible manner. I felt neither demeaned nor subjugated (mentee 5, 2006).

My mentor was known to me casually as we have offices on the same floor. Casual chats about promotion etc seemed to naturally lead to the formalised mentoring relationship (mentee 2, 2006).

I found my mentor from the list provided by the program. And it happened to be one of my colleagues. It is difficult to talk to someone you don't know about your teaching and research problems. Thus, it is natural to select someone you know (mentee 3, 2007).

[I selected my mentor on the basis of] personal knowledge – this allowed us to determine that there were potential benefits from the pairing and that we could work together to achieve these benefits (mentor 1, 2007).

This theme also stood out to me in the consultations that I shared with mentees as academic developer facilitating the mentee's selection process.

In 2006, the importance of a pre-existing personal connection become even more apparent, as three of the 12 pairs came into the program already matched:

...my association with [my mentee] existed prior to him joining the University of Sydney. I realised how important the mentoring program was likely to be for

introducing him to our institutional ways and for developing our potential joint research interests (mentor 6, 2006).

In 2007, the number of already matched pairs increased to six out of 13 pairs, for example:

...we were working quite closely together and it seemed natural to take the relationship to a new level of trust and mentoring. We both really appreciated the opportunity to formalise the mentoring relationship (which the mentoring team allowed us to do) which meant...we could reach a highly productive and meaningful stage quickly. To provide open and honest feedback both members need to be in a position of trust and that takes time, so the fact we already had a basis for our working relationship meant the process worked very effectively for us (mentee 6, 2007).

*A very positive experience for me*

Once mentoring pairs were established, all participants were able to achieve positive outcomes. For the mentees in the pilot program, the difficulties of the initial phase of finding a mentor were ameliorated by settling down into the mentoring relationship. Similarly, one of the mentors who initially felt uncomfortable became less so once the meetings with their mentee progressed. Participants in all cohorts expressed positive feelings about their achievements within the program.

Once I had a mentor, I felt very comfortable. I quite enjoyed the meetings with [my mentor] and I got a lot out of it. Now reflecting back on the process, I think it was definitely worthwhile (mentee 1, 2005).

I think the biggest benefit from the relationship for me was to have someone to use as a sounding board and to direct questions to. They were generally questions/issues which were fairly broad and not related to specific issues such as teaching and research – but questions relating to networking, personal development etc (mentee 12, 2005).

...it was a very positive experience for me... Apart from increased research output for both of us, we have developed a very good professional relationship that extends to our teaching as well as research (mentor 6, 2005).

The mentoring program has enabled me to make a smooth transition to the Faculty from my previous institution. The time usually required to settle into a new academic work environment...was made easier by constant advice and encouragement from my mentor (mentee 6, 2006).

[My mentor] did a peer evaluation of my lecture and that was very useful, as I learnt a few things that I didn't know about my lecturing style thus far, and I have made a very conscious effort to change that (mentee 5, 2007).

Program outcomes for mentees included: career progression, publications, feedback on promotion applications, grant applications, sharing about research skills, feedback on research papers, professional learning about teaching, feedback on teaching, some joint papers between mentees and mentors, preparation of a joint textbook chapter, settling into the Faculty smoothly, networking skills, improved time management and developing synergies between research and teaching.

Mentors reported that they also learned and benefited from the interaction with their mentee, including stronger working relationships, as well as the intrinsic reward of assisting someone.

### **So what did we learn about pairing?**

Our learning regarding the pairing process was principally threefold. First, that the initial awkwardness felt by mentees during the pilot program could be effectively addressed by offering an individualised process for mentees to select their mentors. Second, that mentor selection by mentees built on pre-existing personal connections that emphasised the personal nature of mentoring. Third, that brokering the formation of mentoring pairs and developing a mentoring culture could be facilitated by an academic developer shepherding this formal but individually tailored mentoring program.

#### *An individualised process for mentees*

Mentees preferred private, one-to-one facilitation of the pairing process, rather than the open 'meet and greet' sessions of the pilot program. The open sessions were not effective in creating an environment where people felt comfortable getting to know to each other. Participants made comments about feeling unsure, embarrassed and awkward. Possible sources for the initial discomfort with the open pairing process in the 2005 program include little previous experience of successful mentoring and networking skills and the program's lack of support in facilitating the pairing process. Mentees who expressed unease about the process of having to select and approach a mentor had not been involved in mentoring programs previously, with the exception of mentoring offered by their PhD supervisor or colleagues whose advice they had sought. Most of the mentees who seemed more confident about approaching a mentor had either been involved in a mentoring program previously or held very positive expectations of mentoring.

Although successful mentoring relationships formed after initial awkwardness of the pairing process in the 2005 program, unease causing potential mentees to drop out is problematic. Nine additional colleagues, who expressed initial interest in participating as mentees, did not continue in the program. At the time, there was no follow up to find out why they discontinued; nevertheless, it is possible that the discomfort, reported by some participants, was a barrier to their participation.

Some of the unease felt by mentees may also relate to the culture of the University and the Faculties. The hierarchical nature of the University does not make it easy for junior staff to feel comfortable approaching senior staff. In addition, the large staff numbers in each Faculty preclude the likelihood that everyone knows each other. The academic culture in which people mainly relate within their own disciplines (Becher and Trowler

2001) compounds this issue. Potential mentees may also have been wary of being seen as needing help. Programs that aim to address deficits are not unusual and, though well-intentioned as support, have been of particular concern to women and minorities. Boice (1993 p306) found that “women were more inclined to see offers of help as problematically manipulative or intrusive” and Girves, Zepeda and Gwathmey (2005) felt that “[w]omen and minorities... may feel uncomfortable with the concept of being groomed or cloned fearing they must give up their own identities. ... [mentees] may be reluctant to seek out mentors out of fear that they will be perceived as being too dependent” (Girves et al. 2005 p456).

The discomfort felt by mentees in the pilot program pairing process has also been observed in other studies (Zachary 2005, Gardiner 1999, Benson et al. 2002). In the Flinders University mentoring program for early career female academics, an end of program survey revealed that a few mentees had an initial “fear of how to approach the partnership. Several mentees commented on not knowing what to ask their mentor and being afraid of bothering him/her” (Gardiner 1999 p43). In a program where mentees selected their mentor, Benson et al. (2002 p553) found that 67% of mentees found the mentor selection process to be easy, but academics who were new to the institution found the process difficult and would have preferred “facilitated assistance”.

#### *The personal nature of mentoring*

Our results highlight the very personal nature of mentoring and thus emphasise the importance of mentees being able to select their own mentor. Successful mentoring necessarily involves developing a relationship of trust and many mentees selected a mentor whom they already had some personal knowledge of, thereby giving them a base on which to build a mentoring partnership. It was not unusual for mentees, when looking through the list of mentors who had volunteered, to comment on a personal connection with a colleague from their previous university, from another discipline whose teaching was known to them by reputation, or even a former lecturer whom they respected.

Like the study conducted by Armstrong et al. (2002), mentoring participants who demonstrated mutual liking not only enhanced the quality of mentoring relationships, but also, in our cohorts, gave strong indications that they would continue their relationship after the formal part of the program had concluded.

Although our mentoring program is formal, mentee choice of mentor is a feature of much informal mentoring. The greater identification, interpersonal comfort and motivation in informal relationships may contribute to the higher mentee satisfaction found in informal programs (Ragins and Cotton 1999) and we speculate that these aspects were also valuable for the success of our formal program. It is possible that mentoring relationships built on pre-existing relationships, however incipient, create conditions for greater honesty and trust.

The importance of personal connections in mentoring has also been confirmed in several other studies. Perceived similarity of their mentors is important for mentees (Alleman et al. 1984; Ensher and Murphy 1997): “the more similar protégés perceived themselves to

be to their mentors in outlook, values, or perspective, the more likely they were to report liking their mentor, being satisfied with their mentor, and having more contact with their mentor” (Ensher and Murphy 1997 p474). Although the authors concluded from this result that personal characteristics do not need consideration during the matching process, for us it reinforces the benefits of mentees being able to select their own mentors.

Further, in contrast to our results, Boice (1992a) found that pairs based on friendships were more likely to be unsuccessful. In his program, mentees reported being uncomfortable with the sudden evaluation of status of the mentor and about sharing confidential information with a departmental colleague that might harm their chances of tenure. Participants in our program who had pre-existing collegial relationships did not express these concerns. In fact, some mentees felt that they could improve their standing in their discipline by forming a mentoring relationship with a well-respected senior colleague whom they trusted. Trust is an important theme in studies of mentoring relationships (Stanulis and Russell 2000, Johnsrud 1990, Clarke 2004, Kamvounias et al. 2008). The most frequently cited positive outcome for mentees of mentoring in education is ‘support, empathy, encouragement, counselling and friendship’ (Ehrich et al. 2004 p523).

#### *Reflections on brokering pairs*

The pairing process that the pilot program participants found frustrating and dragged out through several meetings and lunches was achieved more quickly in 2006 and 2007 than in 2005. Individual consultation not only sped up the time taken to formalise each mentoring pair, but could be tailored to the individual’s readiness regarding their expectations and goals, level of comfort to approach potential mentors and their personal connections. As academic developer, I considered the expectations, employment position, disciplinary culture and also gender of each mentee and tailored my support accordingly. Some mentees were not sure of their goals for the mentoring relationship, so I encouraged a dialogue that enabled setting some specific, achievable and measurable goals as a starting point for the six month program, that helped them select one or two mentors to meet. Some mentees were unsure of how to approach a mentor, so we considered together ways that they would feel comfortable with. The benefits of this collaborative approach are echoed in research by Ferman (2002 p157) whose predominant finding was that “academics of all length of experience valued collaborative activities as a form of professional growth”.

We feel that the one-to-one support model for the pairing process is sustainable due to low numbers in the program (on average 12 mentees each year). Each conversation was about 15-25 minutes. In supporting and encouraging each mentee to find their own mentor, I saved the time that program coordinators may spend in matching participants: “In many ways, we were matchmakers throughout this process, trying to think of who would be most appropriate for each participant.... [The process was] ‘extremely time-consuming’ [and] ‘challenging’” (Fives et al. (2008) p181). In contrast, our approach, with calls for expressions of interest from both mentees and mentors, sometimes supplemented by other invitations, and then mentee choice followed by mentee initiation of the potential pair, was not time-consuming. Indeed, my sense is that the time spent in

these consultations did not exceed that required to set up the pilot events. Once the mentoring relationship formed, as academic developer I was much less involved.

Our conclusions contrast with Boice's research where he found that mentoring pairs matched by the program coordinator fared just as well as those who formed their own pairings. At first "[p]rotégés paired with strangers from different departments began by reporting that they did not like their mentors and that they were sure that a mentor from a different discipline would be of minimal help." (1992b p111). Nevertheless, Boice helped the mentees push through these initial difficulties by providing a great deal of support to all participants, encouraging those who were reluctant to persist with the program and meet weekly. Certainly our mentors primarily expected to be paired within their own discipline, and even several professors expressed surprise, wondering what they would have to offer someone beyond their discipline. Their experience during the program, nevertheless, was revelatory as they reflected at the lunch on what they had been able to contribute to their mentee, and indeed, learnt from their mentee.

Although we acknowledge the importance of personal connections in the pairing process, we felt somewhat uneasy about the increasing number of already-matched pairs applying to the program. Although such pairs viewed their prior formation positively, we were concerned that this practice potentially reduced the number of places from those who had more need of a facilitated formal mentoring program e.g. those were new and did not already have existing relationships. Myers and Humphreys (1985) identified similar pitfalls in mentoring, such as mentees recognising the "old-boys" network within their organisation and selecting mentors who give them access to that network. Such practices may then result in discrimination, with adverse effects on the careers of women and minorities. White women and men, whom Boice (1993) categorised as exemplary new academics, found social networks and/or mentoring readily or came to their new university with such networks already in place. Minority new academics, and what he termed ambiguously 'unadapted' white female new academics, did not have such networks and did not seek out mentoring opportunities. In order to ensure opportunity for those who can benefit most from a formal program and give priority to the academics, who need the most support, we will consider how to prioritise matched pairs in future mentoring programs.

### **Creating a mentoring culture**

In any mentoring program, it is important that the participants help shape the current program and any future programs. In this program, the participants' feedback contributed to the development of a sustainable academic mentoring program where the pairing process was improved. Further, on the basis of participant feedback, we repositioned where the gathering takes place within the program. Instead of bringing participants together at the beginning of the program, as in the pilot, we offered sessions during and at the end of the programs. This change in timing was more effective in developing a the mentoring community of practice, as the participants were able to share and learn from each others' experiences of mentoring; and as each cohort went through the program further developed the mentoring culture.



At its first meeting, the project team noted, “The success of the program will also depend upon developing a culture of support. This will impact on the longevity and sustainability of the program. A notion of culture and community will feed into the program becoming self-sustaining and self-supporting” (project team meeting minutes, 1 June 2004). In this context, Lave and Wenger’s (1991) concept of community of practice has been valuable for our program. Cultivating such a group that shares a commitment to, and understandings of, practices they undertake, is recognised as an effective organisational approach to foster innovation and change (Li et al. 2009). Also highly relevant for the mentoring program is Breu and Hemingway’s observation that “...where organisation structure fails to satisfy individuals’ needs for affiliation, they appear to use informal mechanisms to compensate for a perceived lack of social cohesion” (2002, p.151). Thus the program has encouraged the development of a community practice in which mentees and mentors share the mentoring practices they have found supported their learning during the program.

There is no best way of matching mentees and mentors in formal mentoring programs. However, we feel we have continued the conversation about the pairing process – to explore what shapes successful pairing of mentees with mentors. By not only enabling mentee choice of mentor but also providing considered, individualised support for each mentee, participants had a positive experience of the pairing process and went on to have successful mentoring relationships. In future iterations of the program, we will examine mentor/mentee satisfaction, follow up the extent of continued relationships, and their focus beyond the program itself and also examine the populations – by gender, discipline, expectations of mentees and purpose of program. This further research may be fruitful for finding Professor Right.

### **Acknowledgements**

We thank our colleagues who participated in the programs, at writing retreats in December 2006 and January 2007 and members of the pilot project team: Robyn Ewing, Mark Freeman, Simon Barrie, Fran Waugh, John Shields, Donna O’Connor and Paula Spicer. We also thank colleagues at the Institute for Teaching and Learning who provided valuable feedback on drafts. We are grateful to Chris Sykes for assistance with the literature review and Barbara Grant for suggesting Professor Right for the title.

### **References**

Alleman, E., Cochran, J., Doverspike, J., Newman, I. (1984). Enriching mentoring relationships. *The Personnel and Guidance Journal*, 62, 329-332.

Allen, T.D., Eby, L.T., Lentz, E. (2006). Mentorship behaviours and mentorship quality associated with formal mentoring programs: closing the gap between research and practice. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 91(3), 567-578.

Armstrong, S.J., Allinson, C.W., Hayes, J. (2002). Formal mentoring systems: an examination of the effects of mentor/protégé cognitive styles on the mentoring process. *Journal of Management Studies*, 39(8), 1111-1137.

Becher, T., Trowler, P. R. (2001) *Academic Tribes and Territories: intellectual enquiry and the cultures of disciplines*. (2nd edition). Open University Press/SRHE, Buckingham.

Benson, C.A., Morahan, P.S., Sachdeva, A.K., Richman, R.C. (2002). Effective faculty preceptoring and mentoring during reorganisation of an academic medical center. *Medical Teacher*, 24(5), 550-557.

Blake-Beard, S.D. (2001). Taking a hard look at formal mentoring programs: A consideration of potential challenges facing women. *Journal of Management Development*, 20(4), 331-345.

Boice, R. (1992a). Lessons learned about mentoring. *New directions for teaching and learning*, 50, 51-61.

Boice, R. (1992b). *The new Faculty member: supporting and fostering professional development*. Jossey-Bass Publishers: San Francisco

Boice, R. (1993). *New Faculty Involvement for women and minorities*. *Research in Higher Education*, 34(3), 291-341.

Braun, V., Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3, 77-101.

Chao, G.T., Walz, P.M., and Gardner, P.D. (1992). Formal and informal mentorships: a comparison on mentoring functions and contrast with nonmentored counterparts. *Personnel Psychology*, 45(3), 619-636.

Clarke, M. (2004). Reconceptualising mentoring: Reflections by an early career researcher. *Issues in Educational Research*, 14(2), 121-143.

D'Abate, C.P., Eddy, E.R. (2008). Mentoring as a learning tool: enhancing the effectiveness of an undergraduate business mentoring program. *Mentoring & Tutoring*, 16(4), 363-378.

Ehrich, L.C., Hansford, B., Tennent L., (2004). Formal mentoring programs in education and other professions: a review of the literature. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 40(4), 518-540.

Ensher, E.A., Murphy, S.E. (1997). Effects of race, gender, perceived similarity, and contact on mentor relationships. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 50, 460-481.

Ewing, R., Freeman, M., Barrie, S., Bell, A., O'Connor, D., Waugh, F., and Sykes, C. (2008). Building community in academic settings: The importance of flexibility in a structured mentoring program. *Mentoring and Tutoring: Partnership in Learning*, 16(3), 294-310.

Ferman, T. (2002). Academic professional development practice: What lecturers find valuable. *The International Journal for Academic Development*, 7(2), 146-158.

Fives, H., Buehl, M.M., Myers, S.D. (2008). The cultivation of a professional association-based new faculty mentoring program. In C.A. Mullen (Ed.), *The Handbook of Formal Mentoring in Higher Education: A case study approach* (pp. 165-190). Northwood, MA: Christopher-Gordon Publishers, Inc.

Gardiner, M., Tiggemann, M., Kearns, H., Marshall, K. (2007). Show me the money! An empirical analysis of mentoring outcomes for women in academia. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 26(4), 425-442.

Gardiner, M. (1999). Making a difference: Flinders University mentoring scheme for early career women researchers. Pilot program report. [http://www.flinders.edu.au/staffdev/courses/research/resources/Full\\_report1999.pdf](http://www.flinders.edu.au/staffdev/courses/research/resources/Full_report1999.pdf). Accessed 22 July 2009.

Girves, J.E., Zepeda, Y., Gwathmey, J.K. (2005). Mentoring in a post-affirmative action world. *Journal of Social Issues*, 61(3), 449-479.

Handley, K., Sturdy, A., Fincham, R., Clark, T. (2006) Within and beyond communities of practice: Making sense of learning through participation, identity and practice. *Journal of Management Studies*, 43(3), 641-653.

Harnish, D., Wild, L.A. (1994). Mentoring strategies for faculty development. *Studies in Higher Education*, 19(2), 191-201.

Johnsrud, L.K. (1990). Mentor relationships: those that help and those that hinder. *New directions for higher education*, 72, 57-66.

Johnston, S., McCormack, C. (1997). Developing research potential through a structured mentoring program: issues arising. *Higher Education*, 33(3), 251-264.

Kamvounias, P., McGrath-Champ, S., Yip, J. (2008) Gifts in mentoring: mentees' reflections on an academic development program. *International Journal for Academic Development*, 13(1), 17-25

Lave, J., Wenger, E. (1991) *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. New Jersey: Cambridge University Press.

- Lawson, H.A. (1992). Beyond the new conception of teacher induction. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 43(3), 163-172.
- Li, L., Grimshaw, J., Nielsen, C., Judd, M., Coyte, P., Graham, I. (2009) Evolution of wenger's concept of community of practice. *Implementation Science*, 4(1), 11-
- Long, J. (1997). The dark side of mentoring. *Australian Educational Researcher*, 24 (2), 115-133.
- Madison, J., Knight, B.A., Watson, K. (1993). Mentoring amongst academics in Australia: a case study. *Australian Educational Researcher*, 20(1), 77-91.
- Metros, S.E., Yang, C. (2006). The importance of mentors. Educase [www.educause.edu/content.asp?page\\_id=10631&bhcp=1](http://www.educause.edu/content.asp?page_id=10631&bhcp=1). Accessed 12 December 2006.
- Mullen, C.A. (2008). Conclusion: mentoring, change, and diversity: findings and lessons. In C.A. Mullen (Ed.), *The Handbook of Formal Mentoring in Higher Education: a case study approach* (pp. 297-319). Northwood, MA: Christopher-Gordon Publishers Inc.
- Murray, M. (1991). *Beyond the myths and magic of mentoring*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass
- Myers, D.W. and Humphreys NJ (1985). The caveats in mentorship. *Business Horizons*, 28, 9-14.
- Quinlan, K.M. (1999). Enhancing mentoring and networking of junior academic women: what, why and how? *Journal of higher education policy and management*, 21(1), 31-42.
- Ragins, B.R., Cotton, J.L., Miller, J.S. (2000). Marginal mentoring: the effects of type of mentor, quality of relationship, and program design on work and career attitudes. *Academy of Management Journal*, 43(6), 1177-1194.
- Ragins, B.R., Cotton, J.L. (1999). Mentor functions and outcomes: a comparison of men and women in formal and informal mentoring relationships. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 84(4), 529-550.
- Stanulis, R.N., Russell, D. (2000). Jumping in”: trust and communication in mentoring student teachers. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 16, 65-80.
- Treleaven L 1994 'Making a space: Collaborative inquiry as staff development' in *Participation in Human Inquiry*, ed. P. Reason, SAGE, London, United Kingdom, pp. 138-162.
- University of Sydney. (2009a). <http://www.usyd.edu.au/about/profile/pub/facts.shtml>. Accessed 7 January 2009.

University of Sydney. (2009b). Statistics Unit  
<http://www.planning.usyd.edu.au/statistics/staff/staff.php?yr=2008&type=1&fac=u>.  
Accessed 7 January 2009

University of Sydney. (2009c). Statistics Unit  
<http://www.planning.usyd.edu.au/statistics/load/ls08/bfcats.php?fac=6&semind=3&ci=3>.  
Accessed 7 January 2009

Viator, R.E. (1999). An analysis of formal mentoring programs and perceived barriers to obtaining a mentor at large public accounting firms. *Accounting Horizons*, 13(1), 37-53.

Zachary, L.J. (2005). *Creating a mentoring culture: The organization's guide*. Jossey-Bass: San Francisco.

Table 1. Summary of program demographics, pairing process and thematic analysis

<b>Program year</b>	<b>2005</b>	<b>2006</b>	<b>2007</b>
<b>No. of pairs</b>	14	12	13
<b>Mentor demographics</b>			
Male/Female	3/9	7/5	6/6
Professors	3	4	2
Assoc. Professors	5	3	3
Senior Lecturers	3	4	8
Lecturers	1	1	0
<b>Mentee demographics</b>			
Male/Female	2/12	7/5	6/7
Senior Lecturers	3	3	1
Lecturers	8	7	9
Assoc. Lecturers	2	2	3
Research Associate	1	0	0
<b>Pairing processes</b>	All mentees and mentors met at Forum, informal lunch, then mentee approached mentor	Each mentee met one-to-one with academic developer, then mentee approached mentor	Each mentee met one-to-one with academic developer, then mentee approached mentor
<b>Thematic analysis</b>	<i>Initial awkwardness, Personal connections, Positive experience</i>	<i>Facilitated pairing, Personal connections, Positive experience</i>	<i>Facilitated pairing, Personal connections, Positive experience</i>