# THE MENTORSHIP EXPERIENCE:
## A SYNOPSIS OF CONVERSATIONS WITH STUDENTS AND JUNIOR FACULTY

## LIFE CIRCUMSTANCES

Many of the students and faculty represented "first" generations in their families to attend college, obtain advanced degrees, or become members of academia. As such, they did not know what they did not know. They did not have easily accessible resources within their own family or community to help them know the tasks, challenges, strategies, or opportunities. Within their respective institutions, faculty and students were challenged to address the intersection of the culture of the university and their own cultural identity.

For some, family was supportive but did not know how to help. For others, family did not understand or support the pursuit of their roles. Still other family members wanted assurance that there would not be a loss of cultural identity. Both cultural traditions and financial realities magnified the pressures on students.

Both students and faculty reported uncertainty about their competence or abilities. They both described some of the pressures of visibility ("being a minority everywhere you go").

## STUDENTS

### General Themes – Discovering their Potential and Pointing the Way

▪ **Discovering their Potential**
Students spoke to the role of mentors in helping them discover their abilities to perform academically. Mentors created opportunities for students to develop their knowledge and skills. Mentors helped them see possibilities beyond their expectations of themselves and beyond what was known to them. Mentors also provided emotional support to assist them in facing their own self-doubts and addressing practical barriers to their success.

- **Pointing the Way**

Mentors had a significant role in identifying career options for students, directing them to opportunities and facilitating the resources for them. One example is a mentor who directed students to the Bridges program where community college students spent the summer in a university research experience. Some mentors did more than point the way, but opened the way through letters of recommendation, and referral to professional networks.

**Recruitment**

High school teachers were often cited as key persons who identified their talents and encouraged them to complete high school and continue their education. Students expressed the view that persons who felt the commitment would "reach back" to help someone like themselves. Some programs came to the school to make youth aware of career options and of possibilities. Personal relationships were very important.

**Retention**

Mentors provided support when family members did not understand what it takes to be academically successful. Mentors were a source of support when times were difficult with school work, family life, and university life. At the same time, mentors pushed students to perform up to their abilities, stay on track, and maintain high standards. Peer mentoring and pairing with higher level students facilitated retention. Mentors helped guide and support students to navigate through the political environment of "the department". Racial and gender concordance were important, but not essential if the mentor understood cultural issues.

**Challenges**

Experiences with mentors were not without challenges. Most notably, when mentors: 1) misused or abused their position of power by using or exploiting the mentee for mentor's personal research goals, and 2) competing with the mentees when mentee successfully moved from one level to another (e.g., master's level study to doctoral study).

*General Themes – professional development* and *negotiating the terrain*

- *Professional Development*

Faculty members described their need to learn how to do the job. They came into this work with limited family history in academia. Faculty needed assistance in sorting out the basics regarding the tasks of teaching, conducting research, publishing, fulfilling committee assignments, and advising. Notably faculty needed assistance in managing their own unique approaches to these tasks within the context of their personal interpretation of what it means to be a professor of color (e.g., imposter syndrome or superwoman syndrome) and how administration, other faculty, and students related to them as a professor of color.

- *Negotiating the Terrain*

Faculty spoke to the importance of having mentoring to help them negotiate the terrain of the academia. The need here was to understand not just the tasks of the faculty role, but to also understand the organizational politics, especially in relationship to achievement of tenure.

**Pre-Story: Life Before Academia**

For some faculty, the experiences prior to entering the academia were pivotal. One person had experienced a level of racism in high school that eroded his self-confidence, but found extraordinary mentorship in college. During that time he learned skills that positioned him well for his current academic career. Another had had no experience as a mentee prior to obtaining her position, and in not knowing what she did not know, she did avail herself to possible opportunities. Several reported on the impact (positive and negative) of their mentors and/or advisors during their post-doctoral fellowships on obtaining their faculty appointments. Sometimes that person remained a formal or informal mentor.

**Recruitment**

Many of the faculty members obtained their initial faculty appointments through their mentors in their post-doc assignments. Some reported the importance of mentorship as a necessary condition to feel comfortable in accepting a position.

**Retention and Promotion**
Faculty spoke to the role of mentorship in professional development and negotiating the terrain that helped them to achieve university goals and expectations. Further, mentorship enabled faculty to feel comfortable within the academic environment. This included stimulating intellectual growth, addressing any self-doubt, serving as a sounding board (or "*ventorship*"), and offering guidance on work/life balance. The advocacy provided by mentors supported these faculty through racially charged challenges within the university. Racial concordance was important, especially as role models, however it was not critical if the mentor understood the cultural issues and authentically acknowledged the limitations of their knowledge.

The role of mentors that facilitated faculty's teaching, research, publishing, and committee assignments was critical to prepare them for tenure. The mentor's role in helping faculty understand and navigate the political environment of the university was also viewed critical. Those who had achieved tenure stated that their mentor's advocacy on their behalf was essential. Many indicated that having only one mentor was not sufficient. These faculty acknowledged appreciation of formal, informal, and peer mentors from persons within the department, the university, other universities, and the community. Communication with their mentors could be in person, by phone, or electronic.

On the other hand, the absence of mentors left them feeling isolated and vulnerable. One person left the university when it became apparent that neither he nor his research was respected. Some left the tenure track and took on different roles within the university. Significant problems resulted if the mentor did not appreciate the "mission-driven" or "identity-driven" nature of the faculty member's research and approach to other academic tasks. In general, assigned mentors were not helpful due to lack of investment in the faculty member or absence of guidance regarding role as a mentor.

# Characteristics of good mentorship for students and faculty from racial and ethnic groups who are underrepresented in the health professions

### *Description of Types of Student and Faculty Support from a Junior Faculty Conversation*

| | | PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| | | WEAK | STRONG |
| PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT | WEAK | Advisor ("but useful") | Sponsor |
| | STRONG | Friend | Mentor |

There was general consensus from both students and junior faculty members that mentors should be persons who have a genuine interest in the success of mentee. The relationship should offer a combination of support for the technical aspects of academic and faculty achievement as well as be a person with whom the mentee can feel safe to share "anything". For students and faculty from underrepresented racial and ethnic groups, "anything" includes their challenges as member of these groups for themselves personally, in pursuit of their tasks, and in relationship with members of the academic community.

Mentorship is most realistically provided by more than one person because it is difficult for any single individual to have the ability to serve all of functions and needs of any given mentee. Some combination of formal and informal mentees should be facilitated to include the possibility of racial or ethnic concordance. All mentors should have professional development and training in cultural competence. Mentors should view cultural competence as an essential area of knowledge and skills. Formal mentors should be well prepared (i.e., mentor development) and supported (i.e., time and recognition towards advancement) for their role. The formal mentor role should be structured with clear expectations of the relationship.