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Social Work Leadership Attitudes On Formal Menthorship: Impact on Field Directors

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Abstract

Despite numerous benefits, formal faculty mentorship, particularly within social work, remains underutilized. To assess attitudes towards formal mentorship, a national exploratory survey (*N* = 187) was conducted of those in social work leadership positions within CSWE-accredited programs. Findings indicate overwhelming support for formal mentorship. Social work deans were least receptive, and field directors expressed the highest level of support. Participants were moderately receptive to adding mentorship requirements to the EPAS. Field directors deliver the signature pedagogy of social work education and should be provided with formal mentorship. Implications for field, social work education, and future research recommendations are presented.

Keywords: formal mentorship; field directors; social work education; CSWE EPAS; attitudes

Formal mentorship is widely accepted within higher education as a critical mechanism to support faculty (Allen et al., 2018; Brady & Spencer, 2018; Holosko et al., 2016; Jackson et al., 2017; Schmidt & Faber, 2016; Sheridan et al., 2015; Smith et al., 2016). While there is no agreed-upon definition of formal mentorship, components widely accepted in the literature were used for this study. Formal mentorship is defined as a process by which a more experienced faculty member engages collaboratively with a less experienced faculty member to serve as a role model in areas such as career development, institutional knowledge, provision of information and advice, work-life balance, and navigating through challenges inherent in higher education. This definition stresses mentorship as a formal commitment of support, beyond an informal

helping relationship.

Formal mentorship is essential to recruiting and retaining a diverse body of faculty, increasing promotion and tenure rates, cultivating greater scholarship productivity, assisting in job-specific training, and preparing faculty for leadership and advancement opportunities (Allen et al., 2018; Alvarez & Lazzari, 2016; Jackson et al., 2017; McRae & Zimmerman, 2019; Sheridan et al., 2015). These supports decrease feelings of isolation, assist faculty in acclimating to institutional expectations, and provide opportunities for collaboration (Brady, 2018; Holosko et al., 2016; Smith et al., 2016). Formal mentorship is associated with increasing program and prestige indicators (Allen et al., 2004; Chadiha et al., 2014; Miller et al., 2016; Sheridan et al., 2015). Mentorship also preserves institutional memory while building leadership capacity to aid in succession planning (Raymond & Kannan, 2014). When deeper relationships are fostered through mentoring, the work environment and institutional climate are elevated (Gilroy, 2004; Pifer et al., 2019; Schmidt & Faber, 2016).

Formal mentorship is particularly important for field directors, as they are responsible for organizing, implementing, administering, and monitoring the signature pedagogy of social work education (Ellison & Raskin, 2014; Lyter, 2012). Field directors are expected to be the institutional authority for the most critical part of the curriculum, hold complex and constantly changing roles, are an essential link to the community, are often best positioned to understand the community needs, and serve to provide key partnerships within the broader community (Ayala et al., 2018; Beaulieu, 2020; Lyter, 2012). Because of their unique administrative roles, responsibilities to support institutional and community stakeholders, and need to employ flexible, creative, and pedagogically sound responses to complex changes, formal mentorship for field directors is critical (Ayala et al., 2018; Beaulieu, 2020; Bogo, 2015; Ellison & Raskin, 2014; Lyter, 2012; Wertheimer & Sodhi, 2014).

Despite its benefits, utilization of mentorship within the academy remains inadequate (Carmel & Paul, 2015; Ellison & Raskin, 2014; Wilson et al., 2002). Robbins's (1989) seminal study found only one-third of faculty received formal mentorship. Over thirty years later, the landscape of higher education has changed dramatically, yet rates of mentorship have not. In an exploratory qualitative study, Zerden et al., (2015) found only one-third of social work faculty interviewed received formal mentorship. While mentoring is recognized as the most common form of faculty development, it is scarce in most social work departments (Brady, 2018; Holosko et al., 2018). Research on formal mentorship for field directors is limited, although two studies on this topic indicate this population experiences mentorship at a far lower rate than faculty (Beaulieu, 2020; Ellison & Raskin, 2014). In a national exploratory survey, Ellison & Raskin (2014) found that only 19% of field directors received institutionally sanctioned formal mentorship. The authors indicated the vast majority of participants

independently sought supports through talking to other field colleagues and reading books or articles on field education, since no formal mentoring supports were made available to them. Beaulieu (2020) also conducted a national exploratory study that confirmed the lack of formal mentorship for field directors. The vast majority of survey participants (73%) indicated they received no formal mentorship, and 95% of participants reported they received no position-specific orientation upon being hired.

While substantial research exists on the benefits of mentorship within academia, few studies have examined attitudes toward mentorship from those who hold a position within social work leadership, particularly from a quantitative methodological perspective (Andreanoff, 2016). Furthermore, the research is mostly silent on how formal mentorship specifically impacts those serving in the capacity of field director (Beaulieu, 2020; Ellison & Raskin, 2014; Lyter, 2012). Exploring the perspectives of those within leadership positions is critical, as this group is responsible for setting agendas, program initiatives, priorities, and culture within their department. This study aimed to address a significant gap in the literature and has implications for those who hold field director positions as well as for social work departments and the broader academic community. The question this study sought to explore was: "What are the attitudes of those in social work departmental leadership positions towards formal mentorship, and further, how do these attitudes impact field directors?" To understand this topic, an overview of the literature is presented.

Literature Review

This literature review explores four major themes that are reflected in the research. These themes include benefits associated with formal mentorship for faculty and institutions, experiences of mentors and mentees, institutional challenges of implementing and sustaining formal mentorship practices, and formal mentorship as a professional responsibility within social work programs.

Benefits of Formal Mentorship for Faculty and Institutions

The benefits of formal mentorship have been studied extensively within higher education. Formal mentorship assists in orienting new faculty members, reduces feelings of isolation and anxiety, and leads to higher levels of social collaboration and collegiality (Brady, 2018; Schmidt & Faber, 2016; Smith et al., 2016). Formal mentorship enhances satisfaction with promotion and tenure, aids in course and curriculum development, bolsters research confidence, increases scholarly publications, and lengthens the time faculty remain employed at their institution (Eby et al., 2008; Jackson et al., 2017; Schmidt & Faber, 2016; Sheridan et al., 2015). Mentorship is also a mechanism for inclusion, relationship building, and retention (Brady, 2018; Chadiha et al., 2014; Sheridan et al., 2015). This is important, as Pifer et al., (2019) noted that 25% of

administrators attribute faculty departures to lack of fit with colleagues.

The presence of mentorship can address these challenges and has been shown to increase job satisfaction and promote work-life balance (Allen et al., 2004; Schmidt & Faber, 2016). Examples of increased job satisfaction noted in the literature include faculty feeling competent in navigating complex work dynamics and institutional systems, achieving success and a sense of pride in fulfilling their work duties, and creating a realistic and concrete plan to advance in their professional goals (Allen et al., 2004; Jackevicius et al., 2014). Examples of work-life balance include faculty ability to allocate time to fulfill required work duties while balancing personal responsibilities, having a targeted approach to prioritizing opportunities while not overcommitting, and knowing how to navigate scaling back to attend to other needs (Jackevicius et al., 2014; Schmidt & Faber, 2016).

While formal mentorship is a predictor of success for all faculty, those from marginalized backgrounds experience additional benefits. Mentorship is critical for women in reducing feelings of isolation, sexual discrimination, and challenges in balancing work and personal life duties (Holosko et al., 2016; Webber, 2018). Formal mentorship helps to navigate oppressive organizational cultures that are disproportionately punitive towards women, and addresses challenges with access, power imbalances, sexism, and gender bias (Alvarez & Lazzari, 2016; Denson et al., 2018; Simon et al., 2008). Formal mentorship is also beneficial for minority faculty. Mentoring relationships provide knowledge and skills to navigate implicit racial bias, uneven political power structures, prejudice, and discrimination (Chadiha et al., 2014; Espino & Zambrana, 2019). Mentors from the same background transfer knowledge of institutional norms, means of gaining acceptance and integration, mechanisms to access social capital, and a deeper understanding of the hidden agenda found within higher education (Espino & Zambrana, 2019; Salinas et al., 2020; Zambrana et al., 2015). Finally, non–tenure-track or part-time faculty members benefit from formal mentorship. Mentorship increases understanding of university policies and procedures, knowledge of curriculum structure and course scaffolding, and teaching pedagogies (Clark et al., 2011; Shobe et al., 2014). Additional benefits include an increased sense of belonging and overall feelings of value at the institution (Fagan-Wilen et al., 2006).

According to Wertheimer & Sodhi (2014), there is high turnover among field directors, many serving in this capacity for fewer than five years. Field directors often experience job insecurity, work in underresourced offices, are more likely to be in a non–tenure-track/staff position, report a lack of institutional supports, and experience high levels of burnout (Beaulieu, 2020; Ellison & Raskin, 2014; Lyter, 2012; Wertheimer & Sodhi, 2014). Mentoring relationships can help create a sense of belonging, assist in advocating for an increase in resources, and reduce overall feelings of isolation and

burnout (Ellison & Raskin, 2014; Fagan-Wilen et al., 2006; Holosko et al., 2016; Lyter, 2012).

Benefits of formal mentorship also extend to institutions. Formal mentorship is associated with higher rates of faculty recruitment, diversity, and retention (Allen et al., 2004; Chadiha et al., 2014; Miller et al., 2016; Sheridan et al., 2015). The work environment and institutional climate is more positive and prestige indicators and program rankings are higher when formal mentorship is present (Gilroy, 2004; Miller et al., 2016; Schmidt & Faber, 2016).

Experiences of Mentors and Mentees

Overall, the literature indicates formal mentoring relationships are mutually beneficial (Ragins et al., 2000). The most important predictor of success is the mentor/mentee match (Ragins et al., 2000). Serious issues are uncommon; however, if present, mentee dissatisfaction may negate any benefits (Ragins et al., 2000). Some of the most common challenges include mentors' disinterest in building relationships, personality incompatibility, a lack of mentoring skills, and unclear definitions of mentor roles and responsibilities (Ambrosetti & Dekkers, 2010; Espino & Zambrana, 2019; Ragins et al., 2000).

While the mentee benefits are reflected robustly in the literature, the experiences of mentors have also been explored. Mentors note personal satisfaction in giving back to faculty (Brady, 2018; Schmidt & Faber, 2016; Webber & Rogers, 2018). Often, senior faculty view mentorship as cultivating the next generation of the professoriate through investing time and energy as a means of "paying it forward" (Salinas et al., 2020, p. 136). Mentors indicate these reciprocal relationships keep them current on teaching pedagogies and provide opportunities for collaboration in course design, curriculum evaluation, and scholarly publications (Brady, 2018).

Despite overwhelming benefits, these relationships can be difficult to implement and sustain. Mentors report a lack of mentorship curricula (Lewis et al., 2017). Furthermore, there is less access to mentors of the same racial/ethnic background due to a limited number of senior-level minority faculty (Denson et al., 2018; Simon et al., 2004; Zambrana et al., 2015). Mentors may face difficulties relating to, and helping, mentees because of differences in racial/ethnic background (Espino & Zambrana, 2019, Lewis, et al., 2017). Mentors also endorse a need for recognition, as investing in these relationships takes time and energy. Formal mentorship would be more sustainable if institutions provided workload reduction or release time (Brady, 2018; Schmidt & Faber, 2016). Further, research and teaching are given more weight in tenure and promotion considerations than is providing mentoring (Brady, 2018; Schmidt & Faber, 2016). There are few incentives to encourage mentorship (Liechty et al., 2009). To

provide support, institutions must recognize the commitment required to be a mentor and offer recognition or compensation.

Institutional Challenges of Formal Mentorship

Despite the benefits, institutions often lack a systematic approach to mentoring, and many times have not constructed rigorous evaluation mechanisms to measure the impact (Zerden et al., 2015). Because higher education largely exists in silos, approaches to mentorship are often not collaborative or widespread throughout the university (Zerden et al., 2015). Institutions face competing priorities and scarce resources to address mandatory expenditures, which makes investing in new programs difficult (Pifer et al., 2019). Many institutions are grappling with creating a diverse workforce and lack historically underrepresented mentors (Byars-Winston, et al., 2018; Espino & Zambrana, 2019). Due to retirements, resignations, and a decrease in tenure-track positions, institutions may struggle to entice senior faculty to provide support (Espino & Zambrana, 2019). Finally, because there are fewer field directors compared to academic faculty, there could be additional challenges or constraints in finding mentors. While mentorship has an associated cost, turnover, poor morale, and lower institutional outcomes also have costs (Bingmer et al., 2019; Cho et al., 2011; Henry-Noel, et al., 2019).

Formal Mentorship as a Professional Responsibility in Social Work Programs

While mentorship practices are supported in the literature, the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) issues no formal requirements to provide them. Mentorship programs vary greatly in practice. In a national exploratory study, Beaulieu (2020) found the majority of field directors (73%) were not provided mentorship. The study further explored the ethical dilemmas associated with this lack of support, and determined that this void may be one reason field directors are not as accepted within academia. Beaulieu (2020) concluded that the profession’s code of ethics supports formal mentorship, and highlights its importance given the field director’s role in overseeing the signature pedagogy of social work education. Many social work scholars encourage mentorship practices and also view them as a professional responsibility (Katz et al., 2019). These scholars urge institutions to recognize the time and commitment mentorship requires and to implement these practices (Katz et al., 2019).

Gaps in the Literature

Quantitative research on mentorship is limited, and the literature is virtually silent in exploring the perspectives on formal mentorship of those in social work departmental leadership positions. There is even less literature focused on mentoring field directors

specifically. Theirs are critical voices to capture, and doing so may provide insight into why mentorship practices are underutilized. To address these gaps, this study sought to explore the attitudes of those in social work departmental leadership positions as they relate to formal mentorship. These findings will add to the scarce literature as well as provide insight into the attitudes of those within leadership positions who are responsible for establishing departmental policies and implementing new initiatives.

Methods

This study aimed to answer the question, "What are the attitudes of those in social work departmental leadership positions towards formal mentorship, and how do these attitudes impact field directors?" To investigate this, an exploratory survey was designed and implemented. Survey methodology was chosen because little research exists on the topic of formal mentorship from the perspective of those in social work departmental leadership positions. This study was approved by the author's institutional review board (IRB).

Population and Sampling

The study's population consisted of faculty employed in social work programs. The sampling frame comprised those who identified as holding a leadership position within a CSWE-accredited social work program. A leadership position was defined as currently holding one or more of the following titles: dean of social work, department chair, department director, field director, Master of Social Work program coordinator, Master of Social Work program director, Bachelor of Social Work program coordinator, or Bachelor of Social Work program director. Purposive sampling was used by sending surveys directly to four listservs utilized by social work education (Rubin & Babbie, 2016). To increase the response rate, snowball sampling was used, i.e., participants were encouraged to send the survey to colleagues.

Procedures and Data Collection

An invitation to participate in this study was sent to four listservs utilized within social work education: The Association of Baccalaureate Social Work Program Directors (BPD), MSW-ED, Field Director, and The National Association of Deans and Directors (NADD). At the time of the survey, 3,509 members subscribed to these listservs. The initial email invitation was sent in January 2020, with three subsequent requests in February, March, and April 2020. Survey data was collected via Qualtrics over this three-month period.

Measures

Participants completed a 42-question anonymous survey constructed by the author, as no pre-existing instruments were available that focused on those with social work departmental leadership positions. The survey was pilot-tested by fifteen people employed within social work education, and feedback regarding flow of questions and wording was incorporated before survey distribution. Questions were grounded in the literature, and the definition of formal mentorship was clearly articulated. The survey captured participants' demographic information and personal experiences with formal mentorship.

Likert-scale questions were asked on the overall value of formal mentorship. Participants were asked to rate their level of agreement (1 being "strongly disagree" to 6 being "strongly agree") on the following statements: "I believe formal mentoring should be provided for all social work faculty"; "I believe formal mentoring is a professional responsibility as a social worker"; "I believe formal mentoring should be included in the CSWE EPAS"; "I believe formal mentoring is important to overall faculty success"; and "I believe formal mentoring is important to overall institutional success." Results indicated that the majority of respondents believe mentorship should be provided to faculty, and see it as a contributing factor in faculty and institutional success. Responses also indicated that formal mentorship is viewed as a professional responsibility of social workers, though there was only moderate support for requiring it in the EPAS.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for Scales

	n	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Professional responsibility	187	1.00	6.00	5.2674	0.91766
EPAS	187	1.00	6.00	3.7807	1.37178
Provide mentoring	187	2.00	6.00	5.4920	0.78541
Faculty success	187	2.00	6.00	5.3476	0.83472
Institutional success	186	2.00	6.00	5.3495	0.83273
Valid *n* (listwise)	186				

Likert-scale questions were asked on the overall impact of formal mentorship on faculty and institutional success. Participants were asked to rate their attitudes on a scale of 0–10 (0 being "no impact" and 10 being a "substantial impact"). Areas assessed were work-life balance, promotion, the tenure process, acclimating to higher education, experiencing feelings of belonging, scholarship/publication, recruitment of faculty, and retention of faculty. Participants strongly endorsed the impact of formal mentorship on promotion, tenure, acclimating to higher education, experiencing feelings of belonging, scholarship/publication, and retention of faculty. Participants moderately endorsed the impact mentorship has on achieving a work-life balance and recruiting faculty.

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics Impact of Formal Mentorship

	n	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Work-life balance	180	0	10	5.89	2.448
Promotion	183	0	10	7.28	2.426
Tenure	178	0	10	8.61	1.836
Acclimating to higher ed	184	1	10	8.47	1.846
Feelings of belonging	182	1	10	7.98	2.010
Scholarship	182	1	10	7.26	2.234
Recruiting faculty	175	0	10	6.34	2.745
Retaining faculty	179	0	10	7.72	2.420
Valid *n* (listwise)	163				

Likert-scale questions were also asked on barriers to implementing formal mentorship programs. Participants were asked to rate potential barriers to implementing formal mentorship programs on a scale of 0–10 (0 being "no barrier" and 10 being a "substantial barrier") in the following areas: adequacy of resources, institutional support, social work faculty support, senior faculty willingness/ability to serve as mentors, being adequately staffed, and having release time for faculty to serve as mentors. Participants overwhelmingly agreed that not having release time for faculty to serve as mentors, staffing, and adequacy of resources are significant barriers. Participants moderately endorsed senior faculty willingness to serve as mentors, a lack of institutional support, and overall faculty support as barriers.

Table 3

Descriptive Statistics on Barriers to Implementing Formal Mentorship

	n	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Resources	183	0	10	7.55	2.401
Institutional support	180	0	10	6.85	2.831
Faculty support	177	0	10	5.30	3.083
Willingness to mentor	182	0	10	6.98	2.663
Staffing	179	0	10	7.60	2.913
Release time	183	0	10	7.73	2.730
Valid *n* (listwise)	174				

Likert-scale questions were asked on barriers to sustaining formal mentorship programs. Participants were asked to rate potential barriers to sustaining formal mentorship programs on a scale of 0–10 (0 being "no barrier" and 10 being a "substantial barrier") in the following areas: adequacy of resources, institutional support, social work faculty support, senior faculty willingness/ability to serve as mentors, being adequately staffed, and having release time for faculty to serve as mentors. Participants overwhelmingly agreed that not having release time for faculty to serve as mentors, adequacy of resources, and staffing are barriers. Participants also rated faculty willingness to serve as mentors, and a lack of institutional support and overall faculty support as barriers.

Table 4

Descriptive Statistics on Barriers to Sustaining Formal Mentorship

	n	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Resources	184	0	10	7.33	2.606
Institutional support	179	0	10	6.92	3.054
Faculty support	175	0	10	5.57	3.018
Willingness to mentor	180	0	10	7.11	2.725
Staffing	177	0	10	7.19	2.973
Release time	176	0	10	7.49	2.763
Valid *n* (listwise)	165				

Data Analysis

Survey responses were cleaned and transferred to the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Since the study is exploratory in nature, data analysis focused on the descriptive level. Participant demographics were analyzed and descriptive analyses were run to explore variable distribution. Cross-tabulation analysis was conducted to assess the overall attitudes of formal mentorship based on the respondent’s position.

Results

Demographics of Survey Participants

The sample consisted of 187 participants who were predominantly white (*n* = 151), female (*n* = 164), and in the 41–50-year-old age range (*n* = 72). Participants were split between public (*n* = 96) and private institutions (*n* = 91). While a variety of academic leadership positions were represented, the majority of participants reported their title as field director (*n* = 66). Most participants reported their department does not have a formal mentorship program (*n* = 132) and that they have never received training to serve in the capacity of a formal mentor (*n* = 162).

Table 5

*Participant Demographics (*N *= 187)*

		n	%
Gender	Female	164	87.7%
	Male	21	11.2%
	Did not answer	2	1.1%
Age	Under 40	33	17.6%
	41–50	72	38.5%
	51–60	43	23%
	Older than 61	38	20.3%
	Did not answer	1	<1%
Race	White	151	80.7%
	Black/African American	23	12.3%
	Hispanic/Latino	5	2.7%
	Asian	2	1.2%
	Indian/Alaskan Native	1	<1%
	Did not answer	5	2.7%
Titles	Field director	66	35.3%
	Department chair	31	16.6%
	BSW program director	28	15%
	MSW program director	17	9%
	Social work dean	17	9%
	BSW program coordinator	13	7%
	Department director	6	3.2%
	MSW program coordinator	4	2.1%
	Did not answer	5	2.7%
Mentoring experiences	Served as formal faculty mentor	107	57.2%
	Did not serve as formal faculty mentor	80	42.8%
	Received formal mentorship	93	49.7%
	Did not receive formal mentorship	94	50.3%
	Department has no formal mentorship	132	70.6%
	Never received mentorship training	162	86.6%

Attitudes Based on Position

To explore how participants viewed formal mentorship based on their institutional position, a cross-tabulation analysis was conducted. Participants were asked to rate their level of agreement with the statement, "I believe formal mentoring should be provided for social work faculty." Overall, 182 participants answered this question, but only 161 reported their position. While 79% (*n* = 144) of participants either strongly agreed or agreed with that statement, their position is important, as it relates to having the potential power to impact rates of mentorship. Participants' positions were as follows: social work dean (76%, *n* = 13), department chair (90%, *n* = 28), department director (50%, *n* = 3), field director (91%, *n* = 60), MSW program coordinator (100%, *n* = 4), MSW program director (88%, *n* = 15), BSW program coordinator (77%, *n* = 10), and BSW program director (100%, *n* = 28). Of those surveyed, deans and department chairs have the most influence in setting priorities or instituting initiatives to support faculty. While 76% (*n* = 10) of deans responded favorably to formal mentorship practices, this group was the least supportive, with approximately 25% (*n* = 3) disagreeing that mentorship should be provided to social work faculty. Field directors had the highest response rates and overwhelmingly endorsed the importance of formal mentorship.

Table 6

Cross-Tabulation Analysis of Attitude on Providing Mentoring

Position	Strongly agree	Agree	Somewhat agree	Somewhat disagree	Disagree
	n (%)	*n* (%)	*n* (%)	*n* (%)	*n* (%)
Social work dean	7 (6.0)	2 (1.1)	1 (0.5)	2 (1.1)	1 (0.5)
Department chair	13 (8.8)	13 (8.8)	2 (1.6)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)
Department director	1 (1.1)	1 (0.5)	1 (1.6)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)
Field director	37 (22.5)	17 (10.4)	5 (2.7)	1 (0.5)	0 (0.0)
MSW program coordinator	3 (1.6)	1 (0.5)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)
MSW program director	12 (6.0)	2 (2.2)	1 (1.1)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)
BSW program coordinator	6 (4.3)	2 (2.2)	1 (1.1)	1 (0.5)	0 (0.0)
BSW program director	25 (12.1)	3 (3.3)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)
Total	104 (62.4)	41 (26.8)	11 (8.6)	4 (2.1)	1 (0.5)

Discussion

Findings from this study indicate 79% (n = 144) of those surveyed in social work departmental leadership positions support the provision of formal mentorship. Respondents recognized the advantages mentorship provides in areas such as tenure, promotion, scholarship, retention, feelings of belonging, and acclimating to higher education. The survey results indicate an endorsement of formal mentorship practices and align with what the literature suggests the benefits are (Allen et al., 2004; Brady, 2018; Eby et al., 2008; Jackson et al., 2017; Schmidt & Faber, 2016; Sheridan et al., 2015; Smith et al., 2016). However, there appears to be a disconnect regarding the actual implementation of formal mentorship. Participants indicated only 30% of their institutions had formal mentorship programs. This is consistent with the literature indicating that less than one-third of faculty receive formal mentoring (Robbins, 1989). Rates are even lower for adjunct or part-time faculty, and often mentorship programs are absent in many schools of social work (Brady, 2018; Clark et al., 2011; Holosko et al., 2018; Hoyt et al., 2008). In the limited studies focused on mentorship of field directors, it appears this group receives even less mentorship than part-time or adjunct faculty (Beaulieu, 2020; Ellison & Raskin, 2014). Despite the substantial body of research highlighting the benefits of formal mentorship, and the data collected in this survey, a disconnect exists which warrants further exploration. This disconnect is particularly concerning for field directors, given the significant role they hold within social work education.

Findings from this study also suggest that participants are moderately receptive to considering the addition of formal mentorship practices to the EPAS. To date, there is no literature that has been located that addresses amending the EPAS guidelines to include provisions for formal faculty mentorship. As there are no data to compare to,

it is difficult to assess support for this amendment; however, this should be explored. It is important to note that the recently released EPAS mentions mentorship only twice as examples of opportunities that could be provided to aid in developing students and faculty (CSWE, 2022). However, there are no accreditation requirements to provide formal faculty mentorship programs. Based on the overwhelming benefits, this should be considered (Holcomb, 2021).

Benefits and Challenges of Formal Mentorship from Social Work Leadership

The literature and this study's findings support the benefits of formal mentorship. Participants endorsed formal mentorship as having a positive impact on faculty success with the tenure and promotion process, increasing confidence in scholarship, acclimating to higher education, and cultivating a sense of belonging. Additionally, participants endorsed mentorship as a mechanism to increase faculty retention and support work-life balance. Despite benefits, participants indicated challenges. Participants reported as barriers understaffing, inadequate resources, and lack of release time for faculty to serve as mentors. Participants indicated senior faculty willingness to serve as mentors, institutional support, and, to a moderate degree, faculty support as barriers to engaging in mentorship. These findings are consistent with the literature (Brady, 2018; Pifer et al., 2019; Schmidt & Faber, 2016; Sheridan et al., 2015).

There could be additional challenges to providing formal mentorship to field directors. While not specifically assessed in this study, the literature reflects an overall disconnect and lack of understanding regarding the unique and nuanced role of the field director within the broader academic faculty (Beaulieu, 2020; Lyter, 2012; Wertheimer & Sodhi, 2014). Additionally, field directors are often classified as staff or hold a nontenured faculty role, which could contribute to lower rates of mentorship. Finally, there are fewer field directors than academic faculty within social work programs, which could lead to less internal ability to provide role-specific mentorship opportunities. This could be mitigated by institutions arranging for formal mentoring relationships across universities or through utilizing regional field consortiums.

Implications for Higher Education

As the climate and culture of higher education shifts, it is critical to increase rates of formal mentorship for all faculty and field directors, assess the efficacy of existing programs, develop evidence-based curricula, and create a culture where mentorship is given weight in promotion and tenure considerations. Formal mentorship can provide critical support, since there has been an increase in disconnection due to virtual and hybrid work, expanded work responsibilities for field directors, and increasingly complex challenges within the delivery of field education. Given these changes,

creating a culture of inclusion, connection, and support in the physical and virtual environment is imperative.

To respond to these challenges, leaders must reflect on the substantial body of research that supports mentorship. Data from this research suggests those in social work departmental leadership positions have favorable attitudes towards these practices. Given the benefits reflected in the literature and the survey results, strong consideration should be given to investigating whether an amendment to the EPAS to include formal mentorship is warranted.

It is also imperative that institutions recognize the value of and place a premium on these practices. Institutions must intentionally invest in faculty by providing mentorship supports. Further, if we are truly to recognize field as the signature pedagogy of social work education, field directors must be afforded the same supports. Of equal importance, institutions must recognize the time and commitment involved in providing these supports. Mentors should be acknowledged by receiving compensation or release time, or having their efforts count towards service requirements. Through quality mentorship, programs thrive and the next generation of social work leadership is cultivated.

Future Research

As this study is exploratory in nature, there is room for future research. Capturing the voices of those within social work departmental leadership positions is critical, and continued research should be conducted to understand their evolving attitudes. It is important to explore the barriers and challenges to implementing and sustaining formal mentorship programs. A deeper understanding of this may provide solutions to increasing rates of mentorship. Further, replication of this survey would be useful in bolstering the data on this topic.

Additionally, there is a need to develop mentorship curricula that can serve as concrete supports to institutions invested in these programs. These curricula should be rigorously evaluated to ensure they are providing support and enhancing faculty success. Consideration should be given to creating social work–specific mentorship curricula that infuses the profession’s core values and ethics. Mentorship curricula could be similar for social work faculty, administrators, and staff, though specific attention and consideration should be paid to the unique role each person plays. While an overwhelming number of participants occupying various levels of leadership positions endorsed the importance of formal mentorship, social work deans were the lowest supporters (76%). While this is still a large percentage, support was not as high as those in other positions, which warrants further investigation. Additional studies should focus on those in higher levels of institutional leadership positions

such as provosts, vice presidents, and presidents to assess their attitudes on formal mentorship. Finally, more research, time, and attention should be focused on field directors and the vital role they have in delivering the signature pedagogy of social work education.

Strengths and Limitations of the Study

This study is a first step in understanding the topic of formal mentorship from a population that has not been thoroughly explored. Understanding the voices of those in leadership positions is critical to identifying the premium placed on formal mentorship. Institutions have multiple competing priorities, agendas, and obligations to consider; thus, gaining information on how formal mentorship is viewed within the context of those that set these initiatives should be explored. Since this population has not been adequately represented within the literature, this study adds to our understanding of the topic.

While there are strengths with this study, there are limitations. There is a relatively limited number of responses despite two forms of sampling. Therefore, findings may not be representative of those in positions of leadership. Membership in several of the listservs to which surveys were distributed is open to all faculty regardless of title. While many members do hold leadership positions, the exact number is unknown, and thus the sample size is difficult to ascertain. Women are overrepresented within this study (87.7%) as are those who identify as White (80.7%). This may not be representative of those within leadership positions. Program size was also not considered in this study, and could be factor in the feasibility of mentoring programs. Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic occurred in March 2020, which was during the middle stages of this survey. Listservs experienced a substantial increase in posts due to educators providing support and sharing resources. It is unclear how significantly this impacted response rates, though it likely did. Replication of this survey to ascertain what impact, if any, the pandemic had on responses to this topic is warranted.

As with any survey research, there are concerns related to the lack of accounting for the complex and dynamic nature, and thus potential oversimplification, of our social reality (Jerrim & de Vries, 2017). Since this study asked participants to self-report their own attitudes on mentorship, potential participant bias or social desirability issues may be present (Morgado et al., 2017). Participants reported their attitudes, and while the responses were representative of the sample, results cannot be generalized to settings and populations beyond the responses obtained. Since this survey has not been replicated, reliability should be considered. Finally, this is an exploratory survey, and therefore causality cannot be inferred. However, the data that were presented provide rich information to explore.

Conclusion

Formal mentorship is an important topic within the context of higher education. The benefits of formal mentorship are well documented within the literature, and study participants overwhelmingly supported the provision of these practices. Despite this strong endorsement, many within academia report a lack of formal mentorship, particularly for field directors. This disconnect should be explored, and challenges to implementing and sustaining these practices should be addressed on a departmental, institutional, and perhaps even accrediting-body level.

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