The Impact of COVID-19 on Formal Mentorship: A Qualitative Study of Social Work Faculty

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Abstract: *Despite numerous benefits, formal faculty mentorship remains underutilized within academia. Formal mentorship has been shown to aid faculty in acclimating to the expectations of higher education, assist in balancing work-life obligations, and provide professional and psychosocial support. These areas of formal support and connection are critical given the significant changes and disruptions caused by the pandemic. Through use of a narrative approach, 10 social work faculty who were teaching during the pandemic, as well as mentees in a formal mentoring relationship, were interviewed to explore the impact the COVID-19 pandemic had on their experiences with formal mentorship. All participants maintained a virtual connection with their mentor during the pandemic, though two experienced a decrease in communication. Four themes that emerged were how mentors helped mentees frame professional development during the pandemic, the shifting focus and deepening of the mentoring relationship, the adjustment to virtual mentoring, and the impact of faculty and institutional leadership attrition. Implications for higher education as it relates to the provision of formal mentorship as a means to increase a sense of faculty connection and support are explored, particularly within the virtual environment.*

Keywords: *Formal mentorship, social work faculty, COVID-19, virtual mentorship*

The COVID-19 pandemic dramatically disrupted how faculty within higher education function and added enormous responsibilities to faculty workloads (Fay & Ghadimi, 2020). In March 2020, brick and mortar universities across the world swiftly transitioned to virtual spaces (Fernandez & Shaw, 2020; Krishnamoorthy & Keating, 2021). Often with little experience or knowledge providing remote pedagogical best practices, faculty scrambled to move courses online while learning new software and technology (Casacchia et al., 2021; Mahmood, 2020). Finding ways to read the Zoom room, engage with disconnected students, and accommodate the increased time commitment required to provide online education became commonplace (Brown, 2021; Buckley, 2020; Casacchia et al., 2021; Kasymova et al., 2021). Overall, faculty across numerous disciplines experienced negative job consequences because of the pandemic such as a decrease in ability to conduct research, less access to networking with colleagues to enhance scholarship, and a loss of campus, community, and professional service opportunities (Aubry et al., 2020; Melvin et al., 2021; VanLeeuwen et al., 2021; Zuo & Juvé, 2020).

Research during the pandemic indicates that faculty felt increasingly frustrated and disappointed in their performance as they struggled to balance professional and personal duties (Aubry et al., 2020; Bender et al., 2022; Hjálmsdóttir & Bjarnadóttir, 2021; VanLeeuwen et al., 2021). Overall, faculty routinely reported experiencing fluctuating energies, overwhelming emotions, increased fatigue, change in sleep patterns, and heightened anxiety and stress in response to the pandemic (Aubry et al., 2020; Casacchia

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et al., 2021; Pereira, 2020; VanLeeuwen et al., 2021). These challenges were compounded by expectations within higher education to achieve promotion and tenure which left some feeling isolated, disconnected, and unable to maintain a work-life balance (Babcock et al., 2020; Filho et al., 2021; Pereira, 2020; Smith & Lim, 2020; VanLeeuwen et al., 2021).

Prior to the pandemic, there was a significant body of literature that demonstrated the benefits of formal faculty mentorship. While there is no agreed upon definition of formal mentorship, components accepted within the research indicate it is a process where a more experienced faculty member (mentor) engages collaboratively with a less experienced faculty member (mentee) to serve as a guide in areas such as: career development, institutional knowledge, information and advice, work-life balance, and navigating challenges inherent in higher education (Eby et al., 2008; Ragins et al., 2000). These characteristics were utilized within this study as a basis to assess participants mentoring relationships. Participants were considered to be part of a formal mentoring relationship if their university sanctioned engaging in this form of support. This criterion was applied to this research in determining whether participants were engaged in a formal mentoring relationship.

Research indicates formal mentorship helps to orient and acclimate new faculty, assist in developing curriculum, and define a clear scholarship agenda (Brady & Spencer, 2018; Eby et al., 2008; Schmidt & Faber, 2016; Sheridan et al., 2015). Formal mentorship has been shown to increase collegiality, enhance departmental and institutional relationships, and bolster satisfaction with the tenure and promotion process (Jackson et al., 2017; Schmidt & Faber, 2016). Formal mentorship has also been shown to increase salary levels, promotion rates, and assist faculty in obtaining a work-life balance (Allen et al., 2004; Schmidt & Faber, 2016). Additionally, formal mentorship is considered particularly critical for women, underrepresented minorities, and those in non-tenure track positions as it serves to counteract the uneven political and power differentials, gender discrimination, implicit racial bias, and rank/status disparities within higher education (Brady & Spencer, 2018; Denson et al., 2018; Espino & Zambrana, 2019).

Given these benefits, formal faculty mentorship is a critical source of professional and personal support to utilize particularly in responding to some of the challenges created by the pandemic (Abelhamid et al., 2021; Babcock et al., 2020; Camacho & Legare, 2021; Melvin et al., 2021). As the pandemic has touched all parts of faculty lives, it is important to study what if any impact it may have had on the relationship between mentee and mentor. Findings from this study could have implications for social work departments and higher education institutions as well as generate best practices for social work educators and mentorship more broadly.

Study Objectives/Aims

While substantial research exists regarding formal faculty mentorship, there is limited literature on the impact the pandemic has had on these relationships, particularly from a social work faculty mentee's perspective. Understanding faculty perspectives on formal mentorship and the pandemic's impact is critical to developing best practices and ensuring faculty support and connection. There is also limited research on social work faculty's

experiences transitioning to virtual mentorship during the pandemic. The aim of this article is to explore the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on formal faculty mentorship from social work faculty's perspectives.

Method

A narrative approach to inquiry was selected as it provides an understanding of participants' lived experiences through capturing their perspectives (Padgett, 2017). This approach allows for a deeper understanding of the human experience through the way individuals construct their story (Butina, 2015; Hickson, 2016). This method also allows for greater understanding of the person's experiences and how they internalize the phenomenon into the story of the self (Butina, 2015). The narrative approach lends a greater understanding of the larger social contexts which are highlighted throughout the stories (Padgett, 2017). This approach is particularly relevant given the pandemic's deep impact on all facets of our lives.

In qualitative studies the researcher is the instrument (Padgett, 2017). As such, it is critical to disclose the author's background. This author is a 43-year-old white female who has been a practicing social worker for 20 years and employed within higher education for 13 years. During the pandemic this author was a faculty member, within a department of social work, at a mid-size public institution located in the United States with courses transitioned to an online format. This author accepted a position within that institution as a field director and continued to teach, though in a reduced capacity. This author has had personal and professional stressors during the pandemic and brings these lived experiences to this research. For example, during the pandemic this author navigated learning a new position and struggled to find/maintain student internship placements. Additionally, this author parented children who were engaged in virtual schooling, navigated illness due to COVID-19, and experienced personal loss due to the pandemic. Throughout the pandemic, this author was not engaged in a formal mentoring relationship.

Participants

The sample consisted of ten social work faculty from across the United States, all of whom identified as being mentees within a formal mentoring relationship (see Table 1). The average age of participants was 41.1 years old (youngest 34 years old and oldest 47 years old). Nine participants identified as White and one as African American. Nine identified as female and one as male. Three participants indicated their highest level of education was an MSW and seven indicated earning a PhD or DSW. Five participants were in a tenure-track position, three were already tenured, and two were in non-tenure track positions. Five participants reported being employed at public, teaching institutions; three at private, Christian, teaching institutions; and two at a doctoral/very high research activity (R1) university. All participants indicated their institution had a formal mentorship matching process. Five participants were matched with a mentor outside of their college; three indicated their tenure chair served as their mentor; and two reported their department chair was their mentor.

It is also important to note that each participant indicated being paired with an experienced mentor. Experience was defined by participants as mentors having longevity within higher education, particularly at their institution. Many mentors had been employed within higher education for over 20 years and all were employed for at least 8 years at their current institution. Mentees indicated this longevity and experience were contributing factors to their satisfaction with the mentoring process and level of support.

Table 1. *Demographics of Participants*

Name	Age	Level of Education	Position	Institution Type	Mentor Position
Amanda	44	PhD	Assistant Prof*	Public, Teaching	Tenure Chair
Emma	47	DSW	Assistant Prof*	Private, Christian	Faculty outside of college
Jane	46	PhD	Associate Prof, Tenured	Public, Teaching	Tenure Chair
Kate	44	MSW	Clinical Faculty, Non-TT Position	Public, Teaching	Faculty outside of college
Lori	34	DSW	Assistant Prof*	Private, Christian	Faculty outside of college
Mary	46	MSW	Associate Prof, Tenured	Public, Teaching	Department Chair
Matt	40	DSW	Adjunct Prof, Non-TT Position	Public, Teaching	Faculty outside of college
Maya	36	PhD	Assistant Prof*	Public, Research 1	Faculty outside of college
Melissa	34	DSW	Assistant Prof*	Private, Christian	Department Chair
Sara	40	MSW	Associate Prof, Tenured	Public, Teaching	Tenure Chair

*TT=Tenure track

Notes: Emma was Black, all other participants were White; Matt was male, all other participants were female.

Recruitment and Sampling

An invitation to participate in this study was sent to three widely utilized social work faculty listservs: The Association of Baccalaureate Social Work Program Directors (BPD), MSW-ED, and Field Director. Email invitations for participation were sent to listservs in October and November 2021. Invitations were also posted to several Facebook groups the author belonged to (Early Career Social Work Educators, Doctoral Mom Group, Tenure-Track Moms, and Doctor's of Social Work International). Eight participants responded via listserv invitations and two responded via the Tenure-Track Moms Facebook group. A total of ten participants responded to the invitation and all completed interviews.

Participants were considered eligible to engage in the study if they were currently employed as a social work faculty member in a Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) accredited program, the mentee in a formal mentoring relationship, and began their mentoring relationship face-to-face but transitioned to a virtual format due to the pandemic. Purposive sampling was used as the invitation was sent directly to each listserv and social media group (Rubin & Babbie, 2016). To increase the response rate, snowball sampling

was utilized as participants were encouraged to forward the listserv invitation and Facebook post to colleagues. The study was approved by the author's Institutional Review Board (IRB). No compensation was offered to participants.

Data Collection

Data were collected in a series of one-time, recorded interviews conducted via Zoom. Interviews began in October 2021 and concluded in December 2021. Participants engaged in a 22-question semi-structured interview. Participants were asked demographic questions, role and job duties, and institutional information. Questions were asked about the matching process and the mentee's experience with the mentoring relationship. Questions were asked about the professional and personal impact of the pandemic; the participant's perspectives on their institution's response to the pandemic; and how connected participants felt to their mentor, colleagues, and institution. Interview questions, and relevant probes, were constructed by this author and prior to the interviews, a pilot test of the interview guide was conducted. Minor changes in the ordering of questions occurred because of feedback. Interviews were conducted in a private setting to ensure confidentiality.

Upon agreeing to be interviewed, participants were sent a consent form via email. Before interviews began, participants were asked if they had questions about the consent form or scope of the study and signed consent forms were obtained. All participants completed the interview, therefore attrition was not a factor. Interviews were transcribed and member checking occurred to ensure accuracy and resonance with their experiences as well as to correct any discrepancies that occurred during transcription. Interviews were held for 48 to 68 minutes, with the average interview time of 50 minutes. Interviews were ended after the tenth interview due to reaching saturation.

Issues of reflexivity were considered throughout this study (Padgett, 2017). This author examined personal beliefs and experiences related to previous mentoring relationships as well as the impact of the pandemic. When discussing the impact of the pandemic, the author ensured objectivity to the extent possible through debriefing with a colleague, particularly after conducting interviews where participants disclosed difficult stories. For example, participants disclosed their experiences with loss during the pandemic, feelings of isolation, and challenges navigating professional expectations which were all areas that resonated with this author. To further solidify what was shared during the interviews, and the impressions and feelings this author had, a separate log was kept. This log was reviewed throughout the study by the author to identify biases (Padgett, 2017).

Analysis

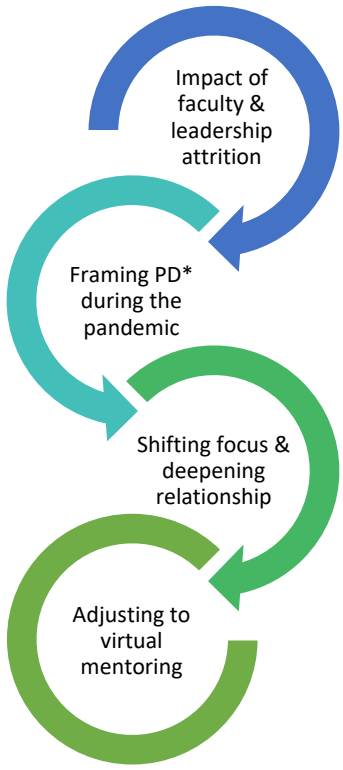
Thematic analysis was used to identify recurrent themes in the data. This analysis was done across the entirety of the data to provide a rich overall description of participants' experiences. Inductive analysis of data was used when coding. This process followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phases of thematic analysis. Each interview was transcribed using the Zoom transcription feature and pseudonyms were used to protect the confidentiality of participants. This author listened to each recording, corrected

discrepancies in the transcript, and coded them in their entirety. Repeated rounds of reading the transcripts occurred, and during this process notes were made to document initial codes that were generated as well as observations and initial trends (Padgett, 2017). This author and a second coder used open coding to organize, collate, and sort content into potential themes. The second coder is an assistant professor of social work at an institution located in the Midwest. The codes that were generated were derived from the data themselves, rather than from specific theoretical underpinnings (Braun & Clarke, 2006). These potential themes were ultimately organized into a larger outline and were refined through repeated investigation of patterns of commonality and anomalous examples until consensus was reached between coders (Boyatzis, 1998). Each theme was shared multiple times throughout the interviews with various examples provided. Direct quotations from the data were grouped under the thematic headings to illustrate each theme in the participants own words. Throughout this iterative process, this author utilized peer debriefing, journaling, and the creation of an audit trail of generated codes and decisions made throughout analysis. This process considered issues of trustworthiness, credibility, and reliability through the use of peer debriefing, member checking, thorough re-reading of the transcribed interviews, and reflexive journaling (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Padgett, 2017; O'Connor & Joffe, 2020).

Findings

This study was conducted to explore the impact the COVID-19 pandemic had on social work faculty experiences with formal mentorship, from the perspective of the mentee. All participants reported experiencing stress, anxiety, grief/loss, and difficulties balancing work-life obligations during the pandemic. Six participants expressed challenges with childcare, working while children were attending school virtually, and lacking a private workspace at home that was conducive to teaching. All participants experienced an increase in their workload and professional roles and identified feeling overwhelmed due to the uncertainties of the pandemic. The analysis resulted in four themes: 1) framing professional development during the pandemic, 2) shifting focus and deepening of mentoring relationship, 3) adjusting to virtual mentoring, and 4) impact of faculty and leadership attrition (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. *Mentoring During the Pandemic*



*PD = professional development

Theme 1. Framing Professional Development During the Pandemic

One of the main roles mentors occupy is to guide mentees in forming professional development goals and connecting them to opportunities. These opportunities are centered on the three pillars of the professoriate: teaching, scholarship, and service. Pre-pandemic teaching looked different for many of the participants, and multiple options existed for faculty to engage in scholarship and service. However, during the pandemic, opportunities were substantially limited. As per the participants, this posed significant challenges, particularly for new faculty or those applying for tenure or promotion.

One of the themes that emerged was the importance of mentors' feedback in how to frame mentees' professional development during the pandemic. Participants indicated seeking feedback on providing quality instruction, addressing student concerns, and navigating opportunities for professional advancement. One participant, Sara (40, associate professor) recalled struggling to engage with students via Zoom, particularly as many had their cameras off and were not providing feedback on course material. Sara indicated sharing this with her mentor who provided her with tangible ways to increase student engagement using technology. "My mentor used activities such as Kahoot games, digital field trips, and Zoom polls to increase student engagement. So, I used these suggestions and their cameras turned on more. These activities helped us to have good discussions." Another participant, Amanda (44, assistant professor) recalled similar situations and said she went to her mentor to discuss how to engage with students virtually:

> *I was transparent with her* [mentor]. *I was concerned about my end of the semester teaching evaluations. She gave me tips such as using breakout rooms and having students present information so it wasn't just me talking at them all the time. She told me not to worry because we were all in the same boat. That was reassuring.*

Kate (44, clinical faculty) recalled a difficult classroom situation she had with students who did not agree with the COVID mitigation strategies the university implemented. She indicated students were mad at her because she was adhering to the mitigation strategies, but other professors were not. Kate sought advice from her mentor and recalled:

> *It was hard. I didn't want to throw my colleagues under the bus and tell students they weren't doing what they were supposed to do but I didn't want them to be mad at me. I got done teaching and called my mentor. I needed to vent. She shared how she handled a similar issue, and we figured out how I would handle it next week. The next time I saw the class, I was open with them about what the university was requiring, why I chose to adhere to the mitigation strategies, and the challenges I faced when I heard other colleagues weren't. We talked about how these issues can come up in the workplace and the tension it can create between doing what the university or agency says we have to do and the relationship difficulties you can encounter if it is not applied by all. I think having this discussion changed how the class perceived me and probably helped my end of the semester evaluations.*

All participants indicated their mentor provided feedback on written work for tenure, promotion, or yearly evaluations which was challenging to complete during the pandemic. Jane (46, associate professor) indicated fewer students completed their course evaluations so her mentor suggested she address the impact of the pandemic in her tenure binder by sharing feedback she received in class through the use of student quotations and Zoom poll results. Melissa (34, assistant professor) shared that her mentor was previously a program director. That experience helped her as she assumed the program director role, which was a daunting task to undertake during the pandemic:

> *Just knowing that she had done what I was doing, and had that experience was helpful. She had a lot of expertise and she made sure to share things she thought would be helpful to me. She was always available to talk through new issues as a result of COVID which helped me feel more confident and overall do my job better.*

Maya (36, assistant professor) indicated she could not conduct research because of university and state restrictions, so her mentor suggested she collect class data which ultimately helped her comply with her tenure research requirements. Amanda indicated her mentor suggested she publish research from her dissertation since she could not conduct research. Both participants indicated this creative thinking helped them to continue developing professionally and stay within the pandemic response requirements. Kate indicated she was overwhelmed by meeting her tenure requirements during the pandemic but her "mentor gave me feedback and we created a plan of action. Without her support I don't know how I would have gotten through the pandemic in one piece." The feedback all participants received from their mentors highlights the power of mentorship, particularly in response to the challenges presented during the pandemic.

Theme 2. Shifting Focus and Deepening of Mentoring Relationship

Another theme that emerged was the amount of attention mentors paid to the impact of the pandemic on the mentees' lives as well as the deepening, in many instances, of the mentee-mentor relationship. Participants expressed gratitude for their mentors' investment and commitment to their relationship which proved to be critical during the pandemic. Jane recalled, "My mentor cared about me as a whole person and started every conversation by asking how I was holding up. This was different. Before the pandemic, there was less of a focus on my overall well-being when we connected." Amanda indicated having similar conversations with her mentor noting, "We always devoted a huge chunk of time to talking about COVID and how I was doing inside and outside of the classroom. We talked about stress and coping a lot." Maya shared her mentor, also a mother, spent significant time focusing on work-life balance:

> *I was working remotely, homeschooling my daughter, and trying to do everything. It was a lot, especially living in a new area. My mentor really validated my experiences and how hard everything was. She talked a lot about setting boundaries and taking time for myself and my family.*

Matt stated his mentor encouraged him to spend time focusing on his overall well-being as well as taking breaks from work. Mary (46, associate professor) shared her mentor focused on extending grace to herself:

> *We all had so much going on and working harder wasn't solving all of the problems that everyone was experiencing. She reminded me that this wasn't a failure on my part, rather it was just the outcome of the situation and the pandemic. She reminded me to extend the same grace to myself that I was showing to my students and colleagues. I don't think this would have been a focus in mentorship before the pandemic.*

Perhaps because of these shared stressors and challenges, many participants noted a deepening in their relationship with their mentor. Sara indicated:

> *We had a close relationship before the pandemic, and she was highly supportive of me in my personal life. My mentor cared about me, but COVID added to our informal communication. We were both dealing with our own stuff, so we checked in a lot just to see if each other was doing okay. That really strengthened our bond.*

Several participants also shared that while their mentoring relationships started off as professional in nature, they grew into a friendship. Melissa shared that she appreciated the friendship she established with her mentor. Matt (40, adjunct professor) stated, "I liked my mentor before the pandemic but grew to appreciate her much more during the pandemic. Our relationship turned into a friendship that I cherish." These experiences demonstrate the ways mentors focused more deliberately on mentee mental health, self-care, and utilizing positive coping strategies during the pandemic.

Theme 3. Adjusting to Virtual Mentoring

Another theme that was identified was the ways mentees adjusted to virtual mentoring. All participants began their mentoring relationships face-to-face, but due to the pandemic, switched to a virtual platform to maintain connection. Participants utilized text messaging, email, phone calls, and Zoom to connect with their mentors. Sara recalled:

> *I did a lot of Zoom meetings just to stay connected to my mentor because I couldn't see her in person. But what I found myself doing more often was going for walks so I could be out of the house and away from my computer. I was so sick of technology and being stuck at my desk. When I would walk, I would call my mentor and we would have meaningful conversations.*

Melissa stated she connected with her mentor more frequently during the pandemic:

> *We would call and text each other a lot. We scheduled Zoom meetings but those were not as frequent. We stayed in touch with each other in real-time. We would quickly touch base about a problem or check in to see how each other was doing. This was nice and more helpful than previously scheduled monthly check-ins especially as I was assuming a new role. I found myself having lots of questions and those more frequent check-ins helped me grow in confidence and stay on top*

of things. We also had a Teams space for important documents and things that would be helpful for me as I started this new role.

Lori (34, assistant professor) shared that being able to send her mentor an email allowed for her to have almost real-time answers and information. Lori indicated these quick responses helped her to gain confidence by having more immediate answers, versus saving her questions for monthly check-ins with her mentor. Lori also indicated, "My mentor and I had regularly scheduled Zoom meetings which helped answer my questions. But these meetings increased during COVID because we didn't have to be on campus at the same time. So, virtual meetings worked great."

Most participants indicated remaining connected to their mentor in a virtual capacity during the pandemic at the same or at an increased rate; however, two shared that their communication decreased because of not being in the same physical space. Jane indicated her mentor began teaching online just before COVID and was not in the office. When everyone transitioned to online the two connected though not as much as when they were in the same physical space. Maya indicated she connected with her mentor online but felt a deeper connection in person. Maya stated, "As soon as we were back to in-person teaching, my mentor and I met on campus. We met outside on a park bench and had coffee. We tried to do the social distancing thing. I appreciated being in person." Jane and Maya highlight that receiving mentorship virtually was difficult in large part due to their preferences of connecting in person. The participants experiences highlight various levels of comfort and preference around virtual connection and mentorship.

Theme 4. Impact of Faculty and Leadership Attrition

A final theme that emerged was the significant attrition in faculty and leadership at the participants' institutions during the pandemic. While none of the participants experienced their mentor leaving, many indicated the constant change of faculty and leadership impacted the mood and general feelings of their mentor, which may have impacted the mentoring relationship. Kate noted, "During the pandemic we hired a new department chair, dean, and president. My mentor was unsure how those changes would impact my program and this weighed on her. I felt anxious because I was just getting used to things." Melissa indicated her university hired a new president during the pandemic. She shared, "My mentor said she didn't know anything about the new president because faculty were not part of the selection process. This made her uneasy and unsure what his new initiatives would be and how that would impact faculty." Emma (47, assistant professor) shared similar feelings indicating:

We lost our chair and hired two new faculty who came and left during the pandemic. It felt like people were coming and going and there was no consistency in my department or throughout the whole university. When I talked to my mentor about this, she would listen but didn't know how to help me. She felt like she didn't know anyone at the university anymore and that things were going to change. It made her nervous which made me nervous.

Sara and Jane both indicated their department chair changed during the pandemic. Jane stated:

> *It was hard when the new chair started. I liked the old one. My mentor didn't have a good relationship with the new chair, so I wondered if the advice she gave me was influenced by this. Like I wonder if her advice may be shaped by her relationship or if there are some bigger political issues that might be playing out, so that was a concern.*

While mentees did not indicate that the attrition in faculty and leadership directly impacted their ability to access mentors, participants did indicate the unease and anxieties produced by these changes and that those weighed heavily in the conversations they had with their mentors.

Discussion

Overall, the importance of mentorship in supporting mentees' acclimation to, and navigation of, academia and the professoriate expectations are highlighted within the results. Formal mentorship, particularly during unprecedented events such as the COVID-19 pandemic, can provide critical supports to faculty. Participants voiced formal mentorship as critical to understanding how to achieve tenure and promotion during unprecedented times; to acclimate to new leadership roles and departmental responsibilities; and to seek feedback on creative ways to engage in teaching and scholarship. The benefits expressed by participants are consistent with much of the literature on formal mentorship, though limited research has been conducted on how these relationships morphed during the pandemic (Allen et al., 2004; Brady & Spencer, 2018; Jackson et al., 2017; Schmidt & Faber, 2016; Smith et al., 2016). Many participants identified the mentoring relationships focused heavily on their overall well-being, self-care, work-life balance, and issues of caregiving during the pandemic. Perhaps because of this acknowledgement, intentional focus, and the collective trauma being experienced, these mentor-mentee relationships were deepened. From this, friendships were said to be formed. The relationships established seemed to help mentees feel less isolated and more connected in general to their colleagues, department/program, and overall work.

The participants shared how they adjusted to connecting with their mentor in a virtual environment. All participants began their mentoring relationship in a traditional, face-to-face modality, though they had to transition abruptly to virtual mentorship due to the pandemic. While all participants did not prefer meeting virtually, mentees indicated that being able to use technology to connect and gain resources and support was helpful. One participant switched to in-person mentoring as soon as their university resumed face-to-face teaching while others continued to use virtual platforms as spaces to connect. Many participants noted receiving responses quickly from their mentors. Participants noted the ease of exchanging messages, connecting on the phone, or having a virtual meeting as being a source of comfort, helping to boost their confidence.

The research is limited currently regarding faculty's adjustment to virtual mentoring relationships, particularly in social work. Research from the medical/allied health fields

suggests mentorship in a virtual environment has been beneficial in reducing anxieties and stressors particularly related to work during the pandemic; increasing levels of confidence and satisfaction in performance; decreasing burnout and isolation; and becoming acclimated to the program and larger institutional culture (Bhakta & Medina, 2021; Junn et al., 2023; Shermont et al., 2022). While it is acknowledged that building meaningful relationships for some can be challenging in a virtual environment, virtual mentorship has been noted to be just as effective as in-person mentoring and is an area for further exploration in social work (Junn et al., 2023). Having an easy method of asynchronous communication such as email, chat, or Teams space; a reliable method of synchronous communication such as phone or videocall; and a repository to share information are noted as keys to success in virtual mentorship and should be considered when implementing such relationships (Junn et al., 2023). Further, it is important to assess the mentor's and mentee's level of comfort with online technology and connecting in a virtual environment. While many faculty have gained confidence and comfort using virtual platforms, attention should be paid to any areas of discomfort and support should be provided to ensure barriers are removed. Ultimately, anticipating and mitigating any issues will assist in establishing and maintaining a mentoring connection in a virtual environment.

Regardless of modality, quality mentoring relationships should be formed using a goodness of fit model where mentors are intentionally engaged in relationally-based interactions focused on supporting the mentees' personal and professional development (Alvarez & Lazzari, 2016; Brady & Spencer, 2018; Denson et al., 2018; Johnson, 2016; Ragins, 2016; Schmidt & Faber, 2016). In these relationships, mentorship transforms both the mentor and the mentee's lives through dynamic engagement and high levels of mutual learning, growth, generativity, and empowerment (Johnson, 2016; Ragins, 2016). As the relationship grows, mentors and mentees experience deeper levels of trust, sharing, and loyalty that build levels of self-efficacy, compassion, and overall career competency (Johnson, 2016). All participants in this study indicated feeling supported by their mentor. All participants shared their interactions were relationally based; though it should be noted there was a wide variation in how institutions matched mentees and mentors, which is an area to be explored further.

In this study, five participants indicated a faculty member outside of their department was their mentor; three shared their tenure chair was their mentor; and two stated their department chair was their mentor. It is beyond the scope of this article to address the nuances of the matching process; however, it is important to note that there could be benefits as well as challenges when matching mentors/mentees within the same department. Having a mentor within the same department may indicate mentors have a deeper understanding of the discipline, professional expectations particularly as it relates to research, and the overall function of the department. However, being in the same department may impede the mentee's ability to share openly about political challenges or issues with specific faculty members without fear of reprisal, particularly if the difficulty may be with a person holding a leadership position. The matching process is multi-faceted and institutions approach this differently given their unique focus and needs. Supervisory roles, rank, status, and other hierarchical considerations should be reflected on when matching mentors and mentees. Finding the right fit is a critical step in predicting mentee

satisfaction and should be thoughtfully and intentionally considered (Eby et al., 2008; Ragins et al., 2000; Smith et al., 2016).

Additionally, several participants indicated that they formed a deeper connection and friendship with their mentor. Participants indicated they engaged in more personal conversations with their mentors often related to their emotional and physical well-being as a result of the pandemic. Participants also reported sharing about their home and family life as well as engaging in more informal and non-work-related conversations. While none identified this as an area of concern, particular attention should be paid to ensuring professional boundaries are clear and that any challenges encountered within the friendship do not spill into the workplace. There may be some challenges related to balancing multiple roles (such as a friend and mentor) particularly if there are unrealistic expectations placed on this relationship (Blake-Beard, 2001; Meeuwissen et al., 2019). Having a clearly defined scope of mentoring and a relationship based on respect and transparency, particularly when multiple roles exist, could mitigate any difficulties that arise (Bozeman & Feeney, 2007; Egege & Kutieleh, 2015).

It is important to consider best practices to guide mentoring experiences during unprecedented events such as the COVID-19 pandemic. While some of these best practices have been addressed earlier in this section, arguably the most important may be the approach the mentor takes when entering into this relationship. It is imperative that the mentor adopt a person-first, holistic approach, particularly during times of crisis. Mentors should approach these relationships from an empathic and compassionate perspective by modeling vulnerability and acknowledging the emotional toll times of heightened anxiety, change, and fear can create (Haidusek-Niazy et al., 2023). Mentors should commit to frequent, intentional, and consistent contact with mentees that focus on overall well-being first and work productivity second (Irish et al., 2023; Junn et al., 2023; Nocco et al., 2021; Sela-Vasiliu et al., 2023). Engaging mentees in discussions on coping strategies as well as acknowledging specific challenges that may be present, particularly as it relates to groups who have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic (i.e., women and Black, Indigenous, and Other People of Color) should be a focus (Nocco et al., 2021; Sela-Vasiliu et al., 2023). Mentors should extend opportunities to mentees to collaborate on creative or scholarly endeavors and embrace the use of technology as a means of connection (Haidusek-Niazy et al., 2023; Nocco et al., 2021).

From an institutional perspective, universities should assess their current systems and invest in virtual spaces that provide opportunities for meaningful connection. Virtual spaces should be used to connect both synchronously and asynchronously as well as serve as a repository for resources (Irish et al., 2023; Junn et al., 2023). While in-person mentoring paradigms have historically been the norm, institutions must value and employ alternative ways to connect and build community. Creating space for and encouraging mentors to connect with mentees as well as acknowledging the challenges faculty face is imperative to relationship-building. Institutions should recognize and celebrate both mentor and mentee accomplishments as a way of fostering this connection (Sela-Vasiliu et al., 2023). Institutions can demonstrate a commitment to overall faculty well-being by providing tangible supports and resources as well as reviewing policies to ensure inclusive and flexible approaches to shifting faculty needs (Dempsey et al., 2022; Haidusek-Niazy

et al., 2023; Irish et al., 2023; McLaughlin et al., 2020). Finally, institutions must prioritize and invest in formal mentoring relationships and seek input on ways to improve these types of critical supports (Holcomb, 2024).

Despite these recommendations, further research regarding best practices in developing and implementing institutional mentorship models that promote full engagement and collaboration, particularly in a virtual environment, should be explored (Toner et al., 2022). Additionally, considerations on how to foster engagement and connection within mentoring relationships in the physical and the virtual space are critical to mentee satisfaction and should be further explored (Schwartz et al., 2016; Toner et al., 2022).

Implications for Social Work Education

The impact of formal mentorship cannot be overstated and has been repeatedly demonstrated within the literature though limited research is available regarding mentorship during the pandemic. When formal mentorship is intentionally employed, research indicates there is a more positive department and institutional work culture in which faculty are engaged and satisfied. It is critical to provide formal mentorship for faculty as a means to support professional success. Formal mentorship can serve as a lifeline for connection and relationship building with colleagues as well as the broader institution. This is crucial given current challenges related to access, faculty support, financial constraints, and political pressures within higher education. Many of these challenges have been exacerbated by the pandemic. Therefore, providing formalized mentorship for all faculty is a critical investment that institutions should prioritize. It is imperative that social work educators advocate for formalized mentorship practices at department and institutional levels, as well as create and expand opportunities for virtual connection and supports.

Limitations

The topic of formal mentorship is complex in nature, as is the changing landscape and responses of institutions to the pandemic and after, which could have impacted participants' ability to recall all nuances of the mentoring relationship. As the pandemic is a more recent phenomenon, this is an emerging area of study and new information related to its impact continues to be explored. Faculty were able to share their experiences on mentorship; however, varying degrees of stress, fatigue, loss, grief, and other extenuating factors may have impacted what participants shared or remembered specifically as it relates to the mentoring relationship. Further, the use of virtual mentorship pre-pandemic versus the forced shift to a virtual environment during the pandemic would most likely produce vastly different experiences particularly as the level of comfort with technology has grown for many. Additionally, the length of mentoring relationships was not asked of participants, which could impact the success, or lack thereof, in continuing connection in a virtual environment. It should be noted that the sample size was small and that nine of the ten participants identified as female and only one identified as a faculty of color. Finally, it is unclear how caregiving responsibilities may have impacted the mentee/mentor

relationship. There is some evidence within this study indicating that mentees and mentors shared struggles in navigating the additional caregiving and work responsibilities during the pandemic though this area could benefit from further exploration, particularly as it relates to the impact from the mentors' perspective.

Future Research

While formal mentorship is not a new concept within higher education, further studies are warranted regarding mentorship during the pandemic and the lessons learned from this. There is a lack of literature exploring faculty experiences in higher education with mentorship delivered virtually, particularly within the field of social work. There is also a lack of research on topics related to mentors' experiences balancing personal and professional stressors while also supporting mentees during the pandemic. As the impact of the pandemic on higher education is only beginning to be studied, understanding ways to maintain connection and community in mentoring relationships, particularly during times of change and stress, is critical. Understanding faculty experiences with formal mentorship may inform practices within higher education which could lead to approaches that positively impact faculty retention, morale, and overall satisfaction.

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