

# From Someone Who Has Been There: Information Seeking in Mentoring

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## Abstract

For tenure-track faculty, mentoring can be an important source of information needed for success in their new career and institution. Although information behavior is central to the mentoring relationship, mentoring has not yet been examined through an information behavior lens. This study sought to fill this gap by investigating mentees' perceptions regarding how they and their mentors share information, what motivates them to seek information, what barriers exist to their information seeking, and what they believe contributes to a successful mentoring relationship. Data were collected using a Web survey and follow-up interviews, both of which explored the mentoring experiences of tenure-track faculty at a major mid-Atlantic research university. Study findings suggest that the information seeking of mentees is akin to browsing in a document collection, that mentees' information needs are fluid and highly contextualized, and that there are affective barriers to information seeking within the context of the mentoring relationship.

**Keywords:** mentoring, barriers, information-seeking, browsing, motivation

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## 1 Introduction

Ironically, as mentoring programs become more popular on university campuses, not much attention is paid to what makes these programs most effective (Allen, Eby, & Lentz, 2006). Ideally, mentoring is the process of transferring cultural information about an organization. The mentor has knowledge of department politics and advice about how to reach goals that will accomplish the work and satisfy the tenure review committee (Palgi & Moore, 2004). Despite the central importance of this process of information transfer, however, mentoring has never been studied from the perspective of information behavior. Through the lens of information behavior theory, particularly as it deals with the affective qualities of information seeking, one may see that there are often barriers to information transfer between the mentor and the mentee.

As an explicit professional development program, mentoring suffers from informality. Department administrators are reluctant to impose ideas of how a mentoring program should work, particularly as it is commonly believed that mentoring relationships should develop naturally, without administrative influence (Zellers, Howard, & Barcic, 2008). Faculty who are less comfortable forming interpersonal bonds may be less likely to reach out to the faculty they have been assigned to mentor, and their reluctance may be exacerbated if the faculty member is of a different race or gender (Stanley & Lincoln, 2005). Similarly, junior faculty who arrive on campus with little to no social network may find a host of reasons not to 'bother' their mentor (Blickle, Schneider, Meurs, & Perrewé, 2010).

It is the faculty now entering the system who will need to find answers to the questions that confront American universities. However, without mentoring, the pool of junior faculty who will be in a position to develop the new academy is likely to be much diminished. Mentoring gives junior faculty the support they need to make the transition from graduate school or post-doctoral training to a tenured faculty position. Through mentoring, faculty are much more likely to reach their full potential (Allen et al., 2006; Berk, Berg, Mortimer, Walton-Moss, & Yeo, 2005; Blickle et al., 2010).

The study presented in this poster examined the perceptions of mentees from the perspective of information seeking behavior and barriers to information seeking. Based on the findings of this study, I offer recommendations that may assist faculty members in overcoming such barriers, as well as to help administrators in identifying mentoring best practices.

### 1.1 Literature Review

Surveyed research about mentoring falls into three main categories: studies of how the mentor may affect the mentee (Blackburn, Chapman, & Cameron, 1981; Palgi & Moore, 2004; Ragins, 1997; Sugimoto, 2012); studies quantifying the characteristics of a specific program (Allen et al., 2006; Blicke et al., 2010; Thurston, Navarrete, & Miller, 2009), or the ideal program (Carey & Weissman, 2010; Hansman, 2003); and finally commentary pieces about how to choose a mentor (Ensher & Murphy, 2006; Hansman, 2003) and what junior faculty need from their mentors (Leslie, Lingard, & Whyte, 2005).

Information behavior is at the heart of mentoring. Kuhlthau (2004) describes the value of an “invitational” mood in information seeking, in the sense that one is simply open to new ideas, and she contrasts this with the “indicative” mood, which leads one to conclusive actions. Under the constraining sense of the value of a mentor’s time, however, the mentee may never have the freedom to enter the “invitational” mood. As Taylor (1968) noted, describing what you don’t know to someone you don’t know all that well is a very complex act of communication.

Junior faculty may also be constrained because they inhabit a culture which prizes organized thought. However, according to Bates’ (1989) berrypicking model, the search for information is a query that changes and evolves during the course of searching (Bates, 1989; Taylor, 1968). For a mentee in conversation with his or her mentor, the berrypicking model would suggest the freedom to change the subject, to follow up on a chance remark, or to make conceptual connections of dubious logic. Models like berrypicking and information patches (Pirolli & Card, 1999) acknowledge the contextual nature of the information need, and the way that need evolves over time. These models can inform the mentee-mentor relationship in fruitful ways, by creating space where the transfer of cultural information can take place.

### 1.2 Research Questions

This study sought answers to the following research questions from the perspective of mentees at a major mid-Atlantic University:

- RQ 1. How do people share information within the context of their mentoring relationship?
- RQ 2. What motivates people to look for information within the context of the mentoring relationship?
- RQ 3. What are the barriers to information seeking within the context of the mentoring relationship?
- RQ 4. What makes for a successful mentoring relationship?

### 1.3 Methodology

In this poster, I report results from a mixed-method study of the tenure-track faculty at a mid-Atlantic research university, within which faculty perceptions of the mentoring they have received is examined from the perspective of information behavior. Every tenure-track faculty member in the University was invited to complete an on-line survey (response rate 28%, n=102), and following completion of the survey, faculty were invited to be interviewed (29% of survey respondents volunteered, n=9). Survey responses were

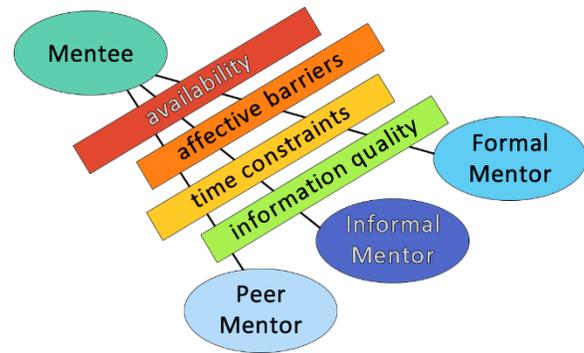


Figure 1: Barriers to Information Seeking

analyzed using quantitative techniques, while transcripts from the interviews were analyzed using qualitative techniques.

#### 1.4 Preliminary Findings

Mentors and mentees share information using tools like email, but there is also an emphasis on meeting face to face. Mentees are motivated to seek information from their mentors because they recognize in themselves a knowledge gap. Particularly emphasized was the idea of learning from the experience of others; mentors were described as experienced in navigating the institution. The extent to which the mentor is perceived as too busy can be a barrier to information seeking, as can other elements of the mentoring relationship. Meanwhile, the successful mentoring relationship is a product of many things, but perhaps most important is the mentor's personality and the common experiences that he or she may share with the mentee.



Figure 2: Adjectives describing a successful mentoring relationship from the mentee perspective.

spent in face to face meetings. Mentor and mentee need not be friends, but they must be comfortable acquaintances in order to freely transfer information.

## 2 Future Work and Conclusion

In the immediate future, additional research is planned to survey the professors who serve as mentors within the same University. The present study evaluates the mentoring relationship only from the perspective of the mentee. However, mentors are also likely to have information needs and perhaps to encounter barriers in their information seeking and in their information sharing.

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The findings represented in my poster are encouraging in what they say about the value of mentoring for junior faculty members, and the kinds of information they seek from their mentors. In the context of this study, the mentor is a repository for information of many kinds, including career and psychosocial dimensions (Kram, 1985). The mentee is constrained by the bounds of his or her small world, to the extent that little is known of research or projects outside the department. Because of the exigencies of teaching, recruiting graduate students, applying for grants, and developing research programs, the mentee has little freedom to look for information on how to accomplish all these tasks; the mentor must serve as the library shelf.

The findings from this study demonstrate that information transfer between mentor and mentee is vastly improved when there is a positive relationship between the two. In order to develop that relationship, a certain amount of time must be committed to the mentoring process – and much of that time must be

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