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# Creating a Mentoring Culture in a Fellowship Program

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# Bringing Darwin and Intelligent Design Together in Fellowship Training

# Underlying assumptions and questions...

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- A mentoring culture is desirable
- It isn't something that occurs spontaneously
- Why doesn't it?
  - Does everyone around you agree it's desirable?
  - It may mean something different to different people
  - There are barriers getting in the way
- How will you know it if you see it?
- Mentoring as a concept is very big, very complex and open to many different interpretations
- May be hard to define and achieve

# What defines a culture?

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- Commonly agreed-to beliefs and practices
- High visibility
- Although it may not be written down, it can be
- Self-sustaining – new members of a community are either born into it or shaped into it with later entry

# If you want to change a culture, how might you do it?

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- Top-down
  - Rules with accountability and consequences – positive or negative
  - Rules with bully pulpit and social pressure
  - Made explicit vs. implicit
- Collective agreement – collectively agree to do something differently
- Bottom up – enable those who need the change in culture, will benefit from it, to see that it happens
- Subtly, stealth movement
- Change the question – focus on actions and outcomes which over time reshape the culture

# Challenges of a mentoring culture

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- What is it?
- Whose style/philosophy of mentoring?
- Better seen as a culture of effective mentoring
- Sharp contrast with between training MD fellows have been immersed in compared to PhDs
- By the end, will propose reshaping the question to:  
How do you create a Culture of Developing Talent?

# A 2 minute quiz. Should a mentor...

- give lots of direction/guidance or lots of freedom?
- provide a research question to study or expect fellow to come up with there own?
- form a close personal relationship or keep a professional distance?
- take the lead on providing ideas for professional development or wait for the fellow to initiate?
- How many talks/workshops/publications have you seen in the last 3 years devoted to mentoring? Why can't we get it right?

# More quiz questions...

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- How many of you have had formal training in how to mentor?
- How many of you see yourselves as good mentors?
- How many of you have spent time thinking about your philosophy and approaches to mentoring?
- How many think there isn't much wrong with the mentors, the problem is the fellows? It worked fine for you why shouldn't it work for them?

# Why did I get interested in this topic?

- Gradually became more and more involved with students, postdocs and Jr. faculty in training
- Huge dependence of scientific development on mentoring
  - One small step from true apprenticeship...the village blacksmith...but with many twists
- Never-ending calls for “We have to improve mentoring!”
  - Assumption is – We have to ‘fix’ the mentors
  - I began to see it as a system issue
  - Clearly translates beyond the lab sciences
  - BIG differences in how business views mentoring
  - Have come to view mentoring as only one piece of a much bigger puzzle

# Why Darwin?

- Traditional constructs of mentoring maximize variations by not constraining or defining how a mentor and mentee interact – think about it...
  - Presumption is mentor knows best
  - Allows field-specific culture/practice differences
  - Outcome = maximized variability, infinite combinations
  - Combinations that ‘work’ promote success of mentee and in some ways mentor – i.e. survival
- Less-fit mentees don’t survive and ‘propagate’
- Works globally with excess mentees but pretty expensive to individuals
- Very likely to exclude individuals different from mentors and the ‘community’ in general – gender, race, SES

# Words and their meaning matter

- What differentiates
  - Teacher
  - Mentor
  - Role-model
  - Friend
  - Colleague
- What do each of these words mean to you?
- The meanings and boundaries are vague but all involve relationships
- Likely would not all agree on definitions or boundaries
- Fellows can see those boundaries differently
- Ideally, relationships change over time
- But culture requires commonly held beliefs...

# Think about development during fellowship years

- Where is each new person starting from?
  - Differences in knowledge of the field/research area
  - Differences in skills – both cognitive and technical?
  - What is their reason for being in the fellowship? What do they want to become after it?
  - Differences in life experiences and current realities
- Time of major life transitions
- Massive shift from highly structured to unstructured time
- As researcher, probability of ‘making it’ very low
- Most research training lab-based, MDs playing catch-up, but most likely future niches in clinical research
  - Really hard to learn clinical research working at the bench!

# How do we...the program, the community, the culture...assist or guide development?

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- VERY different question from how do we mentor
- Now must ask the question – Development FROM what TO what?
- Mentoring becomes one tool of many and the culture becomes a community
- More definable responsibility than just ‘being a mentor’ but also more accountable
- Before we get too far from mentoring, lets look at it as a construct

# Strengths of mentor-based training and relationships

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- High ability to match interests and styles of mentors and mentees
  - Great flexibility in adapting to different starting points and evolution rates of mentees
  - Relationship can evolve over time
    - From dependent to independent
    - From mentor/mentee to colleagues
  - Ability for mentor to pass on informal knowledge
  - High level of satisfaction and sense of impact
- ....when it works

# Challenges/limitations of mentor-based training and relationships

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- Expectations/responsibilities of mentor and mentee often unspecified – misaligned expectations happen
  - Requires a lot of communication that may or may not happen easily
- Not easy to ensure everyone is on the same page
- Mentors may have ‘grown up’ in very different era
- Huge variations in what is provided by different mentors
  - Especially problematic if core skills are to be learned through mentoring
  - Leads to real and perceived inequities

# More complications...

- Goals, needs and priorities of mentor and mentees may differ dramatically and can conflict
- Mentor time demands and life realities may not mesh with mentee needs
- Mentors play dual training/support and evaluative roles
- Little direct reward for time and expertise of mentors in academia – seldom in the equation for promotion
  - Stark contrast with business world – in business, mentors are often judged by the success of their mentees because investing in development of human resource

# Conflicting interests often present in mentoring, especially at the fellow level

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- Productivity vs. skill-building & professional development
- Achievement of mentor-initiated research aims vs. practicing skills of independent thinking and creativity
  - “If I give her latitude to come up with and test her own ideas, it will pull resources away from getting the results I need for my grant renewal. She might hit a new idea but can I take the risk?”
- For fellow to move to an independent position, **MUST** have feasible, tested ideas distinct from those of the mentor – this cannot be ignored and is central to the agreement to mentor
- No easy answer but needs to be out in the open

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All of these challenges inherent in mentoring as a construct are the reason it is so hard to establish and sustain a mentoring culture

# What if we re-conceptualize fellow development as learning and teaching?

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- Alignment of mentor and fellow expectations becomes more visible and important
  - Communication, communication, communication
- Course objectives = fellow development
  - Can be big or very targeted
- Plan for each lecture/class = meetings
- Assessment of starting point, goals and learning along the way
- Evolution of fellow from novice to colleague

# What do we gain from this perspective?

- Much more clarity of purpose
- Much more explicit vs. implicit
- Much more negotiated between two individuals
- Retains our ability to individualize
- Lower risk of miscommunication
- Mentor's role better defined and more reasonable
- Fellow's role comes to the forefront
  - Primary responsibility for learning
  - More equal weight on responsibilities of fellow and mentor
- Becomes more a skill that can be learned, becoming a better teacher

# What do we lose from this perspective?

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- Can feel less 'special' – Mentor of Greek mythology might not approve!
- Requires mentor to give equal or greater weight to mentee's needs and interests – less sense of molding someone in our image
- Less focus on emulation of mentor and wisdom mentor passes on

# Can we teach effective mentoring?

- Experiment currently taking place across 16 CTSA's to test series of 4, 2-hour workshops
  - Maintaining Effective Communication
  - Aligning Expectations
  - Assessing Understanding
  - Addressing Diversity
  - Fostering Independence
  - Promoting Professional Development
  - Articulating Your Mentoring Philosophy and Plan
- Broad skills not narrow ones – heavy on communication
- More focus on learnable skills, less on opinions

# Going from implicit and oral communication to explicit and written

- Vast majority of mentoring relationships are guided by oral communication – often spontaneous and unplanned
  - Maximizes individualization and flexibility
  - Effective over short periods of time
- **INEFFECTIVE** over longer times and more complex issues
- How many of you have ever used some form of written document or agreement?
- Movement toward written Individual Development Plan - IDP
  - Questions guide self-assessment by trainee
  - Used to initiate dialogue and goal setting
- Essential in some situations – e.g. co-mentoring
- Movement toward specifying competencies for researchers analogous to clinical competencies – CTSA's leading – <http://www.ctsaweb.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=home.showCoreComp>

# I am getting to Intelligent Design and Development of Talent

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- If you focus on talent development and learning, mentoring becomes a tool, not the goal
- IDP or explicit objectives becomes roadmap to achieve goals – i.e. Intelligent Design of the journey
- Achieving goals or competencies becomes planned like is now common in individual K awards – primary mentor only 1 element – actually makes job of mentor much more reasonable and definable

# Talent Development and Intelligent Design at the Program or Department Level

- Agreed-upon goals and approaches = Culture
  - Must be visible and audible
  - Moves from behind closed doors to community
  - Responsibilities and resources become shared
  - Multiple mentoring and peer mentoring occurs
  - Learning achieved in many different ways
- Definitely still many challenges – competing interests of faculty and fellow still real but now out in the open
  - Visibility can be scary
  - Differing levels of success become more visible
  - Faculty approaches and beliefs more visible/open to question

# Critical elements of a focus on developing talents

- Must be very clear with range of talents and outcomes valued and taught toward – i.e. alignment
  - If only outcome that is taught toward and valued is lab-based PI then MUST choose fellows very carefully
  - Brutal filtering process and low tolerance for outside life with this outcome
  - Need to select for attributes predicting success – very difficult to create bench scientist from scratch late in life
- If multiple outcomes possible, intelligently design training to support them – one size does NOT fit all!
- Talents do not exist or develop outside of the rest of life – no longer tenable to expect them to

# Thinking farther outside the box...

- Maybe focus on mentoring isn't best answer. What if we took chapter from athletics and other approaches to developing talent?
  - As mentors we are asked to do it as an add-on
  - Coaches are professionals in their fields – their day job
  - My job at Northwestern is essentially a faculty coach
  - Actually makes great economic sense and if I do a lousy job they fire the coach! – hard to fire mentors...
  - Coaches focus only on the talents of the individual, not balancing the needs of mentors, although potential COI don't go away
  - Group-based methods and other approaches can be more effective than one-on-one
- Fellowship programs or combinations of programs may be big enough to justify dedicated faculty coaches with effort paid for – their contribution to the department

# Big implications for diversity

- Mentoring has huge risks of failure as a primary tool for developing talent – can't risk it with a “rare event”
- Mentoring also not very good at adapting to new life views – tends to discount and suppress new views
- Professional ‘coaching’ done right can be much better
- We are embarking on a large randomized controlled trial to see if we can actually coach toward a specific outcome – in this case success in an academic career and increased faculty diversity
  - “Translating Theory to Practice to Diversify the Biomedical Research Community” – NIH Pathfinder Award
  - Starting with beginning PhD students

# Where does this leave us with a culture of mentoring?

- I believe our continual focus on generic mentoring is one of the reasons it is so hard to achieve
- It is possible to achieve but it has to carry 'cultural' value and agreement
  - Without discussion and agreement, the meaning of mentoring will be individually defined and highly variable
  - Likely will not feel consistent
- Mentoring is not the best answer for all needs – keep it focused on what it can do best
  - K Career Development Plans great model
- Needs to be more explicit than we usually make it

# Where does this leave us with a culture of mentoring?

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- Bring the complications/inherent conflicts out in the open – they are part of our lives
- Consider a niche for professional ‘coach’ to complement mentors
- Some Darwin, some Intelligent Design
- Ideally, a focus on developing talents reshapes the question but everyone still has to agree on this as a value objective and shared responsibility

# My contact information

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