WIP: Integrating Mentoring Circles with Appreciative Inquiry for New Faculty Mentoring

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Introduction and Background

The need to enhance mentoring for new engineering faculty has become increasingly urgent due to significant social and institutional changes in higher education. According to a study of 23 deans of colleges of engineering (Huerta, London, & McKenna, 2022), effective onboarding and sustained support are essential for early-career engineering faculty transitioning into their roles. These roles require excelling in diverse responsibilities as researchers, educators, and contributors to institutional service. The faculty members are tasked with conducting innovative research, securing funding, mentoring graduate students, disseminating findings, developing curricula, employing varied teaching strategies, and fostering student engagement. Research (Boice 1992) has found that 95% of new faculty require four to five years to achieve full productivity in research and teaching. Comprehensive support systems are vital for addressing these challenges, with mentoring emerging as a key strategy, as highlighted in a survey by the Professional and Organizational Development Network (Beach et al., 2016). Mentoring not only supports professional growth but also provides crucial support for underrepresented groups, such as faculty of color and women, who often face higher risks of isolation and disengagement (Smith, 2020).

Mentoring approaches have evolved to address the changing demands of faculty. Traditional dyadic mentoring models, where one mentee is paired with a single mentor, often focus on predefined goals and are primarily mentor driven (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2019). While effective in certain contexts, these models may lack the flexibility to meet diverse and evolving faculty needs (Moreau-Johnson, et al. 2023). Multi-mentor networks (Yun et al., 2016; Sorcinelli & Yun, 2007), which allow mentees to engage with multiple mentors based on specific goals or needs, provide a customizable and dynamic approach to mentoring. However, mentees may require assistance in selecting appropriate mentors to fully benefit from these networks. Peer mentoring involves groups of faculty members at similar career stages collaborating and sharing experiences, which fosters collegiality and mutual support. However, informal peer mentoring may lack consistency and clear guidelines, potentially limiting its effectiveness (Lumpkin, 2011).

Mentoring circles, a particularly promising model, bring together multiple mentees and mentors in a structured yet flexible network (Sands, Parsons, & Duane, 1991). These circles are designed to address both professional and interpersonal development needs, fostering connectivity, shared experiences, and collaborative learning (Darwin & Palmer, 2009). Sessions in mentoring circles are typically organized around collaboratively chosen topics, allowing mentees to engage with mentors who align with their evolving goals. By integrating diverse perspectives, mentoring circles can promote inclusivity and help mentees build robust professional networks (Thomas et al., 2015). Despite their potential, there is limited guidance on forming effective mentoring circles or strengthening the connectivity they are designed to foster. As mentoring programs become increasingly common, it is crucial to explore inclusive and innovative approaches to developing mentoring circles that foster meaningful relationships and support long-term success in engineering academia. Appreciative Inquiry, with its strengths-based framework, offers a promising approach to fostering positive and impactful mentoring circles that meet this need.

Developed by David Cooperrider and Suresh Srivastva in the 1980s, Appreciative Inquiry is a strengths-based approach to organizational change that progresses through four key stages: (1) Discover, identifying strengths and high-point experiences; (2) Dream, envisioning aspirational goals based on those strengths; (3) Design, creating actionable strategies; and (4) Destiny, implementing and sustaining the vision (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987). In faculty mentoring, Appreciative Inquiry has been applied to create supportive and collaborative environments that enhance professional development. For instance, Mather et al. (2024) introduced the Appreciative Mentoring Model, which integrates Appreciative Inquiry principles to support early-career faculty members. Similarly, Oxendine, Robinson, and Parker (2022) utilized Appreciative Inquiry to transform departmental culture through appreciative peer evaluation meetings, promoting both individual and collective faculty growth. Additionally, Pope-Ruark (2024) discussed the application of Appreciative Inquiry to support mid-career non-tenure-track faculty.

Building on these successes, this work integrates Appreciative Inquiry with an engineering faculty mentoring circle to create a flexible framework that helps faculty identify their strengths and achieve their goals while fostering connection, shared purpose, and mutual support. Our focus is on how this unique approach fosters relationships, meets program objectives, and delivers lasting impact.

College of Engineering New Faculty Mentoring Program Description

The College of Engineering (COE) New Faculty Mentoring Program is a one-year program designed to provide structured support to new faculty through mentoring circles led by senior faculty mentors from across the college. The program aims to support new faculty in developing a comprehensive five-year career development plan while building strong professional relationships and networks beyond their home departments through a strengths-based, Appreciative Inquiry framework.

Faculty mentees include newly hired pre-tenure faculty across all tracks—tenure-track, research-track, and teaching-track. The program is intentionally inclusive of all appointment types to ensure that faculty from diverse backgrounds and roles benefit from personalized guidance and collective learning experiences. There are typically 9 to 12 faculty mentees each year.

Faculty mentors are selected based on departmental recommendations and their demonstrated excellence in one or more core areas: research, teaching, engagement/outreach, inclusive excellence, leadership, and teamwork. Although each mentor may excel in one or two areas, the group as a whole reflects a comprehensive spectrum of expertise and experience. Mentors include tenured faculty as well as teaching-track and research-track professors, ensuring alignment with the diverse tracks represented among mentees. Interpersonal strengths, a willingness to share experiences, and a deep commitment to faculty development are key criteria for selection. There are six mentors each year, with one mentor representing each department in the college. Notably, four of the six mentors currently serving are named professors within the college, underscoring the leadership and distinction of the mentoring cohort.

Program Launch and Foundations of Trust. The program begins with an in-person welcome reception, which serves to introduce faculty mentees and mentors, foster initial connections, and set a tone of collegiality and shared purpose. The first formal session of the program establishes a shared foundation for mentoring by introducing a basic Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that outlines general expectations for participation. More importantly, faculty mentors and mentees engage in a collaborative trust-building exercise using Brené Brown's BRAVING Inventory (Brown, 2018), a framework that breaks trust down into seven key elements: Boundaries, Reliability, Accountability, Vault (confidentiality), Integrity, Nonjudgment, and Generosity. Together, mentors and mentees co-create a personalized BRAVING agreement by defining what each of these behaviors looks like in their mentoring

relationship. This co-created commitment serves as a living agreement that supports a psychologically safe and respectful environment essential for open, meaningful mentoring throughout the program.

Program Structure. The program is guided by the Appreciative Inquiry approach, structured around four stages: Strength Identification, Brainstorming, Goal Setting, and Delivery Planning, reflecting the Appreciative Inquiry stages of Discover, Dream, Design, and Destiny as conceptualized by Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987).

1. **Strength Identification**: Faculty mentees start by identifying their strengths in teaching, research, and service/engagement. This stage promotes self-awareness, highlights unique contributions to COE, and lays the groundwork for professional growth while fostering group cohesion.

2. **Brainstorming**: Building on the strengths identified in the first stage, the group collaboratively explores how these attributes can contribute to shaping the future of the faculty member, college and university. Mentees are encouraged to think boldly and creatively, generating innovative ideas that will be discussed and refined collectively.

3. **Goal Setting**: Drawing from the insights of the brainstorming stage, mentees are guided to establish realistic and actionable goals that align with their identified strengths and the strategic priorities of the college and university.

4. **Delivery Planning**: In this final stage, mentees, with guidance from their mentors, create a detailed five-year career development plan. This plan outlines specific activities and steps needed to achieve the goals developed in the previous stage, ensuring alignment with their strengths and the institution's priorities in teaching, research, and service or engagement.

Each stage of the program involves a combination of structured group discussions and individualized mentoring. Group discussions are facilitated by the Associate Dean for Faculty, using stage-specific prompts that align with the objectives of the Appreciative Inquiry framework. Following each group session, mentees meet with assigned mentors for more personalized feedback and guidance. To provide a diversity of perspectives, mentor-mentee pairings are rotated throughout the program.

The program concludes with a graduation event during which mentees present their finalized five-year career development plans to peers, mentors, department chairs, and college leadership. This event serves both as a celebration of the year's progress and as an opportunity for mentees to demonstrate accountability by sharing their goals and planned actions with a supportive community of colleagues and leaders.

Research Method

Our research seeks to address the following questions:

1. How does the combination of mentoring circles and Appreciate Inquiry impact relationship building among participants, and what are the outcomes of these relationships?

2. How does the framework assist (or impede) program participants in achieving the program objectives?

3. What are the long-term impacts of the framework several years after program completion?

To explore these questions, we implemented a three-year mixed-methods assessment consisting of annual surveys of first-year faculty mentees and follow-up interviews with third-year mentees and mentors. The interviews explored four core areas: (1) relationship building within mentoring circles and resulting

collaborations; (2) influence on professional development in teaching, research, and service; (3) career outcomes, including awards, grants, and readiness for midterm reviews; and (4) the use and impact of the five-year career development plans created during the program.

Lessons Learned and Challenges

Launched in Fall 2021, the Faculty Mentoring Program is now supporting its fourth cohort during the 2024–2025 academic year. To date, 43 new faculty members—26 tenure-track, 7 research-track, and 10 teaching-track—have participated or are currently enrolled. While our research and program assessment are ongoing, this paper summarizes key lessons learned and challenges encountered in the development and implementation of the program.

Overall, annual evaluations and participant interviews suggest the program is widely recognized for its strong structure, supportive community, and meaningful impact on early-career faculty development. Participants consistently reported that the program met or exceeded their expectations, particularly valuing individualized mentoring, goal-setting exercises, and the creation of a five-year professional development plan. Small group interactions and in-person gatherings contributed significantly to relationship-building and community integration. Mentees expressed high levels of confidence in achieving their teaching, research, and service goals, while mentors found their engagement both rewarding and impactful. Notably, four of the six mentors have remained with the program since its inception, providing stable and consistent guidance across cohorts.

Follow-up third-year interviews with two past participants—one in a tenure-track position and the other in a teaching-track role—offered deeper insights into the program's long-term impact. Both faculty members emphasized the lasting professional relationships formed through the program, which later led to collaborative research projects, grant awards, and teaching initiatives. They also highlighted the value of mentorship in identifying campus resources and navigating professional development opportunities. Although their use of the five-year career plan differed—one revising it annually as part of their review process, and the other using it briefly after program completion—both reflected positively on the process. Their experiences affirm that the program's benefits extend well beyond its formal duration.

One of the program's most significant challenges has been scheduling, particularly coordinating the availability of 16–19 mentors and mentees across various units. Because the program design relies on simultaneous participation in small group discussions, careful coordination is essential. With strong support from both mentors and mentees—who consistently adjust their commitments to prioritize the program—we have managed to meet this challenge each year. However, due to the complexity of scheduling and the geographic distribution of participants, group sessions are primarily conducted via Zoom. While the virtual format enables efficient participation, it inevitably limits informal, in-person interaction. To address this, we have introduced optional in-person social lunches during the semester, in addition to the welcome reception and final celebration, and encourage in-person mentor-mentee meetings to maximize opportunities for connection.

Another ongoing challenge is addressing the diverse needs of new faculty from different tracks and ranks, including tenure-track, research-track, and teaching-track faculty at both assistant and associate levels. To better accommodate this diversity, we redesigned the group discussion sessions at each Appreciative Inquiry stage from one 2-hour meeting into two focused 1-hour sessions: one on research, attended by tenure-track and research faculty, and one on teaching, attended by tenure-track and teaching faculty. We also responded to recent increases in research-track hires by recruiting a senior research faculty member to serve as a mentor. While these adjustments have improved inclusivity, further refinements are needed to ensure the program continues to meet the specific needs of all faculty types.

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