

Defining the Ideal Qualities of Mentorship: A Qualitative Analysis of the Characteristics of Outstanding Mentors

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ABSTRACT

OBJECTIVE: The study's objective was to identify the important qualities of outstanding mentors as described by their mentees' letters of nomination for a prestigious lifetime achievement award in mentorship.

METHODS: The Lifetime Achievement in Mentorship Award at the University of California, San Francisco, recognizes a faculty member who has demonstrated sustained mentoring excellence in the academic health sciences. Recommendation letters in support of the top 10 nominees in 2008 (n = 53 letters) were analyzed using grounded theory and constant comparative technique until thematic saturation was achieved.

RESULTS: In 2008, 29 faculty members (of >1000 eligible senior faculty) were nominated. Nominees were 53 to 78 years old, and 30% were women. The nominees represented 4 schools (Medicine, Nursing, Pharmacy and Dentistry) and 22 departments/divisions. Five themes emerged from the analysis. Outstanding mentors: 1) exhibit admirable personal qualities, including enthusiasm, compassion, and selflessness; 2) act as a career guide, offering a vision but purposefully tailoring support to each mentee; 3) make strong time commitments with regular, frequent, and high-quality meetings; 4) support personal/professional balance; and 5) leave a legacy of how to be a good mentor through role modeling and instituting policies that set global expectations and standards for mentorship.

CONCLUSION: This is the first study to describe the qualities of admired mentors by analyzing nomination letters for a prestigious mentoring award. Our results give new insight into how mentors foster the careers of junior faculty in the academic health sciences. The results can guide academic leaders on how to train and evaluate mentors.

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Mentorship is a critical component of success in the academic health sciences. Faculty and trainees who identify mentors are more likely to be promoted,¹⁻⁴ are more productive,⁵⁻⁸ and publish more often.^{4,7,9,10} During their career, mentored physicians are more likely to obtain grant support,¹⁰⁻¹² have higher retention at their academic insti-

tution,^{3,12,13} and report greater self-efficacy^{7,11,12,14-16} and improved career satisfaction.^{9,11} As a result, an increasing number of health sciences institutions have invested in formal mentoring programs for their faculty and trainees, and some have made participation in mentoring a requirement for advancement and promotion of faculty members.¹⁶

Despite the growth of mentoring programs nationally and the increased emphasis on mentor training, there is little empirical research on the correlates of effective mentoring relationships or the characteristics of outstanding mentors. An analysis of mentored faculty identified specific qualities associated with successful mentoring, including personal communication, professional guidance, and professional development.¹⁷ A recent systematic review of the literature categorized desired mentor characteristics into 3 dimensions: per-

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sonal, relational, and professional,¹⁸ which helps frame a general discussion about mentoring but reveals an absence in the literature of a qualitative description from the mentees of mentors who have been recognized as outstanding. In this context, our aim was to identify the key characteristics of outstanding mentors from the perspectives of their mentees.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study Population

The University of California, San Francisco (UCSF), established a faculty mentoring program in 2006 to support the recruitment and retention of faculty, to increase diversity through improved mentoring of underrepresented faculty, and to improve faculty career satisfaction and success.¹⁶ In 2007, the first Lifetime Achievement in Mentoring Award was established to recognize senior faculty members who demonstrate long-term commitment to and excellence in faculty mentoring in the academic health sciences. Letters of nomination were submitted by mentees to describe specific qualities of the mentor that merit recognition and specific contribution to the mentee's career development.

To be eligible for the award, nominees must have had a minimum of 10 years of service at UCSF, been at an Associate Professor level or above, had a 51% appointment or greater at UCSF, and made significant contributions to his or her mentee's career. An award selection committee, composed of 9 senior faculty members, was convened to choose the winner. Finalists for the award were identified on the basis of the following criteria: impact on the career development of their mentees, productivity of their mentees, overall breadth and depth of their mentorship activities, and quality of the letters of nomination. We included all letters of nomination for each of the 10 finalists for the award. Finalists were chosen for analysis to identify the best mentors at UCSF. Each finalist had 4 to 6 letters of recommendation for a total of 53 letters in our database. All identifying information from the documents was removed by a third party, and analysis was conducted on these deidentified letters.

Data Analysis

The letters were analyzed using a grounded theory approach.¹⁹ Initial independent review of 53 nomination letters by 2 investigators (CSC, RAR) was used to create an open coding list. By using the list, a second independent review of all letters was repeated by 2 investigators (CSC, RAR), applying the open coding list to all 53 letters. The-

matic saturation was achieved after 43 letters. Discrepancies in coding were discussed and resolved. A third investigator (MDF) checked the coded letters for accuracy. This study qualified for exemption by the UCSF Committee on Human Research.

CLINICAL SIGNIFICANCE

- Nominees for a Lifetime Achievement Award exemplify ideal mentorship; qualitative analysis of their mentees' recommendation letters offers rich, descriptive insight into their outstanding qualities.
- Outstanding mentors exhibit admirable personal qualities, act as career guides, make strong time commitments, support personal/professional balance, and leave a legacy of mentoring.
- Identified themes can be used to build mentor training programs and can serve as a benchmark for mentor feedback and evaluation.

RESULTS

Demographics

Twenty-nine faculty members (of >1000 eligible faculty at the Associate Professor rank or higher) were nominated for the Lifetime Achievement in Mentoring Award by their mentees in 2008. Sixty-two percent of the mentees who submitted letters were women, and most mentees (75%) were currently at UCSF. The faculty mentors nominated for the award ranged in age from 53 to 78 years, and 30% were women. The mentors represented all 4 schools at UCSF (Medicine, Nursing, Pharmacy, and Dentistry) and represented 22 departments/divisions within these schools. Academic rank of the mentees were Professor (40%), Associate Pro-

fessor (15%), Assistant Professor (30%), and other (15%).

Characteristics of Outstanding Mentors: Five Themes

Five themes emerged from the analysis of the letters of recommendation in support of these outstanding mentors: 1) admirable characteristics, 2) how mentors act as career guides, 3) strength of mentor's time commitment, 4) support of personal/professional balance, and 5) leaving a legacy of mentoring.

Theme 1: Admirable Characteristics. Mentees described the characteristics and qualities of their outstanding mentors in a variety of ways (**Table 1**). These characteristics fell into 2 descriptive categories: 1) *personal* qualities that lie at the core of the mentor's identity and 2) *professional* traits that relate to success in work-related activities.

Admirable personal qualities included descriptions of outgoing and interactive personalities (*brilliant, engaging, enthusiastic, inspiring, passionate, warm*), kindness (*caring, compassionate, generous, gentle, empathic*), and justness (*ethical, fair, honest*). The words that were most commonly used to describe these outstanding mentors' personalities included compassionate, enthusiastic, generous, honest, insightful, selfless, and wise. In particular, selflessness was a prevalent description of mentors:

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