

Year 1 Public Description of Work for  
Action Collaborative on Preventing Sexual Harassment in Higher Education

Boston University

**Provost Mentor Fellows Program**

**This Action Applies to Rubric Item(s):**

2, 3, 4

**Description of Work:**

Mentoring is not the only factor that influences the climate mentees experience or their outcomes, but it is a major determinant in the likelihood of the mentee's success ([Brunsma et al., 2017](#)). The culture of mentoring within many disciplines is that it is a private and experiential space, representing a personal relationship that develops between two people. However, effective mentoring practices are intentional, evidence-based practices that have been validated by decades of social science research ([Byars-Winston and Dalberg, 2019](#)) and can be adopted in any dyadic or multi-mentor structure toward mutual productivity and satisfaction.

Mentorship is a skill that is learned, practiced, and improved upon with self-reflection and feedback. Part of breaking down the culture of harassment in academia is emphasizing the intentional, evidence-based mentoring strategies that have been demonstrated to be effective in eliminating bias and harassing behaviors, whether intentional or unintentional. Research mentor training has been demonstrated to help faculty differentiate productive and supportive behaviors from destructive ones, leading to changes within their practice.

At Boston University, we are committed to ensuring that faculty feel supported in their development as mentors through the Provost's Mentor Fellows program we launched in October 2019. This cohort-based program sponsored directly by the Provost meets monthly throughout the academic year (10.5 hours total time commitment) to promote peer learning across disciplines, highlight mentoring successes among faculty, and collectively commit not just to updating personal strategies for mentorship, but towards enacting system-wide changes within their department or training program.

The Provost Mentor Fellows curriculum is adapted from the widely adopted *Entering Mentoring* program ([Pfund, Branchaw, and Handelsman, 2015](#)) and covers the following themes – setting expectations, establishing goals, giving and receiving feedback, supporting trainee mental health, navigating challenging conversations, and culturally aware mentoring practices.

The tone of the training is intentionally positive – participants are not recruited based on a perceived need for training, but rather with the message that they are likely already practicing excellence in mentoring and this training can help support their growth. We also intentionally targeted all levels of faculty, from untenured junior faculty to senior leaders / chairs of

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departments. This allows us to balance early opportunities to solidify mentoring practices in junior faculty with the potential to achieve creating wider change through influencing leaders, and also promotes learning among the faculty.

Preventing harassment is not a distinct module of the training, but instead is integrated into each of the concepts we cover. This design is based on the idea that harassment does not happen in a silo but occurs in many academic contexts either intended or unintended. The literature on harassment in academia was used throughout the training to help faculty reflect on the actions they can take to mitigate harassment in their discipline. For example, literature on gender-based bias in scholarly feedback processes (e.g. grant/manuscript review, course evaluations, promotion and tenure) was used as an opportunity to invite our participants to reflect on the ways they give feedback to individuals within their mentoring spheres, and whether or not those practices are intentionally or unintentionally biased based on identity. These conversations and others throughout the training create the foundation of knowledge and awareness that culminates in a longer session explicitly focused on culturally aware mentoring practices.

Our first cohort contained 20 faculty across both our Charles River and Medical Campus, spanning nine different Schools and Colleges. By rank, 45% of our participants were assistant professors, 30% associate professors, and 25% professors. 20% of participants were a department chair or director of a training program. 90% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that they would recommend the program to their colleagues.

Faculty are also responsible for completing a final project that reflects how they will share their learning with their mentees and with other colleagues. Sample outcomes from the projects undertaken by our first cohort of participants included:

- developing workshops focused on mentoring topics facilitated by participants in the program either for disciplinary society conferences or departmental faculty meetings;
- receiving a supplemental grant award awarded to a collaborative of three program participants that will scale research mentor training to reach ~80 faculty in 3 National Institutes of Health funded training programs;
- writing group expectations and a laboratory mission statement that are now listed on the faculty member's website.

The faculty within the program appreciated the opportunity to spend time on issues related to mentoring, mental health, and harassment directly with colleagues, as these topics are not always the focus of their interactions with their peers. Key takeaways reported in a post-survey by participants reflected some of the content material directly, (e.g. *"Advisor/Mentor/Sponsor doesn't have to be the same person and it's okay to acknowledge that."*) but also shifting perspectives on mentoring as an intentional practice (e.g. *"I can always learn more about mentoring! To do it well, it requires a lot of time and attention (and intention)."*) Half of the

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faculty reflected that this training would be valuable for their colleagues (e.g. *“We need to provide mentor training to all faculty who run research groups.”*)

Too often faculty training focused on themes of mentoring or harassment can appear compliance-based or punitive, which has the risk of limiting how open faculty are to participation and engagement. The positive focus of our training created a pathway for participants to discover new approaches and also promoted faculty vulnerability and honesty toward their growth. The Provost Mentor Fellows program will continue to recruit annual cohorts. Our program scales its impact through initiatives and products driven directly by our program alumni, reducing the administrative burden to reach faculty beyond those that elect to participate in a cohort. Faculty reinforcing their learning through their own outreach also endorses the content directly, adding to the program’s credibility.

**Website for further information (if applicable):** <https://www.bu.edu/postdocs/for-faculty/for-faculty/provost-mentor-fellows-program/>

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