Harsh realities in pandemic fatigue, burnout, inequities, and isolation are impacting academic pharmacy. Mentoring programs, especially inter-institutional programs such as those provided within the Sections and Special Interest Groups (SIGs) of the American Association of Colleges of Pharmacy (AACP), may combat some of these issues. Unfortunately, year after year, Academy members continue to request information from these groups on mentoring, whether it be the opportunity to pair up, for advice on how to be better mentors, or for guidance on how to develop a program on mentoring for the Sections and SIGs without an existing program. The need for authentic mentoring is vital to the success and retention of faculty and staff within the Academy. Therefore, it may be appropriate to take a closer look at why, despite ongoing mentoring programs scattered within AACP Sections and SIGs, these programs are unable to fulfill the needs of participants.

Keywords: mentoring, program development, training support, pharmacy, needs assessment

INTRODUCTION

Isolated. Alone. Overworked. Tired. These are some of the words that have been used to describe the life of an academician. Underlying issues such as practitioner burnout, social inequities, workplace uncertainty, drained motivation, changes in instruction/teaching roles, and social isolation were brought to the forefront as a global pandemic revealed cracks in our support system. Each of these issues has had an impact on the well-being of members in the Academy and left many of us scrambling to identify ways to address these concerns.

The topic of mentoring has been explored multiple times and is widely recognized to enhance confidence, professional development, and leadership, while simultaneously reducing feelings of stress and isolation. Many academicians have access to mentoring programs within their institution, but professional associations such as the American Association of Colleges of Pharmacy (AACP), offer a unique opportunity to provide formal mentoring programs that span across institutions and disciplines. The work of AACP in the area of mentoring has been ongoing. Currently, AACP has 6 Sections and 4 Special Interest Groups (SIGs) out of 30 total affinity groups with formal mentoring programs: the Biological Sciences Section, Chemistry Section, Drug Information and Library Science Section, Experiential Education Section, Pharmaceutics Section, Pharmacy Practice Section, Assessment SIG, Laboratory Instructors SIG, Self-Care Therapeutics/Nonprescription Medicine SIG, and the Women Faculty SIG. These programs require participants to provide various pieces of demographic data and personal preferences for them to match mentors with mentees. Some of the criteria used in matching include participant discipline, expertise, and professional development goals. Some programs randomly assign a mentor, while others incorporate mentee preferences. Additional characteristics considered vary widely between groups and may include time zone of the participants, type of institution, preferred amount/method of communication, and gender preference. Most of the factors used in establishing mentor/mentee matches are driven by “common sense,” rather than a scholarly, evidence-based approach, which may explain why there is still an overwhelming call for mentoring opportunities within the Academy.

There is also wide variation in programmatic aspects including duration, matching process, training requirements and opportunities for mentors, and assessment of mentoring programmatic outcomes. Not all the Academy’s mentoring
programs are created equal, and quality mentoring programs/ experiences require a significant amount of time and thought investment by those conducting the program, as well as those participating in the program. While inter-institutional and cross-disciplinary programs provide a unique set of challenges, they may provide greater quality experiences for mentees. Unfortunately, mentoring programs available through the Sections and SIGs are restricted to their specific members, leaving many of these groups performing duplicative work in setting up and structuring the programs and leaving some AACP members without access to mentorship programs.

Despite the existence of structured mentoring programs within the Academy, members still crave authentic mentorship experiences. The personal and professional fulfillment of a mentor/mentee relationship that spans academic institutions can be critical to Academy members’ growth and retention in academia, but not every relationship is a success. Mentoring programs are strongly encouraged within academic pharmacy and have proven to be beneficial to career development. They also continue to be of interest to the Academy and the membership of AACP. Support from AACP to facilitate authentic mentorship experiences within existing mentorship programs and the development of an interdisciplinary program to fill gaps would provide the benefits of successful mentorship to a greater number of pharmacy faculty and staff. By refocusing existing mentoring programs to provide a support system that enables participants to lean on and learn from each other and feel a sense of camaraderie, the Academy can play a larger role in retaining members within academic pharmacy. Additionally, evaluating mentoring programs using evidence-based approaches, such as mentoring models and relationships, delivery and structure of the programs, specific training for both the mentors and mentees, programmatic outcomes, and a post-participation evaluation of the program, creates the potential for more successful programs.8

DISCUSSION
Mentor/Mentee Relationship

The 10 affinity groups within AACP that have mentoring programs represent an organizational level approach to implementing such a program; while an intra-institutional approach may only match a junior faculty member with a senior faculty member of the same department and hope it works out well. But mentoring has different meanings to each person, so identifying the mentee’s needs and expectations of mentoring is essential to developing an authentic and meaningful relationship.9 It is key to know if the mentee is seeking a mentor, sponsor, coach, or a friend. The mentor needs to know if the mentee needs someone to help them navigate their job responsibilities; someone to provide guidance for successful promotion; someone to guide them through their work-life (im)balance; someone to help get their name out there; and/or someone to listen to their personal and professional issues. Each role is different depending on the needs or stage of career of the mentee. Unfortunately, none of these characteristics are requested of participants wanting to participate in one of the available mentoring programs within AACP.

Addressing the Elephant in the Mentor/Mentee Relationship

Without accounting for the specific needs of the mentee, support systems, such as those created by AACP’s mentoring programs, fall short in creating a foundation of trust and authenticity in the matched pair, which can impair the ability for the mentee to experience a more positive work environment and aid in retention in academia.10 Additionally, support systems are great avenues to form connections between Academy members who can understand and empathize with the struggles specific to under-represented minority faculty, which can also result in both retention and success of those faculty members.11

Program experiences may vary for both the mentor and mentee depending upon the concordance of the matched pair with regards to personal identities, such as race, gender identity, and socioeconomic status. At least two of the available mentoring programs through AACP’s affinity groups ask prospective mentors and mentees their preferences in their match to help better align experiences and attempt to create a more authentic relationship; however, this should be considered in all mentoring programs. Thus, the design and structure of some mentoring programs may or may not provide a good mentor-mentee match. If the mentor and mentee are not able to relate to each other, a meaningful relationship is not likely to develop. In this situation, time may be wasted by both parties if this is a formal mentoring program, and obligations are required. A more informal mentoring program, where mentors and mentees already know each other and relationships develop on their own, may lead to more of a connection, trust, and authentic interaction. However, the mentor may serve in multiple roles, or the roles may be blurred in some circumstances and can lead to the mentor giving “this is how I did it” advice. Moreover, having a mentor does not guarantee a mentee will not still feel alone, so there needs to be a way to further develop that connection. Best practices on developing an authentic relationship between the mentor and the mentee to allow both parties to gain from the experience and use each other
for support and camaraderie must be shared and incorporated into the Academy’s programs.

Suggestions for Addressing the Elephant

For any mentoring program to be successful, the roles and expectations of the mentor-mentee relationship must be aligned, and both parties must be comfortable with and knowledgeable of the roles and expectations; otherwise, the relationship may never develop. First, we must consider if we are soliciting the best information to develop a “match” of a mentor and mentee. Evidence-based information should drive matches, not necessarily “common sense” criteria that are currently employed by most of AACP’s affinity groups. This information can include the type of relationship the mentor and mentee are willing to participate in, appropriate training (initial and ongoing) for both the mentor and mentee, alignment of the mentor and mentee’s goals for the relationship, as well as any administrative support and a culture of mentoring within the Academy.

From a mentee’s perspective, they may not really know what they need or even want in the earlier stages of their careers. Mentors may need to guide them more in this area to help them reach their full potential and avoid common pitfalls. Mentee/mentor relationships need maintenance, and it can be challenging for mentees to continue to drive the relationship. Mentors may be the one more skilled at maintaining this relationship. From a mentor perspective, building an authentic relationship and developing trust with a stranger can be a difficult task. The authentic nature and trust allow both parties to share freely and get the most reward out of a relationship.

Another challenge mentors face is knowing what exact role a mentee needs the mentor to play and how to pivot if that role changes as the relationship evolves. Mentors may need additional training to consistently give “best practice” advice instead of falling on our own experiences to guide a mentee. While we all crave support and encouragement, a mentor/mentee relationship should be beneficial to both parties. This does not necessarily mean that both mentors and mentees have an idea of how to provide benefits to each other. Gaps in mentorship training and equitable recruitment of mentors and mentees also exist. These are some of the areas that need to be addressed to formulate a successful mentoring strategy, outcome, and/or experience in which the Academy should provide guidance.

Need for Authentic Mentoring

The ultimate purpose for every mentoring relationship is to meet the end goals of all involved parties, while enhancing the relationship between the mentor and mentee. The wide variety of programs within the different Sections and SIGs in AACP, combined with the continued request for mentoring opportunities, may indicate it is time for us to take a closer look at how these programs are structured and determine if greater support by AACP is needed. This support could start with using evidence-based matching criteria to find the appropriate fit for mentor/mentee pairs, which is critical to program success. AACP can play a larger role in formalizing and providing structural guidance to existing programs to better identify the relationships that Academy members are seeking, whether that be mentors, coaches, sponsors, or friends. Offering education and tools to train both mentors and mentees can enhance the benefits observed by both parties and is essential to strengthening these existing programs within AACP. Additionally, AACP can consider offering a training or certification course in mentoring to aid mentors in providing appropriate guidance for mentees, thus providing the tools to create a safe environment for both to give and receive. Appropriate guidance, training, and time can yield the connection, camaraderie, and fulfillment our Academy members are seeking when electing to participate in the available or future AACP mentoring programs.

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