

# Complete your crew: Mentoring and more

By DEBORAH GIN

For most of us, mentoring is a mixed bag. While we may have had rewarding and life-giving mentoring experiences, we also lament those mentoring experiences where expectations were not met and there was nothing new to be learned. Ineffective experiences can be avoided by tapping the expertise of a range of mentors, including reverse mentors, coaches, role models, and sponsors. Completing our crews can lead to important professional development, but we must be intentional.



As a good researcher, I must first locate myself in a context. Prior to coming to The Association of Theological Schools, the last position I held was Fellow in the Center for Teaching, Learning, and Assessment at Azusa Pacific University. I worked in faculty development and faculty evaluation (APU's version of a tenure support), offices of university scope. I also held a faculty appointment as associate professor in ministry with Azusa Pacific Seminary.

In nearly 20 years at one institution, I had a slow but steady journey toward my last position. Mentors helped me navigate the challenges along the way. I have wondered, however, whether greater intentionality in completing my crew of mentors *earlier on* might have contributed to the same amount of progress in half the time.

I tend not to think of mentoring in traditional ways: typically, a single, formal, unidirectional relationship where protégée sits at the feet of, and uncritically absorbs life lessons from, the master. I prefer to think of mentoring as a *network* of relationships, a *crew* of experts, where not one mentor-mentee combination does, nor should be expected to, provide all learning and where there is great potential for mutual exchange, even when real power differentials exist.

Mentoring can be volunteer and intentional, where you seek out an individual and invite her/him to mentor you; it can materialize when someone seeks *you* out. Mentoring can be among colleagues, at a professional level, where there is an exchange of ideas, a kind of mutual mentoring; a close cousin is

reverse mentorship, where there is mutual mentoring with someone who is much younger than you. Mentoring can occur as a result of working closely together on a common project; in such cases there might be an exchange of skills. We should think of mentoring as incorporating a variety of resources: not just persons but also communities of mentoring or services/skill-building centers. And, while most mentoring relationships bring mentor and mentee together weekly or monthly, mentoring can even take place when those involved see each other only once a year.

Among the many mentors I have been privileged to have, I list a few here as representative of a strategic approach to completing a crew. Each has performed a different role in the crew, and each has taught me a different set of valuable lessons.

#### **Mentor #1—Navigating the system**

My first mentor is the executive director of a national organization. She opened my eyes to the reality of structural obstacles, introducing me to all the “-isms” I am likely to face. One such challenge is age-ism. As a petite Asian American woman with few wrinkles, I often wondered whether I was seen as too young to lead. I remember one setting, when my mentor revealed her age, that she is two years older than a well-respected white male colleague in our context. I couldn’t believe my own internal reaction: my view of her and her potential to lead grew in that instant! (I, of course, subsequently had to repent of my sin of perpetuating the -isms I now work hard to dismantle.) She helped me see the wisdom in telling people my age. She also helped me, an introvert, see the value in nurturing key relationships; I can hear her voice ringing, “Make sure you go to tea regularly with so-and-so.”

#### **Mentor #2—Recognizing my worth**

My next mentor, at the time of our relationship, was a high-ranking administrator of an institution of

higher education. Stressing the meaning of professional significance and intrinsic human worth, she taught me never to devalue myself and helped me see I am worth the promotions and the raises I have pursued.

#### **Mentor #3—Maintaining integrity**

My third mentor was the dean’s administrative assistant at the time we interacted. She exemplified integrity, grace, and nonjudgmental, Christ-like character. I watched her from a distance, realized I wanted the same, and asked her to mentor me. In her position, she became a confidante to many, and she considered it a privileged role, treating information others shared with her in confidence as if they were her own secrets. Richard Rohr refers to integrity as having “to do with purifying our intentions.”<sup>1</sup> This woman did not have an opportunistic bone in her body; every action she committed benefited the community. That’s what I wanted to learn from her.

#### **Mentor #4—Recognizing that knowledge is power**

We all know that knowledge is power, but what I didn’t realize is that knowledge can be a form of capital—until I learned this from my fourth mentor. A faculty colleague, he clued me into the value of intellectual capital and the realization that having knowledge and expertise helps you advance professionally. When I made the transition to faculty, he asked me two questions: (1) What do you plan to read? and (2) How do you plan to excel in your field?

#### **Mentor #5—Nurturing networks**

Similar to recognizing expertise as capital, my fifth mentor helped me see the value in nurturing my networks as social capital. To me, an introvert,

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1. Richard Rohr, *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011), xv.

going to an organization's social events ranks just above grading papers. But this faculty colleague from another institution coached me in the art of expanding my professional circle. I first met her at an ATS Women in Leadership event. We were standing in the lunch line when we introduced ourselves to each other. I proceeded to complain about how the Asians were only sitting with one another and boasted about how I, doing the multicultural thing, was sitting with African American women. It was then that she leaned in, gently chastising me: "Don't burn those bridges with Asian American sisters; they will one day be your support network."

### Completing the crew

These dear individuals comprise an important part of my mentoring crew, and I have expanded my view of leadership and personal agency because of them. I am grateful beyond measure for these and my other mentors, as they have played a critical role in my professional journey, whether they knew it or not.

There is one thing I would change if I had my journey to do all over again: I would have been more intentional about *completing* my crew. I would have figured out earlier where the holes were in my crew and strategized how I might connect with folks who could help me develop in specific areas. I would have created a mentor map of influencers in my life and identified the areas where I needed additional guidance.

### Mentoring and the four pillars of formation

At a recent ATS Women in Leadership conference, I led participants in an exercise to create a mentor map and to identify the gaps in it. Borrowing from the Roman Catholic notion of "four pillars of formation," we identified mentors (i.e., individuals, communities, services, other resources) in our lives who could be understood as informing each of the four formational areas: human, spiritual, intellectual,

and pastoral/vocational. There are a number of resources that provide a more thorough explanation (e.g., [Program of Priestly Formation](#)<sup>2</sup>), but here I offer brief descriptions of the pillars and place my mentors in this framework, as an example.

**Human formation** involves developing character, developing qualities that make us more fully who God created us to be. Mentors #2 and #3, with their emphasis on knowing my value and maintaining integrity, informed my journey in this area. I bolstered my sense of self-worth and gained a healthier understanding of intention for the greater good with guidance from these two.

**Intellectual formation** resides in the cognitive realm, in the academic realm for me in higher education. Encouragement from Mentor #4 to develop my intellectual capital led me to immerse myself in a discipline (or two). Not only did I gain knowledge purely for the joy of learning, but because of him, I was also better prepared for the strategic role that knowledge would play in my emerging professional journey.

**Pastoral formation**, or vocational formation for those of us not in parish ministry, is about development of professional skills and perspectives needed for functioning in your career. Mentors #1 and #5 provided frames for traversing the political terrain gracefully, while making sure that I didn't burn my networks. I have also been formed vocationally by a number of reverse mentors, younger professionals with a natural disposition for technology and social media.

**Spiritual formation** encompasses personal growth in faith and the development of religious disciplines. My church's lead pastor can be located in this quadrant, while also straddling the vocational

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2. United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Program of Priestly Formation*, 5th ed. (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2006).

formation area. Our mutual exchange (when I was the church board moderator, lay counterpart to the lead pastor position) took place where spirituality meets social relevance. I also find my mother in this quadrant, intersecting with the human formation area. I have learned from her to become more completely human as I form in my spirituality.

### Special guidance for women—seek out a sponsor

At the ATS event for emerging women leaders, I also shared findings from a study I conducted on the pursuit of administration in higher education.<sup>3</sup> I identified a profile of women who would pursue upper-level administration, specifically in theological education. One aspect of this profile is having had ample opportunities to use leadership training. But finding opportunities to lead is often difficult for women because of systemic reasons (e.g., women are not *seen* as having good potential to lead).<sup>4</sup>

One way to address this difficulty is to find another kind of mentor, a sponsor perhaps. This is a person

3. For information on a related study, see Deborah H. C. Gin, “Off Limits to Asian Americans? Predicting the Pursuit of Higher Education Administration,” *Multicultural Education Review* 5, no. 1 (2013): 26–37.  
 4. Contact the author for additional findings from this study.

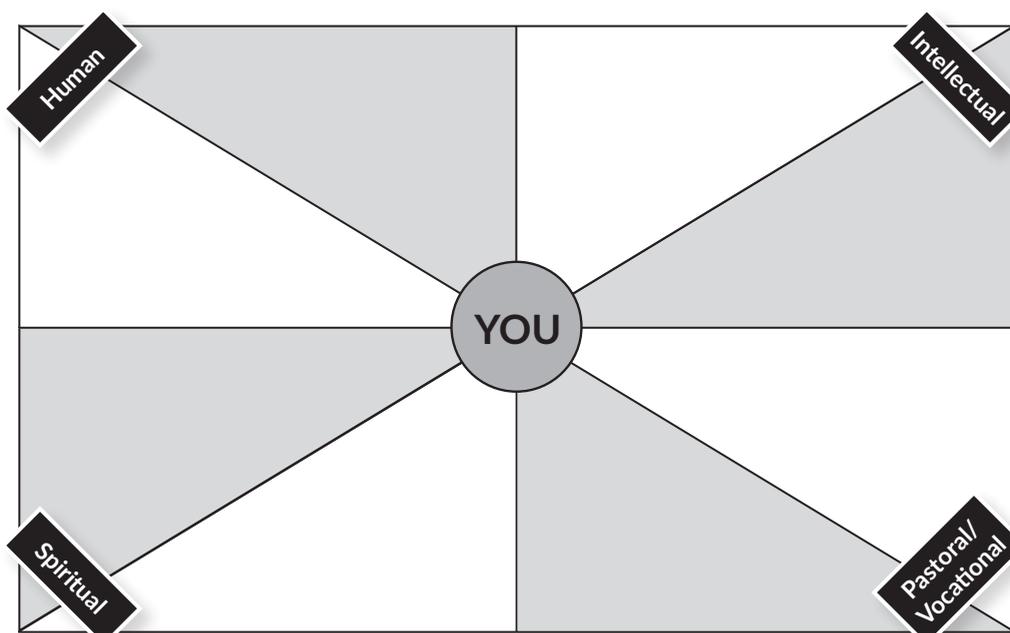
of influence, who has access to leadership circles that you do not. For me, this was my dissertation advisor, a revered expert in diversity. She gave me access to intellectual circles in my guild nationally, which led to others calling on me and my expertise because *she* saw me as having expertise. Another sponsor in my journey was a critically aware white male colleague who is well-networked and well-published. He provided introductions to circles that were previously closed to me locally as well as nationally.

My journey in leadership has been slow but steady, and I am grateful for where I am currently located. Of course, the journey may have taken half this time had I found the gaps in my mentor map earlier and figured out ways to fill these gaps. I believe firmly,

however, that we are meant to learn *throughout* our lives. It is never too late to be intentional about mentoring. So go complete your crew!



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### Mentor Map

Place the names of current mentors in the white blocks for each of the four formational areas and then write in the shaded areas the names of those who you want to invite to be your mentor.