

# **The Mentoring Networks of Outdoor Educators**

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## **Abstract**

The dynamic and transitory nature of outdoor education (OE) employment may make the cultivation of traditional dyadic mentoring relationships challenging. This study used the developmental network perspective, which positions mentoring as a multirelationship phenomenon, to better understand how OE instructors working for NOLS access mentoring support, help ascertain the types of mentoring support instructors find meaningful, and delineate the attributes of effective mentoring relationships. Twenty-one instructors with differing levels of experience were interviewed for this study. Data indicated that interviewees found meaningful mentoring support from a variety of sources, namely, senior instructors and near peers. The provision of career-related support, specifically support that helped mentees navigate organizational culture and gain more work opportunities, was highly regarded by participants and positively impacted career outcomes. Challenges facing instructors seeking mentoring support and the implications of these results for instructors and OE providers are discussed.

**KEYWORDS:** mentoring; outdoor education; instructors; NOLS; developmental networks

*"I don't think I have any mentors."*

This quote, offered by a participant in this study who has worked as an outdoor educator for over 11 years, highlights a conundrum faced by outdoor education (OE) instructors. How do instructors gain mentoring support in a field characterized by short-term employment contracts, transience, and seasonal migrations to ensure year-round employment? Mentoring, as it is traditionally viewed, is an ongoing association between a senior-level employee and a protégé, focused on the protégé's growth and personal development (Kram, 1985; Montgomery, 2017; Ragins & Kram, 2007). Establishing these types of long-term mentoring relationships may be challenging in OE settings, particularly for individuals working for large OE providers such as NOLS. For NOLS instructors, the challenges of initiating and maintaining long-term mentoring relationships may be associated with the organization's size (i.e., in terms of the number of instructors it employs and the physical distance between operating locations), temporary work assignments, impermanent workplace relationships, and the expeditionary nature of its courses. While these employment conditions may make the establishment and maintenance of mentoring relationships challenging, they do not prevent instructors from desiring or benefiting from mentoring support.

Across the mentoring literature, mentoring has been associated with positive career outcomes for mentees including increased job satisfaction, greater career-related attainment, and advancement (e.g., Allen, Eby, Poteet, Lentz, & Lima, 2004). Mentoring also offers many psychosocial benefits including cultivating a sense of organizational belonging or increasing job-related self-efficacy (Dawson, Bernstein, & Bekki, 2015). In the teacher development literature, mentoring has been shown to increase mentees' job-related satisfaction, improve teachers' instructional practices, increase student achievement, support teacher retention, and promote the success and retention of minority faculty members (Ehrich, Hansford, & Tennent, 2004; Hobson, Ashby, Malderez, & Tomlinson, 2009; Ingersoll & Strong, 2011; Zambrana et al., 2015). As educators who facilitate learning activities, assess students' performance, and grant both high school and college credit, NOLS instructors are likely to reap the aforementioned benefits from mentoring relationships.

While the OE literature regularly references the importance of mentoring, with a few exceptions (e.g., Avery, Norton, & Tucker, 2018), research has not fully documented the experiences, affordances, and limitations of mentoring in the OE field. Therefore, the overarching purpose of this study was to better understand the mentoring support offered to NOLS instructors and identify the types of support deemed beneficial and seen as instrumental to their growth and development. This study sought to answer these research questions: (1) What types of mentoring support did instructors find meaningful? and (2) What are the attributes of effective mentoring relationships for OE instructors working at NOLS?

## Literature Review

### Mentoring

Harkening back to Greek mythology, current notions underlying mentoring can be found in Homer's *Odyssey*, in which Mentor, a trusted friend of King Odysseus, helped grow and develop Odysseus's son, Telemachus, while Odysseus ventured abroad to fight the Trojan War (Kram, 1985; Shea, 1997). In this story, a type of mentorship was born wherein an older, more experienced individual comes alongside a less experienced protégé and offers the protégé counsel, advice, or knowledge that aids in the protégé's development (Kram, 1985; Shea, 1997). Approximately three millennia later, mentoring relationships are often conceived in this fashion. In the traditional view of mentoring, a senior-level individual provides assistance, guidance, and/or advice to a neophyte in job-related realms (Haggard, Dougherty, Turban, & Willbanks,

2011; Kram, 1985; Montgomery, 2017). The primary goals of traditional mentoring relationships are varied and unique to the individual situation; however, they regularly consist of skill development, increased competency in work-related domains, emotional support, and/or career guidance (Haggard et al., 2011; Kram, 1985; Montgomery, 2017).

Across the mentoring literature, numerous definitions of the term *mentor* have been offered and their roles delineated (e.g., Haggard et al., 2011; Montgomery, Dodson, & Johnson, 2014). When reviewing definitions of mentoring, Haggard et al. (2011) identified three themes used across the myriad definitions: (1) reciprocity, (2) developmental benefits, and (3) consistent and frequent interactions. Haggard et al. noted that mentoring is a reciprocal relationship with the mentor and mentee engaged in mutually beneficial interactions. Second, mentoring relationships should provide developmental assets that cultivate protégés' career-related development. Finally, mentoring relationships are typically characterized by frequent interactions that occur on a consistent basis between the mentor and the protégé.

Mentors provide distinct types of developmental support: career-related and psychosocial (Allen et al., 2004; Higgins & Kram, 2001; Kram, 1985). Mentors offering career-related support, through the use of vehicles such as offering challenging work assignments, protection, and coaching, help the protégé gain visibility within an organization and acquire the skills necessary for advancement in the workplace (Kram, 1985). Career-related support helps mentees acquire insight into organizational norms and culture, gain valuable recognition, and attain promotions or other advancements (Allen et al., 2004; Kram, 1985). Haggard et al. (2011) noted that the prominence of career-related supports, articulated in the various definitions of mentoring across the literature base, highlights the preeminence of these functions to mentoring relationships. On the other hand, psychosocial support is offered in mentoring relationships characterized by trust and intimacy (Kram, 1985). Mentors offering psychosocial supports, including affirmation, encouragement, counseling, and/or friendship, can positively impact protégés' feelings of competence and work-related self-efficacy (Allen et al., 2004; Kram, 1985). Kram (1985) noted that mentoring relationships can be characterized by either or both functions; however, mentoring relationships solely organized around career-related functions are typified by less intimacy and are valued for the outcomes (e.g., promotions) yielded. On the other hand, mentoring relationships epitomized by a balance between career-related and psychosocial functions tend to generate stronger interpersonal bonds between mentors and mentees and are viewed as more vital.

## Mentoring Networks

To be successful in 21st century professional contexts, today's workforce needs comprehensive mentoring support including professional development, emotional support, meaningful feedback, and access to opportunities (Montgomery, 2017; Rockquomore, 2013). Providing all of these functions is a challenging task for one individual; consequently, employees in today's workplaces may need the counsel of multiple mentors to gain the support they need (Montgomery, 2017; Rockquomore, 2013). To address these needs, Higgins and Kram (2001) proposed an alternative mentoring framework, the developmental network perspective, which positions mentoring as a multirelationship phenomenon. The developmental network perspective recognizes that individuals often receive career-related and psychosocial support from multiple sources including more experienced colleagues, peers, family, or community members, and posits the importance of having multiple mentoring relationships (Higgins, Chandler, & Kram, 2007; Higgins & Kram, 2001). Developmental network research identifies the individuals currently providing protégés career-related and/or psychosocial support and, more important, explores how that support is offered (Higgins & Kram, 2001).

The developmental network perspective is ultimately an individual-centric mentoring model whereby protégés identify developmental needs based upon self-identified career goals and then find mentors who can help them realize the identified need (Montgomery, 2017). As such,

the onus is on the individual to delineate a developmental road map and procure the resources necessary for growth (Montgomery, 2017). Because each mentee has different developmental needs, each mentoring network is unique (Montgomery, 2017). Furthermore, developmental networks are dynamic phenomenon and regularly change as mentees' career-related needs evolve (Dobrow & Higgins, 2005).

## **Benefits of Receiving Mentoring Support**

The benefits of mentoring to the protégé have been documented in numerous studies (e.g., Allen et al., 2004). Allen et al. (2004) found that objective measures of career success (e.g., promotions) were more highly correlated with career-related support than psychosocial support. However, receiving career-related or psychosocial mentoring supports ultimately had similar impacts on job-related satisfaction. When comparing mentored to nonmentored individuals, Allen et al. noted that the most salient benefits of mentoring were the positive affective and psychological feelings it developed within mentees for their career and employer. Higgins and Thomas (2001) found that traditional and individual-centric mentoring facilitated mentee success. Traditional mentoring relationships were beneficial for obtaining short-term career-related benefits, while individual-centric mentoring networks supported long-term career aspirations, promoted advancement, and aided in retention.

## **Mentoring in Education**

In recent decades, mentoring in educational contexts has been frequently studied and its impacts explicated (e.g., Bullough, 2012; Ehrich et al., 2004; Hansford, Tennent, & Ehrich, 2003). While many teachers receive informal mentoring from colleagues and supervisors, 29 states across the United States require some sort of mentoring support for new teachers (Goldrick, 2016). In the early 2000s, mentoring in educational contexts was primarily seen as a vehicle for retaining classroom teachers (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011), but more recently, mentoring has been viewed as a tool for developing effective teachers (Wang, Odell, & Schwille, 2008).

Across higher education, mentoring has been utilized to realize similar goals (e.g., Law et al., 2014; Lunsford, Crisp, Dolan, & Wuetherick, 2017). Early-career university faculty members who are mentored are twice as likely to be promoted, report higher levels of job-related satisfaction, and note increased job-related skills and abilities (Fleming et al., 2015; Jackevicius et al., 2014; Lunsford et al., 2017; Thomas, Lunsford, & Rodrigues, 2015). Informal mentoring relationships in academia have been associated with helping professors establish and maintain work-life balance and providing career-related guidance (Lunsford et al., 2017; Thomas et al., 2015). In addition to engendering individual benefits, mentoring also fosters positive organizational outcomes such as improved educational outcomes for students, creates more competent early-career teachers, and leads to greater rates of retention (Hansford et al., 2003).

## **Mentoring in Outdoor Education**

Research on mentoring in OE has explored a variety of topics. For example, mentoring has been envisioned as a tool for on-the-job training of novice instructors (Shooter, Sibthorp, & Paisley, 2009), to promote women's involvement and development in experiential education careers (Loeffler, 1996), to help women instructors overcome gender constraints and find success in a male-dominated profession (Avery et al., 2018), to enhance protégés' self-efficacy (Propst & Koesler, 1998), and to aid OE instructors in calibrating their teaching self-efficacy beliefs (Schumann & Sibthorp, 2016).

Mentorship has been shown to be a crucial factor in the OE leadership development process, augmenting short-term self-efficacy and encouraging continued participation in OE and outdoor leadership activities, especially for women leaders (Koesler, 2002; Propst & Koesler,

1998). Moreover, Koesler (2002) found that mentoring relationships were instrumental to the development of leadership skills and abilities for OE instructors embarking on their careers. For other novice instructors, mentoring relationships aided in their induction into the OE industry (Avery et al., 2018). In interviews with seven women outdoor leaders, Avery et al. (2018) found that formal mentoring often begets informal mentoring. For example, a professional development training opportunity (e.g., rock-climbing skills seminar) enables two individuals with similar interests and comparable goals to connect and initiate an informal mentoring relationship, which ultimately they can leverage to collectively grow and develop (Avery et al., 2018). While mentoring has been noted as a valuable professional development tool for novice and junior instructors, survey data (Koesler, 2002) showed that individuals who had established themselves as leaders within their OE organization relied on other avenues (e.g., networking, conference attendance, personal trips) for continued development rather than utilizing mentoring relationships. Consequently, this study sought to examine the mentoring support offered to NOLS instructors, ascertain the types of support deemed meaningful to instructors' growth and development, and explore the attributes of effective mentoring relationships for OE instructors working at NOLS.

## Method

### Setting

NOLS is an international organization offering wilderness expeditions for students from 14 to over 60 years old. NOLS courses range from 1 week to 1 academic year in length and are taught in eight countries on six continents. NOLS courses are multifaceted and teach a broad curriculum that covers topics including wilderness skills, leadership development, risk management, and environmental studies.

To facilitate its programming, NOLS relies on a group of approximately 500 seasonal, part-time, and full-time instructors. From an organizational standpoint, NOLS instructors are thought to receive mentorship in multiple ways. During their instructor course (IC; a multiday job interview), NOLS instructors receive mentoring support from their peers and the instructors leading the course. Mentoring support is offered to help IC candidates develop their leadership, risk management, group management, facilitation, and/or environmental studies skills and occurs formally (e.g., via a written evaluation) and informally (e.g., via a conversation in camp).

After successfully completing the IC, instructors can work field-based expeditionary courses in which they encounter two key elements of the NOLS mentoring structure, the program supervisor and the Course Leader (CL)–Patrol Leader (PL)–Instructor (I) hierarchy. The program supervisor prepares the instructor team, who are often meeting for the first time when beginning their employment contracts, to work productively together and subsequently debriefs the team when returning from the field. The program supervisor is ultimately responsible for writing the formal paperwork that documents instructors' field-based performance.

In the field, the CL mentors the PL and the I by using feedback and offering the junior instructors appropriately challenging work assignments. These field-based mentoring interactions occur formally (e.g., via end-of-course instructor evaluation forms) and informally (e.g., via daily check-ins). In addition to these mentoring structures, NOLS offers instructors professional development opportunities through skills-based trainings and faculty gatherings.

### Research Participants

A purposeful sampling method (Patton, 1990) identified a sample of 21 currently active NOLS instructors who had differing levels of professional experience (six participants with 0 to 5 years of experience, eight participants with 6 to 10 years of experience, and seven participants

with 11 or more years of experience). Of the 21 participants, three hailed from outside the United States, 11 identified as female, and 10 identified as male.

## Conceptual Framework

A key assumption undergirding the design of this study was that the inherent challenges associated with the initiation and maintenance of traditional dyadic mentoring relationships in the OE context would impel instructors to seek mentoring support from multiple mentors. The developmental network framework (Higgins & Kram, 2001) casts mentoring as a multirelationship phenomenon and notes that individuals receive developmental support from multiple sources including more experienced colleagues, peers, family members, and community contacts. A developmental network includes the cadre of individuals the protégé names as being instrumental to her or his professional, interpersonal, or intrapersonal growth (Higgins & Kram, 2001). Research conducted from the developmental network perspective ascertains who is currently providing a protégé mentoring support and, more important, how they offer that support.

## Procedures

With the help of NOLS administrators, a purposeful sample of 21 NOLS instructors was identified. Semistructured interviews were conducted in person in August and September 2017. The interviews ranged in length from 20 to 60 min and were conducted in two locations in the Intermountain West. During the interview, participants delineated the individuals who provided mentoring support, described the mentoring support offered by each mentor, characterized typical interactions, and identified ways in which the mentoring support was beneficial or detrimental. In addition to completing the semistructured interview, participants visually depicted their mentoring networks, and these diagrams were collected by the interviewer and added to the data set.

## Data Analysis

After the interviews were completed, the data were transcribed and then coded via a provisional coding strategy (Saldaña, 2016) developed during the literature review process and emanating from the developmental network literature (Higgins & Kram, 2001). Consequently, the individuals offering mentoring support (e.g., senior instructors), the ways in which that support was procured, the attributes of effective mentoring relationships, and the mentoring practices that positively impacted instructors' career-related outcomes were recorded with HyperRESEARCH Version 3.7.5. Saldaña (2016) noted that initially delineated provisional codes can be revised, modified, or expanded to include new codes during the data analysis process. In this study, additional codes were created (e.g., the challenges of receiving mentorship in the NOLS environment) based on themes presented by participants. Unfortunately, one of the recordings failed about halfway through the interview. Upon noticing this failure, the interviewer noted salient thoughts and insights provided by the interviewee in a journal and added them to the data corpus.

## Results

### Meaningful Mentoring Supports

The NOLS instructors interviewed for this study gained meaningful mentoring support from more experienced, senior instructors as well as peers. In the review of the interviews, it was evident that the career-related support provided by senior staff was perceived as invaluable. Participants noted that senior staff helped them understand organizational structures and

hierarchies, understand key cultural systems and language, and navigate institutional bureaucracies. For example, a junior instructor, when describing a direct supervisor, noted, "He provided a lot of information . . . on how to navigate staffing and get more work . . . and develop as an instructor." Senior instructors helped protégés understand how to advance in their careers:

I think that was a conversation that [we] started in the middle of the course, not before the course, because watching him I was gaining confidence and I was like, "Maybe I can do this," and then we started talking about what are some things that I can do to develop and move into [the course leader] role.

Senior staff members offered protégés job-related coaching and feedback. For example, an instructor articulated the support provided by senior staff members that helped her identify the steps necessary to be assessed to work at the next level:

I think they intentionally knew that I was looking, they knew I was looking at being assessed at new levels, and so they were very deliberate with here are the steps and here's what it looks like to show that you have done these steps . . . they provided a lot of opportunities to run parts of a course and try [new] things.

One interviewee noted that a senior staff member role-modeled acceptable performance standards, "and the standards that he keeps in the backcountry are super high and I really respect that and bought into that really rapidly."

On the other hand, the career-related support offered by peers usually occurred in informal settings. An instructor who described the importance of practicing technical skills with peers recounted, "We were actually about the same stage learning together, and so I guess we would support each other, we would go out and practice. We would demonstrate things for each other and try things out." Beyond technical skills, instructors gained invaluable interpersonal skills through peers, as one interviewee stated:

[I learned] the more important stuff like group dynamic things, group management, and communication stuff, and how to work with groups, and I don't think that those people knew that they were passing stuff on to me, and at the time I don't think I knew how much I was getting from them.

In addition to skills practice sessions, instructors learned new instructional techniques during interactions with peers. For example, one instructor noted, "I think it's been like this co-mentorship . . . where I'm doing things that they find interesting and I think they're doing things that I find interesting. And like, we developed this synergy where we are working off each other." The knowledge gained through co-mentorship often occurred through observation, as one instructor relayed:

I don't . . . need them to tell me that this is what they're doing, but I just watch it, and I'm like "Oh this is brilliant," this is a person [who] I think is doing something outside the norm and it's working really well.

While instructors learned teaching-related skills by observing their peers, they also learned through formal and informal conversations among instructors.

Instructors also benefited from the psychosocial support offered by senior instructors and near peers, including confirmation, counseling, and friendship. Both sets of mentors offered verbal affirmation and encouragement, and the descriptions of the affirmation and encouragement were qualitatively similar. In describing a superior, an interviewee remarked, "I would say his mentorship feels like showing care and concern and asking me about my plan and encouraging me. It's an encouragement and connection type of relationship." Often psychosocial support was instituted by senior staff members through the way they established norms of interaction among instructor team members. For example, "The way that he created an instructor culture between



the three of us, we all felt that we could mess up . . . there was no harm in that.” Ultimately, the psychosocial support offered by senior instructors allowed junior staff members to feel comfortable and confident in their skills and abilities, relax, and perform up to their potential.

As near peers, the participating instructors benefited from the psychosocial support offered by co-instructors. One interviewee described her interactions with a co-instructor:

I just [felt] totally supported and kind of buoyed up in both yes you have the skills, and again that affirmation piece, like you can do this, you are competent, and I totally loved what you did with our students earlier, this [is going] great.

While senior colleagues are tasked with developing junior colleagues’ technical, interpersonal, and intrapersonal skills, peers found other ways to push or challenge each other to grow. One interviewee described these types of interactions: “[He] would just see me climbing all the time, he knew my skill, and he would really push me in a positive yet gentle way.” One instructor noted that “this lifestyle can be really hard sometimes,” and other interviewees affirmed this sentiment. To counter the challenges of NOLS employment and the corresponding itinerant lifestyle, peers offered each other tangible support such as words of encouragement, empathetic understanding, and/or a listening ear.

While interviewees found the provision of career-related and psychosocial support by more experienced instructors and peers meaningful and useful to their development, institutionally implemented instructor development opportunities also helped these NOLS instructors grow and develop. These institutionally sponsored activities were implemented to facilitate the growth of instructors and varied in their level of formality. More formal institutionally instituted structures included the instructor hierarchy utilized on courses (i.e., the CL, PL, and I hierarchal model) and interactions with program supervisors or other administrative staff. Mentoring is an inherently personal phenomenon, and some interviewees experienced mentoring in these institutional structures and noted that they supported their career development, while others did not find them especially valuable. On one hand, an instructor described how working with a senior instructor helped her see herself advancing to the CL role:

Then I moved on to being placed with a CL who had a similar style like me, so I could understand what it is for me to CL with my kind of style . . . and that really helped me move on and be like “Yeah, I can do this.”

On the other hand, an instructor noted his frustration with the mentoring contained within the supervisory structure:

I think in 6 or 7 years working at the school, I’ve had the same program supervisor just once. So, I don’t really feel like I have a strong personal connection with any of the people who write the formal documents. It’s not to say that they don’t care, it’s just I don’t think they have that snapshot of this is where he was, this is where he is going . . . What I would want is, I think, is really challenging for NOLS to give which is a long-term single point of contact.

Less formal institutional opportunities included skills-based seminars and faculty gatherings. These offerings provided opportunities for instructors to network with peers, cultivate friendships, and establish informal mentoring relationships. One instructor noted, “I took a women’s river training trip that was really helpful. And put me in contact with people that I still do things with.” Another instructor further described the value of skills training seminars:

I think seminars are amazing for growth, and just building community at other places. You can show up at a branch that you’ve taken a seminar at, like the [Pacific Northwest branch], I’ve never worked there, but I’ve taken seminars [there], I feel like I can go there because I’ve operated there before and have friends there.



In general, these offerings were perceived positively by this group of instructors and enabled them to establish meaningful interpersonal relationships that often gave rise to formal and informal mentoring relationships.

### **Attributes of Effective Mentoring**

During the interview process, participants described the attributes of effective mentoring relationships at NOLS. A personal connection or feelings of respect often prompted the initiation of mentoring relationships. One participant stated, "She is this total powerhouse of a woman. I have so much respect for her. She was my instructor first and she became a friend and mentor afterwards." This respect was often built on the mentor's conduct personally or professionally, or based on a certain skill set of the mentor that the mentee desired. One instructor described why he sought out a particular mentor:

He's got this broad knowledge base. He's always talking and always teaching. You know, when someone just has the heart of a teacher, and they're just willing to share the knowledge they have and help others learn and grow . . . that's something that just draws me, attracts me to them.

Beyond connecting on an interpersonal level, participants appreciated when their mentors challenged them physically (e.g., suggesting they lead a climb that is at the cusp of their current abilities), technically (e.g., practicing various kayaking skills), or even epistemologically. One participant noted,

Some of the best growth came from mentors who were willing to challenge me. I think that is the part of mentorship that I have appreciated over the years. [Having] mentors who challenge my worldview, or what I think I know is right, or how you always do something, or just what my opinion might be of a situation, or my understanding of what's going on and being willing to be like, why is that? Or, what about this other view of that? Being willing to challenge me has been the most impactful [mentoring practice].

Another important attribute of the mentors who positively impacted these instructors was their willingness to connect their mentees to other individuals in their personal networks who could ultimately provide the mentee with developmental assets they needed or desired. One instructor observed,

All of my [mentors], you look at them and they have these incredible networks. They are connectors of people. And, you know, it was a benefit for me because within an organization to have these people that were such, had such great relationships with so many people within the school, they were able to say, "Here's this guy, give him a chance." And given their, their work ethic, their status, their weight within the culture, to give you an endorsement was *carte blanche*, it opened doors.

In addition, interviewees noted that accessibility, personal investment in the mentee's growth, and regular encouragement were important attributes of mentoring relationships at NOLS.

### **Challenges Associated With Forming and Developing Mentoring Relationships**

Interviewees described myriad challenges to initiating and maintaining mentoring relationships. A preeminent challenge was the lack of continuity at NOLS due to the turnover in instructor and administrative positions. One participant succinctly summarized this problem:

I think the big one is just that the rate of change in a lot of positions is fairly high, a lot of turnover, especially at program supervisor type levels . . . or really any of those mid-level jobs, turnover can be quite high or feel quite high.

This lack of continuity becomes especially salient when an instructor is considering a career change. One interviewee, who is transitioning out of OE work, articulated,

I'm thinking about applying to [a graduate program] and I'm thinking, "Oh my gosh, I actually don't have a couple [of people to write reference letters for me]. After working for 9 years for a school, I really wish I had that person who has seen my growth and development over a long period of time, and I just don't have that.

An even greater challenge was the feeling that mentoring was not available, as one interviewee described: "There just isn't the formal, long-term mentoring that I have received at other places." High turnover forces organizations to promote individuals into roles in which they cannot fulfill mentoring expectations. One participant described his experience: "On my first course, I did not feel super well supported. I worked with a new CL who I don't think . . . I wasn't really her priority." Finally, instructors described seeking mentoring support as their personal responsibility; that is, they perceived it was up to them to locate mentors. One instructor relayed,

I think a lot of it will, will fall on the individual themselves whether they want a mentor or not. Meaning, if you want to improve and want to seek the advice and expertise of someone more experienced or senior, I think that's also on the individual, the mentee, as well to seek it out.

Interviewees also delineated factors that hindered the formation of mentoring relationships. While lack of interpersonal connection between senior and junior staff or between staff and supervisors forestalled the formation of mentoring relationships, a more salient challenge for many of these instructors was the initiation of the mentoring relationship. One instructor succinctly summarized, "I was so intimidated . . . I had a really hard time approaching people who I wanted to learn from and asking for that from them." Another wittily noted, "There was never really like a designated go-to, this room where your mentor will be." Organizational norms may also influence the value assigned to the formation of mentoring relationships. One interviewee, who worked as an instructor and a mid-level manager, observed, "The fact that there is not a culture of mentoring may hinder individuals from seeking out developmental relationships."

## Discussion

The NOLS instructors interviewed for this project accessed mentoring support in multiple ways, and the mentoring depicted by one participant looked qualitatively different than the mentoring received by another. In addition, the type of support deemed beneficial to long-term growth varied, with some instructors preferring career-related support and others desiring psychosocial support. While Kram (1985) suggested that the most influential mentors usually offer a mix of career-related and psychosocial support, interviewees spoke more frequently and highly about mentors who offered career-related support. It is likely that the career-related support described by interviewees helped them to gain more work opportunities or identify ways to attain promotions or advancement. In particular, junior staff with less than 5 years of NOLS experience frequently discussed the career-related support they received from senior instructors and noted that being introduced to institutional procedures and norms was influential in their development. Because career-related support correlates with long-term retention (Higgins & Thomas, 2001), it is important for organizations employing OE instructors to ensure junior instructors are being acquainted with organizational culture and norms. As the average tenure

of NOLS instructors is approximately three years (S. Rochelle & L. Tuohy, personal correspondence, February 6, 2017), helping newer instructors gain career-related knowledge, especially ways to secure continued work, may be a valuable, low-cost retention technique.

Even though instructors found the career-related support offered by mentors meaningful, based on participant quotes it appears that the career-related support depicted by interviewees should be construed as advice or advising rather than mentoring. Advisors identify particular steps or provide the information necessary for the advisee to complete a task or advance in a specific career field, and the advising relationship is typically characterized by a unidirectional flow of information (i.e., from advisor to advisee; Montgomery, 2017; Montgomery et al., 2014). More important, the information offered by advisors is not uniquely tailored to the particular individual but would benefit anybody at that stage in their career journey (Montgomery, 2017). On the other hand, mentoring is a "[deep] engagement that is based on a thorough personal understanding of one's mentee and that individual's personal career aspirations" (Montgomery, 2017, p. 2). While the provision of career-related advice may benefit mentees, relationships characterized by a lack of reciprocity may prevent mentors from gaining important knowledge or information from mentees and potentially hinder their development (e.g., Kram, 1985). This confusion between the roles of an advisor and mentor among interviewees suggests that mentoring may not be clearly defined at NOLS or in the OE field in general. This lack of clarity may prevent instructors from receiving the mentoring support needed as they advance in their careers, may cause them to seek employment with a different organization that can meet their mentoring needs, or may cause them to leave the OE field altogether. Moving forward, addressing this definitional problem should be a focus of NOLS and other companies employing OE instructors.

NOLS relies on a variety of hierarchical systems to facilitate the formation of mentoring relationships between senior and junior staff members. Data indicated these formalized systems were occasionally effective at cultivating developmental relationships. Ultimately, the inorganic nature of these pairings, that is, individual instructors did not autonomously select their co-instructors or program supervisors, may limit their effectiveness at promoting mentoring relationships. On the other hand, skills seminars and faculty gatherings were identified as vehicles initiating mentoring relationships. While institutionally initiated, these skills seminars and faculty gatherings provide a measure of autonomy whereby instructors could foster relational connections in personally preferred manners and connect over shared interests. In essence, the relationship formation process was more organic with interpersonal connections forming naturally rather than being implemented from the top down. Interviewees noted that these gatherings led to the establishment of informal mentoring relationships, which ultimately impacted career-related outcomes including technical skill development.

One key mentoring practice that positively impacted these instructors' career trajectories was mentors leveraging their professional networks to help connect their mentees to individuals who have technical skill competencies or organizational influence that helped mentees further their career. Facilitating these interpersonal connections helped interviewees find informal mentors, develop their technical skills repertoire, obtain promotion or advancement, and/or identify organizational opportunities such as administrative jobs or management positions. Helping mentees network is a form of career-related support that has been shown to promote career outcomes, including promotion and salary raises, and is a useful tool for promoting job-related satisfaction (Eby, Allen, Evans, Ng, & DuBois, 2008).

Mentoring in educational settings can develop educators' teaching abilities and classroom effectiveness (e.g., Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). Of the interviewed instructors, only one discussed the ways mentors helped him develop as an educator. This finding was interesting, especially because NOLS instructors are responsible for teaching the NOLS core curriculum and granting high school and college credit, and because many instructors enter the field without formal educational training or experience. In a review of the interview transcripts, it was apparent that

career-related mentoring functions, such as procuring additional work contracts, were an especially salient component of the mentoring relationships described by interviewees. While finding more work opportunities may help instructors develop as educators, increasing the prominence of formal or informal mentoring in regard to educational skills (e.g., lesson planning or curriculum sequencing) will likely make instructors more effective educators and yield more positive student-related outcomes.

Two key challenges facing NOLS instructors emerged from the data. The first was the feeling that growth is self-initiated. Interviewees frequently articulated feelings of uncertainty about seeking out continued development. This was further complicated by the fact that multiple interviewees expressed regret for not having a mentor, even after delineating multiple individuals who had or were investing in their growth. Chandler, Hall, and Kram (2010) suggested that equipping employees with the skills needed to further their development is a low-cost way to foster employee growth and development. Montgomery (2017) outlined a mentoring road map that OE providers could utilize to aid in their instructors' development. Montgomery's process begins with mentees articulating their developmental needs and identifying individuals who might meet those needs. Following this reflective process, mentees seek out the identified developer and initiate the mentoring relationship. OE providers could incorporate developmental initiation training sessions into pre- or postcourse preparation or debriefing sessions to further instructor development. Higgins and Thomas (2001) observed that this small step could increase job satisfaction and ultimately promote employee retention.

The second challenge was meeting the developmental needs of mid-career instructors. A commonality across the interviews of instructors with 11 or more years of experience was their ability to identify mentors who aided them as they embarked on their careers and their inability to name current mentors, because they were not presently receiving mentoring support. This situation is further complicated by the fact that these senior instructors are expected to mentor and develop junior staff. While in theory, mentoring relationships are supposed to be reciprocal, the mentoring relationships described by interviewees primarily involved offering advice. As such, these unidirectional relationships are less likely to benefit the mentors. One interviewee noted that the lack of mentorship opportunities available to mid-career instructors was problematic; however, others were not concerned or had not noticed this phenomenon. It may be that these mid-career instructors felt that mentoring opportunities are primarily for junior instructors, were resigned to the fact that developmental support is unavailable for mid-career instructors, assumed that development will occur through informal interactions with colleagues, or were uninterested in self-disclosing their limitations to superiors or peers (Zachary & Fischler, 2009). Whatever their reasoning, formal mentoring relationships offer mid-career employees learning opportunities that cannot be accumulated through informal interactions (Zachary & Fischler, 2009). For mid-career instructors, finding and initiating mentoring relationships can be challenging. By intentionally pursuing mentoring relationships, mid-career instructors can gain valuable professional development that could help them grow and develop as educators and ultimately more effectively mentor and support junior staff.

## Limitations

One potential limitation of this study was that NOLS instructors may not be representative of OE instructors in general. As such, the mentoring experiences of non-NOLS-affiliated instructors may be qualitatively different than the experiences described. Furthermore, the aforementioned recommendations and suggestions may not be applicable to organizations with different historical and cultural practices about mentoring and staff development.

However, as NOLS requires its instructors to have significant personal and professional experience before gaining employment, many NOLS instructors have worked or still work for

a variety of OE providers. The diverse professional experiences that NOLS instructors gain throughout their OE careers likely causes them to be representative of OE instructors in general.

## Conclusion

Data from this study indicate that these interviewees found meaningful mentoring support from a variety of sources, chiefly senior instructors and near peers. The provision of career-related support, specifically support that helped mentees navigate organizational culture and gain more work opportunities, positively impacted participants' career outcomes. Data suggest there is not a clear definition of mentoring used in the OE field. In fact, the career-related support that interviewees regarded so highly was not necessarily mentoring, because it lacked the relational investment and reciprocity typical of mentoring relationships, and instead should be interpreted as advising. Moving forward, delineating a clear and coherent definition of mentoring in the OE field will allow researchers to truly examine the impacts of mentoring on valuable employee metrics such as job satisfaction and to positively influence employee retention, and it can help OE administrators design effective and meaningful mentoring programs for their instructional staff.

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