



Regional Peer Coaching Program for Basic Science Faculty

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Abstract

Junior basic science faculty teaching in the foundational sciences courses at Central Michigan University (CMED), Oakland University (OUWB), and Western Michigan University (WMED) new medical schools outnumber senior faculty resulting in limited opportunities for mentoring support from experienced colleagues. Faculty developers at these new medical schools created a distance (using telecommunications) peer coaching program that would provide support to basic science faculty in their teaching, research, and career development. This program shows promise for future peer coaching initiatives and could be applied to faculty from other disciplines and expanded to include faculty from beyond the region.

Keywords Junior · Faculty · Basic sciences · Peer · Coaching

Introduction

As new medical schools, Central Michigan University College of Medicine (CMED), Oakland University William Beaumont School of Medicine (OUWB), and Western Michigan University Homer Stryker MD School of Medicine (WMED) employ a large number of junior basic science faculty teaching in the foundational sciences. At CMED and OUWB, junior faculty have limited opportunities for guidance from seasoned faculty as they outnumber tenured faculty. Recognizing that these junior faculty needed support and guidance in teaching and learning approaches, research, and scholarship, faculty developers at CMED and OUWB teamed up to develop a distance (using telecommunications) peer coaching program that could serve faculty from all three young medical schools in Michigan.

It is important to help faculty connect with regional colleagues teaching in similar disciplines to provide research guidance, teaching and learning advice, and scholarship collaboration options [3]. In addition, basic science faculty

teaching in the foundational sciences need opportunities to present their research regionally to meet tenure and promotion requirements. By making discipline specific connections, junior faculty can develop peer relationships that lead to mutual coaching. Peer-to-peer coaching or peer coaching offers junior faculty the support they need to succeed and thrive as teachers, researchers, and scholars [4].

Frameworks and Definitions

A voluntary peer coaching program targeted junior faculty or early career faculty at three new medical schools. Early career faculty are considered to be those who are just entering the faculty ranks or who are in the early stage of their careers [1]. Faculty developers at CMED and OUWB collaborated to provide support to junior faculty using a community of practice model. A community of practice is defined by Wenger (2000) as, “groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it as they interact regularly” [2]. The importance of peer interaction is further supported by Steinert et al. (2006) as they underscore the role of a community of peers both as role models to enable the ongoing exchange of information and ideas and as a professional network of “collegial support to promote and maintain change” [3].

Peer coaching differs from mentoring in that peer coaching is a voluntary, non-evaluative relationship between two people who share similar experiences and training and who wish to enhance their practice [4]. Mentoring is generally a

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relationship between a less-experienced person (a mentee) and a more experienced person (a mentor) for the purpose of fostering professional development of the mentee [5]. Coaching was chosen as an approach to support junior faculty to give them someone outside their institution who might be able to provide perspective on similar experiences, help them to navigate pre-tenure expectations, brainstorm on teaching and learning techniques, and collaborate on research projects. It was intended to provide safe, non-threatening support while also providing opportunities for regional partnerships.

In addition to peer coaching and mentoring models, different approaches to coaching also exist. Friedman (2010) identifies two types of coaching models—directive or nondirective [6]. Directive coaching is characterized by listening then offering advice from your background and experiences; nondirective is listening and posing questions to help a peer reach conclusions on their own [6]. Challenges are often encountered in peer coaching relationships such as personality clashes, competition, and time needed to invest in relationship and trust building [7].

Using a community of practice framework [8], CMED and OUWB medical education faculty developers proposed developing a peer connections program to serve junior faculty at CMED, OUWB, and WMED. A peer connections community of practice will explore ways to help basic sciences junior faculty develop relationships and build connections that will enable them to survive and thrive in their faculty roles at these new medical schools.

The Process

Medical education faculty developers at CMED and OUWB worked together to develop the distance/telecommunications program. They met via Skype over 4 months to plan and set up the program. Objectives were written, a proposal/program description drafted, and a guide created to help faculty understand what peer coaching is, best practices for effective peer coaching relationships, and strategies for effective meetings. An online profile form was developed for interested faculty to complete. Faculty completing the form provided their name, institution, contact info, faculty rank, courses taught, research interests, expertise areas, and expertise sought.

Objectives

After participating in the peer connections program, participants will:

1. Describe benefits and challenges of a peer coaching partnership
2. Access peer coaches for assistance and/or collaboration on faculty practices such as teaching and learning methods, research projects, and grant writing

3. Apply peer coach suggestions and assistance to faculty practices
4. Report on the effectiveness of the peer coaching relationship including long-term impact on faculty practices

In mid-July, faculty developers at all three institutions sent out an initial email to a total of 87 (12 CMED, 35 OUWB, 40 WMED) junior basic science faculty describing the program and requesting they complete the profile form available by clicking on a link. Faculty had 1 month to complete the online profile form, and email reminders were sent out 1 week before the profile due date. The due date was extended 2 weeks to the end of August. A thank you/update email was sent at the end of August giving faculty advance notification about upcoming emails, a timeline for program implementation, and the Guide for Peer Coaches attached. October 1, 2016, was the official program “kick off” date.

A total of 36 faculty signed up initially—8 from CMED, 22 from OUWB, and 6 from WMED.

Because the people signing up were primarily basic scientists, the match process focused on research first, teaching/learning second, and then discipline backgrounds. Faculty developers reviewed profile information, identified themes, and matched faculty to a peer(s) using faculty information gathered from the online profile form. When possible, faculty developers matched peers from different institutions to provide inter-institutional exposure. Some peer coaching arrangements were pairs; others, triads. When final matches were made, 27 people agreed to continue in the program.

Once the matches were made, faculty were contacted with their matching peer information, and faculty development offices set up initial meetings. These meetings were on phone or Skype meetings, and an initial meeting outline for a successful first meeting was emailed to each participant. Teams were instructed to plan a meeting schedule for the remainder of the academic year and to send this schedule to a training coordinator working with the faculty developers. The training coordinator set up all of the initial meetings—12 meetings total for 27 faculty.

Evaluation

Unsolicited feedback was sent to faculty developers after the initial faculty meetings. The majority of responses after initial meetings were positive and identified the benefits and challenges of the peer coaching relationship (Objective 1). Themes identified from initial email communications included the following:

Meeting expectations—making connections:

(referencing first conference call). .. *It went extremely well and we chatted for almost the entire hour. We have*

set up another meeting via Skype for next Wednesday where we are going to discuss our respective curricula. .. Thanks for putting this together!

I talked with my peer coach today. . . she is really nice and will be good to get to know.

Unintended discoveries—disparities in staffing levels at different schools:

They have 2 full time faculty for. . . (and three part-time for all. . . topics that I would teach), 3 for what is equivalent to my. . . class, and 3 to oversee student research projects. We have me.

Going beyond expectations:

We have even discussed respective campus visits to observe some of the instructional techniques that are unique to each school. (The first of these visits took place in November 2016, and another visit took place in January of 2017.)

Three times during the remaining academic year, surveys were sent to participants to gauge participation in the program including areas of concentration, challenges encountered, and overall satisfaction. Surveys were sent to peer coaches in December, February, and April.

Survey results below show that the majority of faculty peers responding received assistance from their coaches (Objective 2). A total of 16 faculty completed the December evaluation, 14 completed the February evaluation, and 7 completed the April evaluation. The majority of the peers reported focusing primarily on teaching/learning and research/medical education scholarship. A few reported working on career growth/advancement or evaluation and assessment. Several peers noted that these conversations have impacted their work to the extent of giving them ideas to try, introducing them to new teaching technologies, or giving them feedback and information. Some peers noted that they made connections for possible collaborations, and others commented they discussed tenure processes at their respective institutions.

The challenges the peers experienced centered on lack of time to make connections and expectations not being met. Several peers noted that busy schedules prevented them from meeting or even finding time to meet despite whether these meetings were set by them or the faculty developers. Some commented that they did not feel they were matched appropriately and had little in common with their peer(s). Despite the resource given to faculty on peer coaching, confusion about the nature of a peer coaching relationship was also noted as this model is different from what some faculty

expected. As a result, some peer connections were changed and some faculty left the program.

Despite the challenges shared, the majority of the peers rated the program positively noting they were satisfied or very satisfied with their experience, and these ratings remained high throughout the year. In addition, some positive unintended outcomes emerged including the formation of a discipline specific cohort and the connections made by groups outside the basic sciences.

In the spring of 2017, peer faculty gathered for a networking event. A total of 17 faculty from all three colleges attended the networking event which provided opportunities to reflect on their coaching experiences, to discuss topics related to their roles at their respective institutions, and to network with colleagues outside their peer connection. Evaluation feedback indicated that the event was well received by attendees. In 2018, 30 faculty from five universities attended the spring networking event with positive feedback and evaluation data.

At the end of the year, faculty were looking forward to applying new ideas gained from their peers (Objective 3) as faculty noted areas they would incorporate. While it is too early to measure the program's long-term impact on faculty success (Objective 4), the program has expanded in popularity to two more Michigan medical schools beginning in the fall of 2017.

Future Directions

The Distance Regional Peer Connections program proved to be an effective way to help junior basic science faculty get needed support for their teaching, research, and scholarship. The response rate to the program and initial involvement show that this type of virtual initiative was a welcomed approach to filling a gap in support. Evaluation data showed that faculty established support connections, shared ideas, and identified opportunities for future medical education research. While the intent of doing the program using telecommunication was to create efficiencies for attending meetings and foster ease of connections, many faculty still struggled with finding time to get involved in the program to the extent that they anticipated from the intended and anticipated benefits. New faculty at these institutions had several competing priorities involved with getting a new medical school curriculum developed and implemented. Lessons learned include finding ways for faculty to get dedicated time and communicating this need to leadership for allocated time. In addition, allowing faculty to choose their peer coach(es) may create better matches for collaboration. The program will continue for the 2017–2018 academic year with the addition of faculty from two large state medical schools. The long-term impact on retention, tenure, and promotion of this program remains to be seen; however, interest continues to grow as more people are requesting peers and additional institutions are joining the program.

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Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of Interest Statement The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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