

## Mentorship: A Pathway to Build Academic Resilience and Foster Transformative Development of the Caribbean Academics and Their Communities in an Evolving Higher Education Climate

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### MENTORING IN ACADEMIA

Mentoring is defined as a process in which a person with a rank of seniority with outstanding achievement(s) or scholarship, the mentor, guides the development of a junior colleague, the mentee (1). Historically, the wise have offered counsel to the young. The term ‘mentor’ is derived from ancient Greek mythology captured in Homer’s *Odyssey*, where Odysseus, King of Ithaca and Trojan war hero, entrusted the counselling and guidance of his son, Telemachus, to his colleague, Mentor (2, 3). Academic institutions, by virtue of their existence, have a preponderance of staff with scholarship in education and research, and are poised to provide effective mentorship of junior staff and students (1). However, the reality is that the economic constraints of most academic institutions have placed immense teaching and advising responsibilities on junior staff. This, along with the effort expended to adjust to the rapid technological advancements in higher education, has hindered the professional development of junior staff (1). This editorial explores the advancement of formal mentorship primarily for staff to support the sustainable and transformative development of Caribbean academics and their societies.

### ESSENTIAL COMPONENTS OF AN EFFECTIVE MENTORSHIP PROGRAMME

Mentorship is an important aspect of the success of most accomplished academics (1). These academics would also agree that the efficacy of their mentorship experience was enabled by a nurturing environment with added emphasis on *relationship-focussed guidance*. Generally, there is a mutual consensus on goals by mentor and mentee, and the benefits of the association are driven primarily by the mentee’s interests. Mentorship is therefore

characterized by trust, respect and a commonality of views towards enhancing the mentee’s personal and professional development. A lack of intentional fidelity to these core values jeopardizes the mentee’s progression and will inculcate and foster dysfunctional and unethical behaviour (4).

Top academic institutions such as Harvard University and The University of Edinburgh have formal mentorship for staff (5, 6). Their mentorship goals epitomize strong leadership support, are human resource-centred and focus on:

1. orientating new staff;
2. empowering participants by supporting their growth and renewal;
3. promoting staff satisfaction and confidence;
4. attracting, retaining and promoting new staff; and
5. promoting collegiality

The benefits of attaining these goals are not restricted to the participants but are also transferable to the academic institutions (7). The Table outlines these benefits.

Table: Potential benefits of formal mentorship (institution, mentees and mentors)

Benefits of mentorship programmes		
Institution	Mentees	Mentors
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increased productivity</li> <li>• Improved strategic planning and execution of the institution’s mission</li> <li>• Increased professional development opportunities and succession planning</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increased skill development</li> <li>• Enhanced productivity</li> <li>• Career advancement</li> <li>• Decreased job anxieties and stress</li> <li>• Increased job satisfaction</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increased recognition</li> <li>• Career advancement</li> <li>• Development of leadership skills</li> <li>• Personal fulfilment</li> <li>• Renewed interest in their career</li> </ul>

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Table (continued)

Benefits of mentorship programmes		
Institution	Mentees	Mentors
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Retention and distribution of organizational culture and knowledge</li> <li>Accelerated training and reduction in staff attrition</li> <li>Improved cost-effectiveness</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A feeling of empowerment</li> <li>Increased research grant funding opportunities</li> <li>Increased network opportunities</li> <li>Improved academic 'self-efficacy'</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Potential to learn new skills or acquire knowledge</li> </ul>

Allen and colleagues from the University of South Florida, Tampa, FL, United States of America, highlighted that formal mentorship can be effective by designing a programme which encourages the mentees and mentors to share their views on mentorship team-building (8). Other core components of an effective mentorship programme may include: (a) a goal-oriented framework with a non-invasive evaluation plan; (b) guidelines for selecting mentors and the establishment of mentorship teams; and (c) guidelines for supporting and training mentors.

### FORMAL MENTORSHIP: FOSTERING SUSTAINABLE AND TRANSFORMATIVE DEVELOPMENT OF THE CARIBBEAN ACADEMIA AND OUTREACH

The University of the West Indies (The UWI) has been at the forefront of regional development in the Anglophone Caribbean since its establishment in 1948. Currently, it is ranked in the top 4% of universities globally by Times Higher Education (9). At the centre of its success is its greatest asset, its human resources. While The UWI continues to be *the light rising from the west*, the ability of Caribbean universities to sustain a high quality of training and research is threatened by economic constraints and the rapidly evolving technological advancements in higher education (1, 10, 11). Already limited by post-colonial strictures (12), Caribbean universities have to evolve from this selection gradient by developing high-quality academic enterprises (13). The expansion of formal mentorship at these academic institutions should be considered a key component of these high-quality academic enterprises. More opportunities for formal mentorship have existed for students in our academic institutions (14, 15). In May 2021, The UWI launched an institutional staff mentorship programme, IGNITE, which enables more alignment with its 2017–2022 strategic plan and The UWI Quality Policy (16) to create a

more quality-driven workforce, and assure stakeholders of the quality of its processes and outcomes. The latter highlights the importance of transformative development, a correlate of high-quality mentorship (17).

In conclusion, the American Association of Higher Education has endorsed mentorship as a good practice at higher education institutions (18). Formal mentoring can build resilience of Caribbean academic institutions in this challenging environment of higher education. Further, building capacity through mentorship in higher education strengthens the research output (19) and contributes to the development of the region. The expansion of these initiatives supports the achievement of greater, more sustainable gains in higher education. The future is made brighter through the resilience that mentorship engenders—let us create this future together.

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