9. Advancing Social Work Research through Doctoral Education and Mentorship

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Abstract

Edward Mullen's long and productive career is noteworthy in light of his contributions to social work research in areas including the process of social work interventions, social indicators research for strategic planning, social work education, use of research for personal practice modeling, evidence-based policy and practice, and comparative effectiveness research. Consistent themes throughout his career included the replication of his scientific methods and scientific reasoning in providing mentorship to his students. In this chapter, we reflect on his career as a mentor by taking inspiration from a pragmatic controlled trial to examine this dimension of his contribution to the scholarly community. Dr. Mullen's career provides a framework for all mentors to propel their students toward scholarly excellence.

9.1 Introduction

Edward Mullen is by all accounts a luminary in the field of social work. He has been a leader in the field of social work interventions, social work education, use of social indicators for strategic planning, use of research for personal practice modeling, and comparative effectiveness research. He was an early and continuous innovator of evidence-based policy and practice. He envisioned a repository of single-subject research before there was a technological framework to do so. Given that Dr. Mullen's career has shaped

and reshaped the use of research evidence in the field of social work, it is no surprise that his method of mentorship and doctoral education was likewise innovative and effective. Through his mentorship, Dr. Mullen's students have secured faculty and research positions at leading schools of social work and American think tanks. His efforts produced highly productive students who have leveraged their learning from Dr. Mullen and amplified his contributions to the field of social work and ongoing innovation in the field through their work.

In this paper, three of his former students reflect on the quality and nature of his mentorship as an outstanding contribution to the field. Mentorship is an essential component of knowledge translation in academia, yet it is a challenging activity to execute with success and not often explicitly taught to aspiring social work scholars. We who benefited from Dr. Mullen's mentorship found it hard to quantify exactly how he was able to motivate and propel each of his students toward success, and yet it is clear to each of us that his supervision and guidance continue to pay dividends. His methods were tailored to our interests, augmented the development of our emerging areas of expertise, and targeted our unique strengths, challenges, and career goals. In many ways, his method of mentorship mirrors the elements of a pragmatic controlled trial (PCT) that he detailed in his work on reconsidering the evidence in evidence-based policy and practice (Mullen, 2015). Though he did not articulate a formal framework for mentorship with his students, Dr. Mullen's mentorship is well articulated by his use of a reflective scientific method with his students.

In the following pages we use key elements of a PCT to illustrate and reflect on Dr. Mullen's generation of approaches to successful mentorship. Although the PCT framework was designed to produce evidence for practice and policy decision making, this framework has elements that mirror the production of mentorship knowledge and successful mentees. The PCT framework is organized into seven essential elements. We highlight a key theme reflected in each of these elements that we believe reflects the strength and spirit of his mentoring approach: (a) *practicality* so as to provide

evidence to service users, practitioners, and policy makers for real-world decision making; (b) evaluation of study *participation and representativeness*; (c) use of *realistic* intervention alternatives as the comparison group; (d) gathering of information regarding *costs and resources*; (e) examination of a range of *valued outcomes* by stakeholders using mixed methods; (f) employment of *flexible* research designs to address the research questions; and (g) enhanced translation of findings and *implementation* with an emphasis on transparency throughout solicitation of federal training funds (Glasgow & Steiner, 2012).

9.1.1   Practicality

Although Dr. Mullen's written oeuvre is populated by critical and far-ranging scholarship drawing on broad theory and research from a myriad of disciplines, reflecting a true social work approach, his work has always remained grounded in the applied value of the work. So too was his mentorship oriented toward propelling each of us through the critical stages of our careers and attending to all areas of need and deficit. He worked to facilitate our success not only by prompting critical thought and reflection in each of us by reading and commenting in great detail on drafts of our written work, guiding us as we developed presentations for international conferences, and pushing our ideas forward through discussions and debate, but also by scanning lists of possible courses across departments and schools, suggesting practical campus resources for housing, and assisting with other challenges of graduate student life. In sum, he worked at the task of helping us move through our doctoral studies with whatever means best supported that process—from the scholarly to the banal. This practical orientation to mentorship extended beyond our doctoral education and continued well into the job market and early stages of our careers. He continued to provide support and guidance as we chose academic homes that played to our strengths and moved into the role of independent social work investigators.

9.1.2   Participation and Representativeness

To gain a better understanding how Dr. Mullen provided practical mentoring to his students, it is necessary to understand how he chose his mentees. For more than 20 years he ran a competitive predoctoral training program funded by the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) that provided training for doctoral students in mental health services research. To participate in this training program, students had to apply at the outset of their doctoral education. After a written application and personal interview with Dr. Mullen, they committed to participating in a 3-year training program that included weekly team meetings, specialized courses, and interaction with alumni of the training program. Alumni were asked to update Dr. Mullen on their progress and offer assistance to current fellows.

The expectation of ongoing engagement in the training program postgraduation was critical to ensuring that current students could make evidence-informed decisions and have active connections to early career investigators who could be useful in providing peer mentoring and connectivity in the world of social work academia and external funding. Through a vast alumni network, students were able to discuss course choices, areas of research focus, career opportunities, and career trajectories. Dr. Mullen could connect his students with at least two dozen alumni at any given moment, instantly extending the mentorship network for each new trainee.

However, he did not limit connections to program alumni. At any opportunity he would create connections with experts and leaders in the mental health services, both within the field of social work and beyond. These connections led to lasting relationships that later contributed to awareness of postdoctoral fellowship and faculty opportunities and scholarly collaborations with leading experts in his students' substantive areas of interest. With access to a diverse array of educational and career paths, his students could easily view, explore, and learn from a menu of potential professional options and outcomes so that they might cobble together a plan that best suited their needs.

Similarly, Dr. Mullen would organize weekly meetings for his trainees during which students at varying points in their education would be given the opportunity to convene and share their experiences in courses, troubleshoot challenges on research projects, and collaborate on papers. The inclusion of students at various stages in their doctoral education was important because it built a natural peer-mentoring network that afforded younger students a window into their future and offered more senior students an opportunity for reflection and mentoring practice. These approaches to mentoring across a network of multigenerational trainees helped students at the earliest stages of their education learn from the experiences of more senior students, gave senior trainees the opportunity to develop and practice their own approach to mentoring, and facilitated opportunities for collaboration. Mentorship was facilitated by the participation of all trainees for the benefit of the larger group, with representation at all stages of each participant's career.

Although at the time his approach seemed standard, because it was all we knew as doctoral students, it became apparent after taking faculty positions that we had benefited from practices that were not standard in all social work doctoral programs or across all social work doctoral program faculties. Each of us has been able to incorporate elements of Dr. Mullen's approach into our doctoral programs or the mentoring of our own doctoral students and junior faculty members at our respective institutions; these have proven to be unique and novel approaches in our current programs and have contributed to the quality of the education of our doctoral mentees. Many of these individual strategies have been adopted by our colleagues, expanding the reach of Dr. Mullen's career contribution to generations of well-prepared social work scholars.

9.1.3 Realism

Edward Mullen sought out preexisting structures for evaluating his mentorship through his fellowship programs. This saved both cost and time. His students had to reflect on their academic and career plans in reports to the doctoral program and through regular audits of their degree progress.

These audits incorporated completion of not only the minimal doctoral education requirements but requirements to go beyond the minimum to obtain additional coursework in research and analytic methods that placed his students on the cutting edge of current research practices. Additional requirements facilitated professional development, such as mandates to attend professional conferences and provision of funds to do so. He also encouraged his mentees to join him on papers and presentations. Dr. Mullen met with each student individually to chart a career trajectory and plan out desired outcomes, including research projects, grant applications, conference submissions, and job applications. He was realistic about his mentorship in terms of his proactive and efficient approach to maximizing his mentoring work, but he was also realistic about the possible and probable trajectory for each student. He did not counsel all of us in the same way but took an individualist approach as he inquired about, and thoughtfully incorporated, each of our familial burdens and obligations, goals for future work, and strengths and weaknesses. For one of us, a postdoctoral position was the best next step after doctoral training. For the other two, tenure-track faculty positions were a better fit. He understood that these professional decisions were not made in a vacuum and helped us consider these questions in the context of our individual needs and life circumstances.

9.1.4   Costs and Resources

Dr. Mullen personally took it upon himself to be abreast of the costs of doctoral education. He evaluated monetized costs like the price of admission to the doctoral program, living expenses for students, and nonmonetary costs including emotional stress and impact on families. For every cost, Dr. Mullen found a resource. If NIMH funding came up short, he would find money from the school to defray admission costs or support conference travel. When a student had to take a leave of absence for several years, he helped her figure out how she could return to the program for 6 months, including making a cross-country move, finding short-term housing, and securing a workspace at the school. He encouraged students to pursue outlets that gave them a sense of emotional well-being. For example, he once supported a student in applying some unused course credits to take a dance

class. His students knew that for any problem they faced in completing their doctoral program, Dr. Mullen would work with them to find a solution.

9.1.5   Valued Outcomes

Incorporating a course as part of a mentoring strategy allowed for built-in mechanisms for evaluation. Every semester, students were asked to complete an evaluation of the course and provide feedback on what mentoring strategies had been successful and what could be improved. This approach was a brilliant way to incorporate preexisting organizational procedures to evaluate mentoring outcomes. Furthermore, Dr. Mullen had to provide an annual report to the NIMH describing key demographics (e.g., race, gender, area of interest) of each mentee, progress of each mentee, and outcomes of the mentorship program. Again, this built-in point of evaluation ensured that Dr. Mullen and an outside group of evaluators at the NIMH were regularly reflecting on the inclusive and representative nature of the training program. This reflection provided the foundation to ensure that any student, regardless of background, could benefit from Dr. Mullen's mentoring approach and doctoral training.

As a standard academic procedure, every doctoral student was assigned to work with a mentor in our doctoral program. Students in the NIMH predoctoral program were assigned to Edward Mullen and all other doctoral students were mentored by the chair of the doctoral program. By teaching courses in the program, Dr. Mullen could witness student development and compare it to that of his fellows. He also received feedback about student outcomes as a member of the doctoral program steering committee. Colleagues who taught seminars on dissertation development would report to him about his fellows' development versus other students. Finally, Dr. Mullen participated in evaluation of both the written component and the oral defense of his students' comprehensive exams, giving his students a third reviewer and offering him the opportunity to be present during and influence the oral defense and guide his students through the process. Dr. Mullen had three systematic points of feedback that allowed him to compare his fellows to other students. The results of this comparison were

undeniable—his fellows had access to more professional resources, networking opportunities, training opportunities, and feedback than any other students. We also benefited from faster graduation rates and by securing tenured positions at top-ranked schools of social work.

9.1.6   Flexibility

Dr. Mullen's flexibility in mentorship is best exemplified by his engagement of colleagues in facilitating his students' progress while allowing them to chart their own course in mental health services research across various career paths. We previously noted that all students in the NIMH fellowship were assigned Dr. Mullen as a mentor. However, Dr. Mullen was clear from the point of entrance into the fellowship that no student is successful with a single mentor. He asked every student to identify their key area of interest and would locate other federally funded colleagues with similar interests. He was exceptionally skilled at convincing his colleagues to work with his students, to our great benefit. He was also exceptionally skilled at placing his students with the most prolific people in their area of interest. This is even more impressive when considering the diverse areas of interest that his students explored under the umbrella of mental health services research. The three authors of this chapter alone focused on such diverse areas as using community-based participatory research to address mental health issues for HIV-positive youth, engaging fathers in their children's mental health treatment, and perinatal and maternal mental health and the cultural adaptations of interpersonal psychotherapy. It seemed as if no topic was off limits or too circumscribed for Dr. Mullen to support and to tap his colleague network for support.

Although engagement of colleagues may have been his greatest strength in terms of flexibility, it was by no means his only one. Dr. Mullen was able to tailor his mentoring style to the individual needs of each of his mentees. He had a unique way of quickly discovering and subscribing to the most appropriate mentoring style with each of his mentees. This is why many of his students may have had markedly different experiences with Dr. Mullen, but all shared the benefit and success of his guidance. Whether taking a

more hands-off approach, a more supportive role, or a more collegial style, Dr. Mullen was able to be flexible with his students, always seeming to know the right time and the right way to encourage individual students to stretch their limits and make the most of the doctoral program and their own abilities to contribute to social work research. Similarly, when it came time for students to launch their careers, he was able to connect them to almost any school or organization for which they wanted to work. He encouraged his students to search nationally to increase their options while also expanding their lens of potential employers to include prestigious postdoctoral fellowships, think tanks, policy organizations, and federal agencies.

9.1.7 Transparency

Perhaps the most unique element of Dr. Mullen's mentorship is that he found a way to translate it into a federally funded project. By doing so, he ensured that his methods were reviewed by experts in the fields of mental health services research, scholarly training, and mentorship. In essence, by sharing his approaches in a much more transparent manner than is often the case for doctoral-level mentoring, his mentoring program benefited from the review and feedback of scholars within and outside of the profession and within and outside of the Columbia University School of Social Work. It also meant that he had to regularly track the program's progress, share those findings, and integrate feedback and critiques on an ongoing basis. He could not cover up or dilute poor outcomes, but rather had to acknowledge challenges and incorporate possible improvements. More so than any other scientific endeavor, this requires exceptional levels of honesty and transparency, because a student's failure easily can be attributed to the mentor's shortcomings. His ability to translate his mentorship approach to multiple early career scholars and have similar successful outcomes was far more likely because of his methodical, scientifically supported, reflective, and flexible form of mentorship.

9.2 Conclusion

Edward Mullen can be directly linked to the successful careers of dozens of students he mentored during the course of his career and indirectly linked to the students they have mentored by adopting his techniques and strategies. His success in mentorship mirrors his success in scholarship. In both endeavors, Dr. Mullen focused on innovation, scientific rigor, adaptation, and practicality. He is a lifelong mentor to his students, who continue to collaborate with him as their careers progress. We have continued to call on him for career advice, help with tenure preparation, and planning for our next scientific inquiry. Although we celebrate one of the most illustrious people in our field, we are also saddened by the fact that fewer students will have access to his formal mentorship. However, by imparting to us a method of mentorship that we can disseminate ourselves and clear principles for continuing to evaluate and adapt our approach to mentoring, we hope to continue his legacy of producing the finest social work scholars.

References

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