

Women's Mentoring Experiences in the #MeToo Era

"If you've been sexually harassed or assaulted" actress Alyssa Milano tweeted on October 15, 2017, "write 'me too' as a reply to this tweet." By the end of that day, 200,000 women had responded to this revival of Tarana Burke's 2006 initial 'me too' invitation to share stories of sexual assault¹. One year later, the #MeToo hashtag had been used over 19 million times. Now, at the two-year anniversary of this extraordinary cultural event, an assessment of its impact has been widely discussed. While #MeToo has created a platform for women to bring sexual harassment concerns to the forefront of their organizations, unintended consequences have also occurred. Most noticeably the concern is that men² are withdrawing from mentoring relationships with women. Because much of those public discussions have focused on men's perspectives and responses, a team of Simmons University researchers sought to examine what women have been experiencing. Perhaps surprising, out of the glare of social media, we found that both male and female mentors and their female protégés are quietly persisting in doing the hard work of adjusting, clarifying, and strengthening their relationships.

What are men saying?

Reports in the media have documented a variety of troubling responses to #MeToo. While some men have used the opportunity to acknowledge past blindness about women's experiences, others have engaged in an active denial of the problem and made hostile threats about withdrawing from professional relationships with women colleagues and co-workers. This threat of withdrawal from engaging with women colleagues has been dubbed "the Pence Principle" named for Vice-President Mike Pence's 2017 admission that he never "eats alone with a woman other

than his wife and that he won't attend events featuring alcohol without her by his side, either."³ Additionally, two national surveys of U.S. adults conducted by LeanIn.org (2018) and SurveyMonkey (2019)⁴ found that the number of male managers who are uncomfortable mentoring women was increasing. By 2019, a full 60% of male managers in the U.S. reported they are "uncomfortable engaging in commonplace workplace interactions with women, including mentoring, socializing, and having one-on-one meetings." This was a 14% increase from 2018. Explaining why they are uncomfortable, 36% of men said they are "nervous about how it would look." Even the possibility of having one's intentions misconstrued was named as a reason for backing away.

Mentoring, long defined as a relationship between an experienced senior colleague (mentor) and a less experienced junior colleague (protégé), has been well established as an essential element of women's professional advancement.⁵ Consequently, men's potential withdrawal from professional relationships could have a profound impact on women's careers.⁶

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What are women saying?

To learn about women’s perspectives, we examined survey responses of 142 attendees of the Simmons Leadership Conference in Boston in April 2019 who answered items concerning, “In what ways, if any, have your experiences, with both female and male mentors, been affected by the #MeToo movement?”⁷

Half of respondents (50.0%) were mid-level professionals in the industries around which most of the #MeToo dialogue has centered, namely, finance, banking, insurance, and technology.⁸ Some interesting notes on our sample respondents:

- Almost three-quarters (71.1%) reported being in a mentoring relationship in the workplace, the majority of which were with female mentors (64.8%).
- Respondents most often reported being in a current mentoring relationship one year or less (39.8%), and that their mentor is two steps above their own professional status (35.2%).
- Their mentorship relationship began by the respondent choosing their mentor independent of a formal mentoring program (58.0%).

Our Findings

With so much hyperbolic language dominating the media – and with so much at stake for employees and organizations -- we wanted to examine mentoring relationships from the protégé’s perspective. We found:

1. Mentoring relationships don’t seem to have changed in a negative manner as much as the media hype has suggested. In fact, contrary to media hype, some respondents indicated these relationships have actually improved.
2. Women’s slightly higher reliance on female mentors that was identified in surveys prior to #MeToo was replicated in our survey post movement.
3. Bolstering sexual harassment policies was the most frequently named organizational response to #MeToo, yet many respondents revealed they

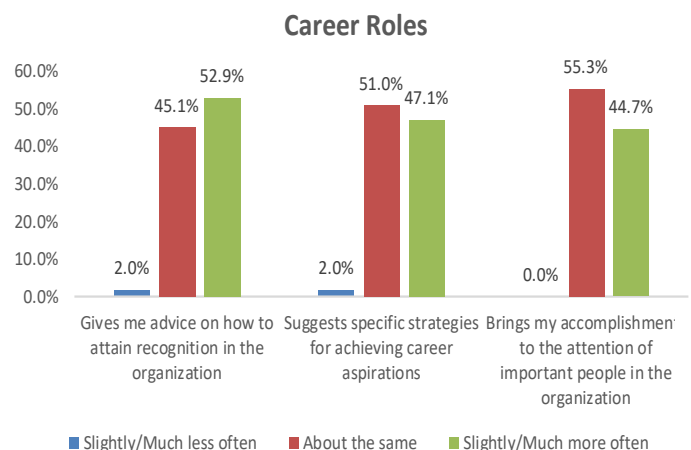
were unaware of what their organizations are doing.

Finding #1:

Women protégés have not experienced much change in their mentoring relationships; some relationships have improved.

In a germinal work on gender and mentoring, Kathy Kram⁹ identified two primary role categories mentors enact in the workplace. This first is related to career support (such as suggesting strategies to achieve career goals, providing feedback, and building visibility with important people); the second is related to psychosocial support (such as providing encouragement and acceptance, and serving as a role model, confidant and sounding board). In our survey, we asked respondents about Kram’s 29 mentoring roles imbedded in those two categories. We found that while most career role activities have not changed, notable percentages of respondents reported that their relationships have improved with respect to mentors’ psychosocial roles. Only a small fraction of respondents told us they have observed a decrease in some aspects of their experiences with their mentors.

Figure 1. Career Roles



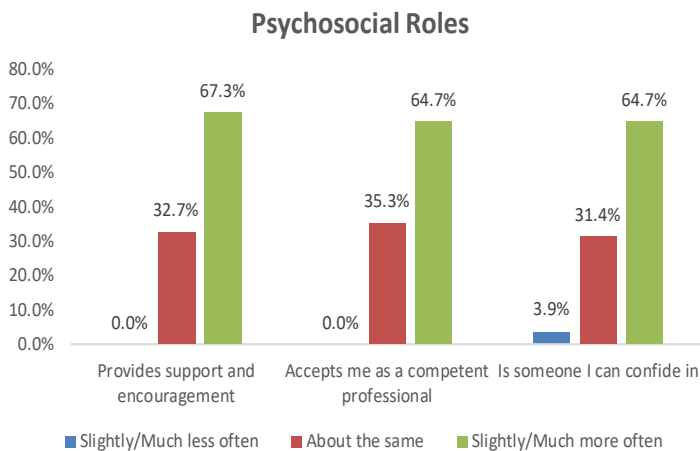
Career roles:

Regarding the career roles their mentors played, the majority of respondents (from 45.1% to 67.5%) felt that nothing had changed since the #MeToo move-

ment for 14 of the 15 roles (see Figure 1 above). However, for some of those roles, a large percentage of participants actually noted an *increase* in the activity, including: “gives me advice on how to attain recognition” (according to 52.9% of the respondents); “suggests specific strategies for achieving career aspirations” (47.1%); and “brings my accomplishments to the attention of important people in the organization” (44.7%).

When looking at the gender of the mentor, post-#MeToo, female mentors were perceived to have enacted several of those career roles “slightly/ or much more often” at a higher percentage than have male mentors. Those roles included: “helps me learn about other parts of the organization” (50.0% for female mentors versus 25.0% for males), “provides specific strategies for achieving career goals” (51.5% versus 35.3%), “helps me be more visible” (45.5% versus 33.3%), and “brings my accomplishments to the attention of important people” (48.4% versus 33.3%).

Figure 2. Psychosocial Roles



Psychosocial roles:

Unlike career roles which primarily remained stable, participants reported an *increase* in psychosocial roles across 9 of the 14 roles (see Figure 2 above). Roles receiving a higher percentage of “slightly/much more often” ratings include: “provides support and encouragement” (67.3%); “accepts me as a com-

petent professional” (64.7%); and “someone I can confide in” (64.7%). These notable increases indicate a *strengthening* of mentoring relationships.

Finding #2:

Women continue to rely on female mentors.¹⁰

Two organizational facts have long impacted the gender of women’s mentors: mentors typically being more senior than their proteges, and men occupying greater numbers of senior positions in organizations. Because the proportion of women in leadership remains stubbornly low, at only 34% of senior manager/directors and 30% of vice-presidents in 2018, the number of senior level women available for mentoring remains slim. Yet, in our study, 64.8% reported having a female mentor.

Given the dynamics of #MeToo, having a mentor of the same gender has become increasingly salient, and our study found that female mentees and their female mentors have strengthened their bonds following #MeToo.

There may be several explanations for this. One, this finding is consistent with the scholarship around homophily which acknowledges that people have a tendency to feel more comfortable around and bond with people who are similar to them.¹¹ Given the dynamics of #MeToo, having a mentor of the same gender has become increasingly salient, and our study found that female mentees and their female mentors have strengthened their bonds following #MeToo. In 13 out of 14 psychosocial roles, female mentors were rated as *increasing* the frequency of these role behaviors at larger percentages than were male mentors indicating stronger emotionally positive growth in those same-gender relationships.

Secondly, protégés may be increasingly searching for role models as part of their mentoring relationships. Indeed, Scandura (1992) and Blake-Beard (2002) both

proposed that role modeling should be considered a third distinct role in addition to Kram's career and psychosocial roles to signal its evolving importance. In our study, female mentors were reported to have *increased* their enactment of several psychosocial roles related to role modeling. Three examples are: "serves as a role model for me" (61.8% of those with female mentors said this *increased* since #MeToo, while 31.3% said the same for their male mentors); "is someone I can identify with" (58.8% for female mentors versus 25.0% for male mentors); and "represents who I want to be" (55.9% versus 31.3%).

Finding #3:

Employees may be largely unaware of organizational efforts to address #MeToo issues.

Providing mandatory sexual harassment training and reviewing their sexual harassment policies were the two most frequently-cited organizational responses to #MeToo (reported by 51.8% and 41.2%, respectively). Yet the third most frequent choice of survey-takers (34.1%) was "I do not know what my organization is doing to address concerns raised in the #MeToo movement," which has implications for HR professionals and all managers.

Additionally, very few respondents were aware of organizational activities aimed at supporting male mentors. Only 4.7% reported their organization had "implemented discussion groups for male mentors" and 7.1% said it had "launched a new gender-focused mentoring program." These responses could indicate that organizations are either not making changes in response to #MeToo or are failing to communicate their efforts to female employees.

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What comes next? Recommendations for organizations and individuals¹²

For organizations, the focus on sexual harassment is a start. A sexual-harassment-free work culture benefits both men and women, the vast majority of whom go to work expecting and wanting to work. But to build a mentoring culture, organizations also need to require, support, and reward cross-gender mentoring. A 2018 study revealed that 71% of mentors, male and female, still choose protégés who are the same gender and race.¹³ Creating mentoring programs that help all prospective mentors deal with this natural phenomenon is critical. Additionally, some organizations are addressing head-on the fear that men feel by establishing "Lean In-like circles" that provide 'safe spaces' where men can express and deal with their fears. In these discussion groups, men also clarify with one another what behaviors might qualify as inappropriate. Still other organizations are creating processes that attempt to ensure that no one will be tainted by false accusations. As one inclusion strategist named it: "it's about engaging and changing, not blaming and shaming."¹⁴

Many call for men to do the internal work to understand their fears and guide their behavior accordingly rather than withdraw from women.¹⁵ Men (and women) need to recognize and control the natural draw of homophily, and understand how excluding women from mentorship can impede women's careers. Instead, when seeking out women to mentor, men need to be transparent regarding why and how they are developing their female protégés. This clarifying messaging is needed both inside (to their protégés) and outside (to others in the organizational community) the mentoring relationship.

Consistent with a notable percentage of ratings showing that little had changed in their mentoring relationships, particularly for mentors' career roles, 84.9% of the women in our survey said they themselves had made no specific changes to address any #MeToo dynamics in their relationships or organization. Yet women still have a role in fostering a mentoring culture. This encouragement includes actively pursuing the best mentor possible (male or

female); being clear with their mentor what their goals and expectations are; and being clear and firm if their mentor is making them uncomfortable. For senior women, it is important to be active in taking up mentoring, not just with female talent. Senior female mentors can (and should) also recognize the impact they can have on young men as they become acculturated into their professional lives.

Conclusion

Certainly the #MeToo movement has set complex and paradoxical dynamics in motion within organizations and mentoring relationships. Some individuals may be frightened into protective withdrawal, while others may be motivated to do the hard work of preserving mentoring as an essential factor in talent development and community building. The #MeToo movement may have also been a call to women in leadership positions to become more visible and active in their roles as models to other women.

Our survey respondents primarily reported that career role support from mentors had not changed compared to prior to the #MeToo movement, while there was actually an increase in multiple aspects of psychosocial roles, particularly with female mentors. Those increases in psychosocial roles could be affected by the confounding variable that relationships of all kinds strengthen as time goes on; or they might be responding to a greater need for emotional support in a post #MeToo work setting.

This relative stability as well as growth in certain areas of the mentoring relationship may also be explained by some of the demographics of our sample: our respondents were conference attendees who were primarily representing their organizations. Their selection may be a signal of the organizations' commitment to women's advancement in general, and to those women specifically. If that is the case, our results support the positive outcomes that can come from organizations intentionally focusing on the advancement of their female talent. Importantly, our sample consisted largely of managers in white collar professions who were attending a conference

focused specifically on leadership. There is a need to examine the experiences of women who are not in management and/or are in blue collar jobs.

Finally, the stability, coupled with the finding that respondents made few changes in response to #MeToo, may indicate that women and men in mentoring relationships are being intentional in maintaining those relationships. Media often hypes the outliers, in this case the men who are withdrawing their support of women. Yet a quieter story may be being revealed through the perspective of women, as captured in our survey: mentors and protégés are doing the hard work of adjusting, clarifying, and strengthening their relationships to their mutual benefit, and to the benefit of their organizations.

AUTHORS:

Simmons faculty: Mary Shapiro, Professor of Practice, School of Business; Margaret Costello, Associate Professor, School of Nursing; Shelley Strowman, Associate Professor of Practice, School of Nursing; Shira Birnbaum, Associate Professor of Practice, Health Professions Education; Stacy Blake-Beard, Professor, School of Business; Cassidy Swartz and Vail Cort, Simmons Graduate students

END NOTES

1. Launched originally in 2006 by Tarana Burke, an advocate for women and girls of color who had survived sexual assault, #MeToo was revived by Alyssa Milano and has been hailed as an initiation for broad social movement.
2. To clarify, in this Insight we are using the terms 'men' and 'women' as socially constructed identity groups. Those terms are used as 'shorthand' for both 'individuals who identify as men/women' and 'individuals who present as men/women'. We recognize the continuum of gender identity and are using terms that mirror the social conversation in which our research is intended to explore.
3. There is a multitude of media stories about men's withdrawal from mentoring women. Those naming the "Pence Principle"

include: Waldman, P. (2017). Pence's unwillingness to be alone with a woman is a symptom of a bigger problem. Retrieved from <https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/plum-line/wp/2017/03/30/pences-unwillingness-to-be-alone-with-a-woman-is-a-symptom-of-a-bigger-problem/>; Tan, G., & Porzecanski, K. (2018). Wall Street rule for the #MeToo Era: Avoid women at all cost. Retrieved from <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-12-03/a-wall-street-rule-for-the-metoo-era-avoid-women-at-all-cost>; Blake, A. (2017). Mike Pence doesn't dine alone with other women. And we're all shocked. Retrieved from <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2017/03/30/mike-pence-doesnt-dine-alone-with-other-women-and-were-all-shocked/>.

Others describing the withdrawal of men from women in general, and mentoring more specifically, include: Bennhold, K. (2019). Another side of #MeToo: Male managers fearful of mentoring women. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/27/world/europe/metoo-backlash-gender-equality-davos-men.html>; Steward, J. (2018). A #MeToo backlash is brewing in banking. Retrieved from <https://www.americanbanker.com/news/a-metoo-backlash-is-brewing-in-banking>; Gourguechon, P. (2018). Why in the world would men stop mentoring women post #MeToo? Retrieved from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/prudygourguechon/2018/08/06/why-in-the-world-would-men-stop-mentoring-women-post-metoo/#8ba620979a53>; FTI Consulting, (2018). #MeToo at Work Report. Retrieved from https://gender.fticomms.com/pdf/MeToo_at_Work-research.pdf; Soklaridis, S., et al. (2018). Men's fear of mentoring in the #MeToo Era-- what's at stake for academic medicine? *New England Journal of Medicine*, 379 (23), 2270-2274.

4. LeanIn.Org (2019). Working relationships in the #MeToo Era: Key findings. Retrieved from <https://leanin.org/sexual-harassment-backlash-survey-results>; Gebhardt, J. & SurveyMonkey (2019). How #MeToo has impacted mentorship for women. Retrieved from <https://www.surveymonkey.com/curiosity/mentor-her-2019/>; LeanIn.Org (2018). Women in the workplace. Retrieved from <https://leanin.org/women-in-the-workplace-report-2018/men-still-outnumber-women-at-every-level>

5. For a review of some of the scholarly literature establishing the importance of mentoring on women's careers, check out: Blake-Beard, S., Bayne, M., Crosby, F., & Muller, C. (2011). Matching by race and gender in mentoring relationships. *Journal of Social Issues*, 67(3), 622-643; O'Brien, K. E., Biga, A., Kessler, S. R., & Allen, T. D. (2010). A meta-analytic inves-

tigation of gender differences in mentoring. *Journal of Management*, 36(2), 537-554; Murrell, A. J., & Blake-Beard, & S. D. (2017). *Mentoring diverse leaders: Creating change for people, processes, and paradigms*. New York, NY: Routledge; Burke, R. J., & McKeen, C. A. (1990). *Mentoring in organizations: Implications for women*. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 9, 317-332; Ragins, B. R. (1999). Gender and mentoring relationships: A review and research agenda for the next decade. In G. N. Powell (Ed.), *Handbook of gender and work* (pp. 347-370). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage; Ramaswami, A., Huang, J. C., & Dreher, G. (2014). Interaction of gender, mentoring, and power distance on career attainment: A cross-cultural comparison. *Human Relations*, 67(2), 153-173; Kram, K. E. (1985). *Mentoring at work: Developmental relationships in organizational life*. Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman.

6. Regarding the benefits provided by mentoring to the organization, check out: Able, A., & Neal, S. (2018). #MeToo in mentorship. Chief Learning Officer. Retrieved from <https://www.chieflearningofficer.com/2018/11/29/metoo-in-mentorship/>. The authors found that organizations fostering strong mentoring cultures had a 46 percent higher overall quality of leadership and a 20 percent lower turnover rate. Retaining and moving more women into leadership also resulted in companies having a 1.5 times greater chance of experiencing sustained, profitable growth.

7. Issues with technology impacted data collection. Our 20-question survey was administered through a phone app, made available to the approximately 3000 people who attended the Simmons Leadership Conference. The URL for the survey was imbedded in the larger conference app (with program schedule, maps, sponsors, etc.) and was not readily noticeable. And while the app was tested as a stand-alone URL, imbedding the survey URL in the larger conference app also may have made navigating and viewing response options difficult on a phone screen. These technology issues may explain why:

- the number of responses dropped to 40-60 for many questions.
- 42% of respondents were missing data on the item asking for their gender. However, a survey of conference attendees showed that 97% identified as female, so we have high confidence that we collected women's experiences.

8. The demographics of our sample are as follows: Among those who answered the demographic items, the majority

were between the ages of 45-54 years old (31.7%), of white ethnicity (84.0%) and were middle level managers (50.0%) of finance/banking/insurance companies (22.6%) with 10,000 or more employees (53.6%). Respondents primarily said there are very few women as senior leaders in their organization (44.0%). While this sample is not representative of the female working population, their demographics do closely match those fields where there has been some of the most active dialogue around the impacts of #MeToo, namely in technology and finance.

9. One of the foundational articles on mentoring is: Kram, K.E. (1983). Phases of the mentor relationship. *Academy of Management Journal*, 26(4), 608-625. Kram identified two primary roles that mentors enact in the workplace, with 29 functions as noted below:

FUNCTION IN CAREER ROLE	FUNCTION IN PSYCHOSOCIAL ROLE
Helps me attain desirable positions	Is someone I can confide in
Uses their influence in the organization for my benefit	Provides support and encouragement
Uses their influence to support my advancement	Is someone I can trust
Suggests specific strategies for achieving career goals	Frequently socialize one on one outside the work setting
Gives me advice on how to attain recognition	Frequently get together informally after work by ourselves
Helps me learn about other parts of the organization	Serves as a role model for me
“Runs interference” for me	Represents who I want to be
Shields me from damaging contact with important people in the organization	Is someone I identify with
Protects me from those who are out to get me	Guides my personal development
Provides me with challenging assignments	Serves as a sounding board for me to develop and understand myself
Assigns me tasks that push me to develop new skills	Guides my professional development
Gives me tasks that require me to learn new skills	Accepts me as a competent professional

Helps me be more visible in the organization	Thinks highly of me
Creates opportunities for me to impress important people in the organization	Sees me as competent
Brings my accomplishments to the attention of important people in the organization	

10. Regarding the 64.8% of respondents in our study who have female mentors, check out: Blake-Beard, S. (2003). Critical trends and shifts in the mentoring experiences of professional women. CGO Insight #15. Retrieved from <https://www.simmons.edu/sites/default/files/2019-03/Insights%2015.pdf>; O’Brien, K. E., Biga, A., Kessler, S. R., & Allen, T. D. (2010). A meta-analytic investigation of gender differences in mentoring. *Journal of Management*, 36(2), 537-554. Percentage of women in leadership comes from McKinsey & LeanIn.Org (2018). Women in the workplace: Women are doing their part. Now companies need to do their part too. Retrieved from <https://womenintheworkplace.com/>; Bank, B. J., & Hansford, S. L. (2000). Gender and friendship: Why are men’s best same-sex friendships less intimate and supportive? *Personal Relationships*, 7(1), 63-78; Fehr, B. (2004). Intimacy expectations in same-sex friendships: A prototype interaction-pattern model. *Journal of Personality & Social Psychology*, 86(2), 265-284; Reis, H. T., Senchak, M., & Solomon, B. (1985). Sex differences in the intimacy of social interaction: Further examination of potential explanations. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 48(5), 1204–1217.

11. Murphy, W. (2019). Advice for men who are nervous about mentoring women. Retrieved from <https://hbr.org/2019/03/advice-for-men-who-are-nervous-about-mentoring-women>.

12. In discussing recommendations for individuals and organizations, check out: Soklaridis, S., et al. (2018). Men’s fear of mentoring in the #MeToo Era---what’s at stake for academic medicine? *New England Journal of Medicine*, 379 (23), 2270-2274; Gourguechon, P. (2018). Why in the world would men stop mentoring post MeToo? Retrieved from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/prudygourguechon/2018/08/06/why-in-the-world-would-men-stop-mentoring-women-post-me-too/#8ba620979a53>; Green, J. (2019). Managers pick mini-me protégés of same race, gender. Retrieved from

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-01-08/managers-pick-mini-me-protoges-of-same-gender-race-in-new-study>; Thomas, J. (2018). #MeToo hasn't fixed the workplace. Here's a playbook that can. Retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/metoo-hasnt-fixed-the-workplace-heres-a-playbook-that-can/2018/11/29/bb1de86e-e762-11e8-b8dc-66cca409c180_story.html?noredirect=on; Williams, J.C. & Lebsack, S. (2018). Now what? Retrieved from <https://hbr.org/cover-story/2018/01/now-what>; Carter, K. A. (n.d.) Can men mentor women in the #MeToo Era? It's about engaging and changing, not blaming and shaming. Retrieved from <https://thriveglobal.com/stories/can-men-mentor-women-in-the-metoo-era-its-about-engaging-and-changing-not-blaming-and-shaming/>; Anderson, R.H., & Smith, D.G. (2019). What men can do to be better mentors and sponsors to women. Retrieved from <https://hbr.org/2019/08/what-men-can-do-to-be-better-mentors-and-sponsors-to-women>; Bennhold, K. (2019). Another side of #MeToo: Male managers fearful of mentoring women. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/27/world/europe/metoo-backlash-gender-equality-davos-men.html>.

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13. Center for Talent Innovation (2018). The Sponsor Dividend. Retrieved from https://www.talentinnovation.org/_private/assets/TheSponsorDividend_KeyFindingsCombined-CTI.pdf.

14. Carter, K. A. (n.d.) Can men mentor women in the #MeToo Era? It's about engaging and changing, not blaming and shaming. Retrieved from <https://thriveglobal.com/stories/can-men-mentor-women-in-the-metoo-era-its-about-engaging-and-changing-not-blaming-and-shaming/>.

15. Soklaridis, S., et al. (2018). Men's fear of mentoring in the #MeToo Era-- what's at stake for academic medicine? *New England Journal of Medicine*, 379 (23), 2270-2274.

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300 The Fenway, Boston, MA 02115 USA
617-521-3844
cgo@simmons.edu
www.simmons.edu/cgo