

Study finds men, women in Army view mentorship differently, as way to advance or survive

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Members of the Special Troops Battalion, 1st Armored Division plot their positions on a map. Credit: Wikimedia Commons

The U.S. Army has stated it views mentoring as a key way to not only

help the most qualified individuals advance in their military careers but to address diversity gaps in its leadership. New research from the University of Kansas shows that men and women in the Army's special operations overwhelmingly view mentorship positively, but men view it as a way to advance, while women view it as a way to survive in a male-dominated organization.

The Army, like many branches of [public service](#), strongly touts meritocracy as a way for the most deserving to advance. While mentoring can help achieve that, the KU study found it is not currently viewed as a way to advance for everyone, and the relational nature of the practice is at the heart of the discrepancy.

"Advancing in your career and simply surviving are two very different goals," said Shannon Portillo, professor of public affairs & administration and associate dean of academic affairs at KU's Edwards Campus, about the gender-differing goals of Army mentorship.

"Mentoring is not a one-size-fits-all program. It meets different goals for different people. If we're looking at it to fill diversity gaps at the top of organizations, as the Army has said it wants to, it's not necessarily doing that. It may just be helping women survive."

Portillo, Amy Smith of the University of Massachusetts at Boston and Alesha Doan, professor of public affairs & administration and women, gender & sexuality studies at KU, co-wrote a paper based on a study in which they conducted surveys with approximately 1,200 Army special operations personnel and focus groups with 198 of them. "Up the Chain: Gendered Mentoring in the U.S. Army" was published in the journal *Review of Public Personnel Administration*.

The authors have been studying the Army—one of the largest, yet least-studied public sector organizations—to better understand its slow integration of women in various roles. Portillo and Doan recently wrote

the book ["Organizational Obliviousness: Entrenched Resistance to Gender Integration in the Military."](#) which documented how entrenched gender stereotypes slowed or prevented women from advancing and filling roles they were previously denied. For the current study, they examined the value of mentorship when the results revealed drastically different views of such roles.

Men in the focus groups spoke positively about their experiences with mentorship and how it helped them advance in their careers. But they also revealed their [mentors](#) often connected with them, not because they were recognized for leadership potential, but because they shared things in common, including gender, race and coming from similar geographic areas. Women revealed their experiences with mentors largely helped them navigate life as a woman in a male-dominated organization and find ways to stay in the Army as opposed to dropping out or discussing how their careers could advance.

"Although mentoring provides women with the skills to remain in a male-dominated profession, it falls short in providing them with the same tools for advancement that their male counterparts receive. To create a level playing field in these organizations, leaders need to structure more robust mentoring programs that provide both support (i.e., retention) and professional development opportunities (i.e., advancement) for women," Doan said.

The authors wrote that the results are not necessarily intentional, as men were genuinely surprised that women's experiences were so different than their own. And while keeping women from leaving the Army is positive, helping men thrive and women merely to survive is not close to reaching the stated goal of helping qualified candidates advance or addressing diversity gaps in leadership.

"Mentorship the way it's being practiced is especially helping men.

Mentorship is good and vital for what it's doing, both for men and women in the organization, but our research shows we can improve it to reach the Army's goals," Portillo said. "It's a benevolent approach to mentorship that we saw, but it still excludes those who haven't always had access."

The authors said the gendered experiences of mentorship in the Army reflect gendered experiences of people in similar male-dominated organizations such as police and firefighting. But, by becoming aware of the current gulf in experiences for men and women, the Army could address the issue by improving formal mentorship programs, providing better training for mentors, ensuring the program meets the stated [career advancement](#) goals for everyone and striving to match mentors with worthy candidates, not just those who match their own gender or backgrounds. The fact that the Army has stated it sees mentorship as a way to address diversity gaps in leadership is a positive sign, the authors said. But currently, men in the Army see mentorship as a way to move up, aided by a mentor's "encouragement, recommendations, introductions and insider knowledge," the authors wrote, while "mentoring provided women with skills they could use to navigate the organization as an othered individual."

More information: Shannon Portillo et al, Up the Chain: Gendered Mentoring in the U.S. Army, *Review of Public Personnel Administration* (2022). [DOI: 10.1177/0734371X221076770](https://doi.org/10.1177/0734371X221076770)

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