Thriving in Academe

Finding a Mentor

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To navigate the complex world of modern academic life, faculty may need more help than a traditional one-size-fits-all mentor can provide.

Many of our campuses have expended a lot of time, effort, and funding in order to replenish our faculty ranks with a new generation of scholars. But the success of our new colleagues involves far more than simply recruiting and hiring them. Research shows that new faculty often encounter roadblocks that slow or halt their progress into the professoriate.

Because mentoring has been seen as a means of easing this transition, many institutions— ours included—have established mentoring programs to better support the short- and long-term needs of its newcomers.

Traditionally, mentoring in academia has followed a top-down model in which a senior faculty member guides the career development of his/her protégé. In recent years, however, we've seen the emergence of new approaches to mentoring, in which no single faculty member is expected to possess the expertise of many.

At the University of Massachusetts Amherst, we've been experimenting with an innovative, flexible, and faculty-driven model of mentoring that encourages faculty at all stages of the academic career to build networks of mentoring partners who can address a wide variety of career competencies. We call this approach "Mutual Mentoring."

MEET MARY DEANE SORCINELLI AND JUNG H. YUN

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Tales from Real Life

SEARCHING FOR ANSWERS

AS COLLEAGUES AND CO-AUTHORS, we represent different generations, disciplines, and cultural backgrounds. Yet we can both point to past mentoring relationships that have had a significant impact on our careers, as well as less-than-successful relationships that fell somewhat short. One of us had a teacher in college and again in graduate school who exemplified the best characteristics of a traditional mentoring relationship, i.e., highly individualized support and guidance; and the exchange of relevant experience, expertise, and ideas. The other had less positive experiences, complicated by the discomfort of confiding in a mentor who later played a key role on a thesis committee, and mentoring that felt "imposed from above" by a structured matching process based strictly on discipline, rather than other interests (e.g., pedagogy or research methods).

The differences in our respective mentoring experiences are quite significant, but not entirely uncommon. We've consulted with hundreds of faculty who have reported a similar range of benefits and drawbacks. In designing a new model of mentoring for our campus, we decided to draw upon our differences to create a more flexible model of support—one that could strengthen faculty connections across career stages and disciplines, promote context-sensitive (rather than one-size-fits-all) mentoring, and empower faculty to make their own choices about their most desirable areas of professional growth.

—By Mary Deane Sorcinelli and Jung H. Yun, University of Massachusetts Amherst

Mutual Mentoring

Mutual Mentoring encourages the development of strong, productive, and substantive mentoring networks.

In an increasingly complex academic environment, the traditional model of a single mentor may no longer be realistic. As faculty members, our professional success and personal well-being rely largely on our ability to excel at teaching and research, support our students and advisees, understand expectations for performance, develop substantive collegial relationships, and create a balance between work and life. Given the wide range of demands in today's academic environment, a variety of mentoring partners—each of whom brings unique expertise and experience to a particular area—is more likely to provide the largest possible "safety net" across career competencies. These multiple mentors don't need to substitute for a single mentor but, rather, can add to and enhance a close, core relationship. Our experience tells us that combining both the traditional and network models of mentoring can build upon the strengths of each.

What Characterizes Mutual Mentoring?

A Mutual Mentoring network is typically characterized by the following:

- mentoring partnerships that include a wide variety of individuals—peers, near peers, tenured faculty, chairs, administrators, librarians, students, and others;
- mentoring approaches that accommodate the partners' personal, cultural, and professional preferences for contact (e.g., one-on-one, small group, team, and/or online);
- partnerships that focus on specific areas of experience and expertise, rather than generalized, "one-size-fits-all" knowledge;
- a reciprocity of benefits between the person traditionally known as the "protégé" and the person traditionally known as the "mentor;" and
- perhaps most importantly, new and under-represented faculty members who are not seen or treated solely as the recipients of mentoring, but as the primary agents of their own career development.

How Can You Build Your Own Mutual Mentoring Network on Campus?

Some good first steps to create a Mutual Mentoring network of your own include the following:

- If your department already has a formal mentoring program in place, take advantage of it, but keep in mind that the mentor chosen for you, or by you, as part of this program should not be your only source of professional support.
  - Ask some key colleagues whom they think you should approach about your specific subjects of interest. Keep in mind that there are many different ways that you can "click" with a mentoring partner. Who teaches classes similar in size to yours? Who uses a particular classroom technology that you're interested in adopting? Who seems like the best overall personality match?
  - Identify near peers (colleagues who are close to your career level). Near peers can be particularly valuable because their experiences as newcomers are still reasonably fresh. Helpful "global" questions to ask near peers include: What do you wish you would have known when you first arrived? What is the most valuable thing you've done in support of your teaching?
- Look for mentoring partners outside the faculty ranks. A talented, tech-savvy student may help you navigate a new class management system, while a librarian specializing in your discipline may be able to recommend hard-to-find resources.

What Might an On-Campus Mentoring Partnership Look Like?

Since launching the Mutual Mentoring initiative in 2007, we've seen some creative examples of on-campus mentoring partnerships, including the following:

- An assistant professor of nursing worked on the development of a new model for Web-based mentoring of online/distance education students. As part of her project, she met regularly for small group mentoring with "near peer" and senior colleagues in her school, and also worked one-on-one with a course design consultant.
- Two assistant professors in English established a peer writing partnership to work on their respective book proposals and book manuscripts. They met twice monthly to give each other feedback and track their writing progress, and also worked with a writing coach who advised them on editing and preparing their manuscripts for submission.
- Eight assistant professors of sociology developed a peer mentoring group to supplement an existing departmental mentoring program. These junior faculty come together around issues of teaching, research, and professional development, assign books to read as a group, and support each other as newcomers "learning the ropes" at our university.
- An assistant professor of communication disorders organized

a mentoring group consisting of junior and senior faculty (both in and outside of his department) to work on an external research grant. He attended a grant proposal workshop as part of a national conference and brought back grant writing ideas and feedback to his mentoring partners.

How To Expand Your Mutual Mentoring Network

Mutual Mentoring isn't limited to having great mentors down the hall, or even in the same building. Great mentors can be found far and wide. Once you've developed a core group of mentoring partners on your campus, you may wish to look beyond it and consider different ways to expand your network.

- Take advantage of proximity by reaching out to potential mentoring partners at campuses in your geographic area. This can be especially helpful if your department is small, hasn't hired in recent years, or lacks a cohort of near peers or senior colleagues for you to work with.
- Identify external scholars and teachers whose academic interests significantly overlap your own. If approached properly, these individuals can often introduce you to a broader network of colleagues able to support your professional development.
- Ask a respected senior colleague if he/she would be willing to introduce you—either in person or writing—to an external scholar to whom you wish to reach out. You can also research the conferences where these external colleagues may be presenting and arrange to attend yourself.
- Don't be shy about contacting an external scholar to request a quick meeting during a conference. People are busy at these events, but put yourself in their place and imagine the compliment of being sought out by someone who admires and appreciates your work.

An External Mentoring Partnership

Here are some examples of ways faculty at UMass Amherst have expanded their Mutual Mentoring networks off campus.

- A cross-disciplinary group of UMass faculty teaching Asian and Asian Pacific Studies created a mentoring network of colleagues who teach the same subjects at four liberal arts colleges in the area. This group meets monthly for topic-driven discussions on teaching, research, and tenure. The group includes UMass graduate students hoping to secure faculty positions in Asian and Asian Pacific Studies as well.
- One of our assistant professors of art, architecture, and art history chose a professor/artist/critic/curator at a New York university as her external mentoring partner. During a visit to UMass, the mentoring partner assisted our new faculty member with studio critiques for her students, met with junior and senior colleagues in her department, and gave a public talk.
- Our political science department supplemented its on-campus mentoring efforts by encouraging new faculty to choose off-campus mentoring partners who could help them begin to network nationally within their subfield. Some of these mentors are faculty members at other regional campuses, and some teach at universities and colleges across the nation. The department provides modest funds for new faculty members to visit the campus of their external mentoring partners, or to invite their external mentoring partners to come to UMass.
- One of our assistant professors of biology arranged to visit the laboratory and classroom of a nationally recognized senior colleague at a university in Texas. During her visit, she received one-on-one training in lab techniques that she plans to use in a future field study. When she returned to UMass, she also trained her students and teaching assistants in the same techniques.

Building Positive Mentoring Relationships

When mentoring relationships fail, the cause can often be traced back to a mismatch between actions and expectations. When people enter into a relationship with differing ideas about important issues, such as time commitment or confidentiality, good will and good intentions may not be able to prevent a potentially damaging misunderstanding. Some of the best practices of building and maintaining positive mentoring relationships involve clarifying expectations as early as possible—yours as well as theirs.

Understand your own needs before you begin to approach new mentoring partners. "Drill down" to the specifics whenever possible. For example, asking someone for help with a new class that you're teaching is different from asking for help developing active learning exercises that can work in a large lecture setting.

Respect the time constraints of your mentoring partner, and recognize that the best mentors are often highly sought out by others. Try to decide how often the two of you would like to or are able to meet, whether your interaction will be mostly in person or online, if your mentoring partnership will cover more general topics or more specific ones.

Recognize that the things you discuss with your mentoring partner are confidential. Usually, it is worthwhile to make sure your mentoring partner has the same understanding.

Remember to thank and acknowledge your mentoring partners as often and appropriately as possible. And if an opportunity arises to put your skills and experience to use to help your mentoring partner, be sure to reciprocate.

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ISSUES TO CONSIDER

Make Mentoring Permanent

Faculty across career stages can build and participate in Mutual Mentoring networks.

Faculty careers develop over time. We need information, advice, opportunities, and support all along the way to advance our careers. It's important to remember that Mutual Mentoring is not just for new faculty. Early, mid-career, and senior faculty can build and participate in strong, productive, and substantive Mutual Mentoring networks.

Consider your motivation for being a mentor. How will your experience and expertise contribute? What can you learn from your mentoring partner?

- What concrete things can you and your mentoring partner do to support each other (e.g., share the "inside story" on departmental culture, exchange advice about course or teaching issues, read each other's manuscript or grant proposal)?

- Let your mentoring partner know that he/she is welcome to talk with you, and give your full attention when he/she does. You don't have to have the answer for every question. You can listen and, if needed, point your mentoring partner to the appropriate individual or office who can help.

- Mentoring is one of many commitments that you and your mentoring partner are juggling. Clarify how frequently you are able to meet. Try always to keep appointments but be open to rescheduling meetings if necessary. Call a "time out" if you

have a heavy travel or teaching schedule. Acknowledge that you can't fulfill every area of expertise and recommend others who can extend your mentoring partner's network.

Assess the needs of your colleagues to better understand the state of mentoring in your department and to inform the development of a mentoring program.

- Bring together a representative group of faculty to explore mentoring models and recommend a workable departmental program. For example, the department might create a mentoring committee for each new faculty, multiple mentors of limited terms, or mentors both in and outside of the department.

- Check department schedules and the campus calendar to minimize conflicts. Consider that attendance at early breakfast, dinner, or evening sessions may be difficult for colleagues with families.

- Encourage mentoring partners to set concrete goals, to develop a roadmap or specific steps for each meeting (how to get from here to there), and to measure their progress along the way.

- Build responsibility for mutual mentoring into the evaluation of faculty and seek ways to recognize and reward faculty for time spent working with their mentoring partners.

THRIVING IN ACADEME

ILLUSTRATION: ALAN KING