



(<https://www.insidehighered.com>)

Reach more than 1.2 million
talented higher ed professionals with
your job posting [CLICK to POST NOW](#)




Essay on how to be a good faculty mentor to junior professors

Submitted by Kerry Ann Rockquemore on August 12, 2013 - 3:00am

"Transformative," "career-changing" and "life-altering." I'm curious: Are these words that tenure-track faculty members in your department use to describe the mentoring they receive?

Well that's how people frequently describe our faculty mentoring programs. I'm not saying that to brag, but by taking a fundamentally different approach than most campus programs, the [National Center for Faculty Development and Diversity](#) ^[1] has become the largest faculty development center in the U.S. We've learned some powerful lessons from mentoring over 18,000 graduate students, postdocs and faculty members. So in this final column in the series on [How to Mentor New Faculty](#), ^[2] I want to lay out the biggest lessons we've learned about mentoring and encourage you to imagine how they might apply to your campus environment.

Let me say at the outset, our mentoring programs rest on three core beliefs. First and foremost, we believe that faculty members are the greatest asset of any college or university. Secondly, we believe that the pervasive "sink or swim" model of mentoring on the tenure track is inefficient, ineffective, and organizationally unhealthy. ^[3] As problematic as it is for early career scholars generally, it can be particularly toxic for under-represented faculty. ^[4] And third, it's time to change the way we socialize, mentor and support new faculty members because hazing rarely produces brilliance, creativity or innovation. By contrast, happy, healthy professors are more productive, more invested, and more easily retained than those who are miserable.

Based on that foundation, here is what we've learned from engaging in a fundamentally different type of mentoring project:

Productivity, Balance, and Joy Are Learned Habits

Tenure-track faculty members are pretty clear about what they want: tenure and a life. It really is that simple. They want to be the extraordinary researchers, exceptional teachers, and awesome colleagues who exceed the standards for tenure (whatever those may be) AND they want to have a life beyond campus. These two things together -- explosive productivity and personal health -- are what it means to truly thrive in academe.

The good news is that the pathways to productivity and balance are well-studied and well-documented. The bad news is that it means learning behaviors that are the opposite of how most academics have been socialized in graduate school. For example:

- Daily writing leads to greater productivity than binge-and-bust writing.
- Perfectionist professors publish less (not more) than their colleagues.
- Sleeping eight hours a night leads to greater (not less) productivity.

- Taking the weekends off, getting regular exercise and eating a healthy diet lead to greater productivity than working all the time and sacrificing physical and dietary health.
- Time management is not about working longer and harder to get everything done, it's about realizing there will always be more work than time and prioritizing the truly important over the seemingly urgent.
- Greater time on course prep and grading does not necessarily lead to better learning outcomes.
- Gratitude leads to joy and it occurs when we choose to focus on the vast majority of things that are going well every day (instead of fixating on miniscule errors and what didn't get done).

I could go on and on, but the reality is that faculty members want to be successful and are eager to learn and adopt best practices. We do this by a slow and steady drip of incremental steps. But what would it mean for you (as a mentor) to break free of the idea that every individual just has to figure it out for themselves and instead realize that (just like other behavioral patterns) there's an empirically documented path to the habits that are most likely to lead to success.

Faculty Crave Community, Support, and Accountability

Tenured faculty often assume that new faculty members have been thoroughly mentored in graduate school and it's best to get them settled in and then leave them alone to sink or swim. This works for a small number of people and everyone else is left struggling to figure out how to make it through the day.

Instead, we've found that there's a difference between knowing what works and actually doing it. So instead of telling new faculty what to do, we design opportunities and online communities that encourage people to experiment with new behavior and see what happens. For example, we don't just make the case for daily writing. We offer a 14-day writing challenge for faculty to freely experiment with daily writing, track their daily activity (as data), and analyze their outcomes at the end. Doing so in the context of a community designed to support productivity heightens the experiment by providing the type of accountability needed to change behavior.

What would it look like for you to figure out what supportive communities exist on campus and instead of just telling your mentee about best practices, encourage his/her experimenting with internal and external communities of productivity?

Change the Conversation

What's become clear to us is that the six-year tenure track does quite a bit of damage to early-career faculty. The hazing dynamic, the unspecified standard for tenure, and the culture of "never enough" lead to a highly problematic outcome: faculty who are stressed out, overly externally referenced, and can't see beyond the tenure decision. Let's be honest, those are normal responses when you know a group of people will go into a room and anonymously cast a vote that significantly impacts your future. However, it's an outcome that doesn't necessarily promote innovative scholarship, personal health, or long-term job satisfaction.

I believe the single biggest reason the NCFDD has grown so quickly is because we work with people to change the limiting but normative conversations around tenure from being largely instrumental ("how can I win tenure?") to focusing on the meaning of work ("how can I work at my highest potential?"), from a stance of limitation ("how can I meet my department's standards?") to a stance of possibility ("what do I want?"), and from externally referential ("what can I do to please the senior faculty in my department?") to internally driven ("what does success look like for me as a whole person?").

And guess what? Shifting the conversation in this way changes the underlying dynamic from hazing to belonging ^[5] and often results in greater productivity, satisfaction and commitment. So as a mentor, what would it look like for you to imagine framing mentoring (either your individual relationship with your mentee or your institution's mentoring program) as a commitment to guiding your mentee to establish a broad mentoring network? And what would it feel like to reimagine your role as coaching the new person to organize their life to support explosive productivity AND personal health (as

opposed to jumping through hoops and trying to prove themselves)?

Weekly Challenge

This week I challenge you to:

1. Ask yourself what core beliefs underlie YOUR approach to mentoring?
2. Imagine how your stance as a mentor would change if you believed that productivity, balance and joy are not only equally important to success, but learned behaviors.
3. Explore what groups currently exist on campus to provide community, support, and accountability for your new faculty mentees' productivity and what external resources may be useful.
4. Become aware of how you frame your conversations with your mentee. Is your approach geared towards instrumental activity or are you able to locate your approach as being committed to your mentee operating at his/her highest potential?

I hope the lessons we've learned are helpful to you in reimagining your relationship to your new mentee and rethinking how you socialize, mentor, and support new faculty members on your campus.

Peace and positive mentoring,

Kerry Ann Rockquemore, PhD

Source URL: <https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2013/08/12/essay-how-be-good-faculty-mentor-junior-professors?width=775&height=500&iframe=true>

Links:

[1] <http://www.facultydiversity.org/>

[2] <http://www.insidehighered.com/career-advice/how-be-great-mentor>

[3] <http://www.insidehighered.com/advice/mentoring>

[/essay_on_the_problems_with_the_sink_or_swim_mentality_in_higher_education](#)

[4] http://www.amazon.com/Black-Academics-Winning-Tenure-Without-Losing/dp/1588265889/ref=pd_sim_b_3

[5] <http://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2013/08/05/essay-how-make-new-arrivals-academic-department-feel-welcome>