



CHAPTER 1

Tips for Mentors Inside or Outside the Department

“Our meetings allowed me to decompress, gain an alternate perspective on my lived experiences, and learn from a senior scholar.”

—Mentee comment

When we ask experienced mentors about the characteristics of good mentors, we receive similar responses. The first attributes to come to mind are openness and a willingness to share. Mentoring is exciting in the same way that research is exciting: We can be open to new discoveries. A good mentor is able to see things from multiple perspectives, and each mentee brings new expertise and experience to the relationship. None will have the same experience you had as a new faculty member, though there may be similarities. The life of the academy has changed a lot for new faculty members. Although you bring years of experience to your role as mentor, you must also have the humility to acknowledge what you don't know. This aspect of openness brings a sense of humanity to the relationship in the increasingly corporate atmosphere of today's universities. The most important part of openness is to be a good listener. Although new faculty members appreciate the advice they receive from their mentors, they overwhelmingly report that the most important aspect of the relationship is that someone actually cares about them and their success.

The second characteristic experienced mentors delineate is trust. The sense of support and encouragement that new faculty members derive from the mentoring relationship relies on two aspects of trust.

The first is a mutual respect between members of the mentoring dyad. This must be a collaborative relationship, not something imposed from the top down. This mutual respect can be particularly important to a very new professor who may still be feeling the effects of the “imposter syndrome,” or the sense that one is not really qualified for the position. A belief in one's credentials and expertise can go a long way in the development of a new faculty member's fragile competence. The second is the creation of a safe space within the relationship. Don't be shy about sharing your own experiences as an untenured faculty member. It is helpful to hear that someone else has experienced difficulties on the road to tenure and survived them. Part of this sense of safety comes from strict confidentiality and protection of the mentee's privacy. This can be a tricky component when mentoring within the department as it is important for the department head to monitor and assess the efficacy of the relationship, and this must be done without putting that sense of safety at risk. The fact that an in-department mentor will vote on the mentee's tenure also introduces a power component to the relationship, which may result in the mentee being less forthcoming about his or her concerns and worries. For this reason, we recommend that the mentee have a second mentor outside the department (see Sidebar 1.1).



SIDEBAR 1.1***Areas in which a mentor can actively help***

- Reading manuscripts, monographs, chapters
- Watching presentations
- Reading grant proposals
- Long- and short-term goal planning
- Writing a teaching philosophy
- Writing a research narrative
- Preparing a portfolio/dossier
- Formative assessment of teaching
- Making connections on and off campus
- Advice on negotiations with department head
- Advice on how to use a graduate assistant
- Advice on student difficulties

A third characteristic of good mentors is the ability to see things in a holistic way. It is important to work with the totality of the life of the new professor. There are ways to help a new professor efficiently prepare for teaching, plan a research agenda, and strategize about service commitments while maintaining work-life balance to avoid burnout. Another aspect of holistic mentoring is the ability to see the big picture from the smaller concerns the mentee describes. In other words, what is this story really about?

What Do You Have to Offer?

If you are new to mentoring, take some time to list your personal strengths and to consider what style of mentoring might best suit your personality. Let us suggest several potential strengths that you bring to the relationship, based on comments from both mentees and mentors.

- You know the culture of the department and institution. This may seem like a given, but mentees appreciate that knowledge base. It also provides a continuity that is meaningful to department heads and other administrators.

- You have been where they are. This provides you with strong empathy that cannot be found in an outside life coach.
- You have the ability to reframe an issue in a larger context. A simple example is the one nasty comment in a semester-end course evaluation.
- You have experience with goal setting and prioritizing university commitments.
- You understand the tenure experience and, perhaps, the tenure criteria. An out-of-department mentor will have to be clear about this and offer helpful suggestions to the mentee for determining departmental criteria.
- You have experience with college students at your institution; they may be very different from those where the new professor may have taught as a graduate teaching assistant.
- You have experience with the annual review process. Again, this may vary between departments or schools and the outside mentor should be aware of this.

What Are the Characteristics of New Faculty Members?

Boice (1992) outlined five characteristics that we find to be true today. New faculty members (a) overprepare for teaching and (b) teach defensively. Consequently they (c) spend less time than necessary on scholarly writing. Nevertheless, they (d) tend to perform on the lower end in course evaluations. And amid all of these stressful experiences, they (e) feel isolated, experiencing loneliness and frustration. To these we would add that mentees on our campus recognize the imposter syndrome in themselves when it is described to them. Initially, some of them may not fully grasp the difference between being a successful graduate student and a successful faculty member. The duties and expectations of full faculty members are not taught in most graduate programs.

Boice (1992) also noted the characteristics of quick starters, which we describe here so you can encourage them in your mentees.

- They develop work habits to reflect their goals.
- They write multiple times per week.



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- They connect with faculty across campus.
- They prepare adequately for engaged teaching.
- They integrate teaching and research.
- They strategically plan service obligations.
- They seek mentoring.

What Do New Faculty Members Need?

Our experience suggests that there are areas in which faculty from all disciplines need guidance.

- They need to feel connected with others and the larger community.
- They need help with time management.
- They need help with prioritizing.
- They need advice with balancing teaching and research.
- They need advice with balancing work and life outside the university.
- They need editorial help with their writing (particularly if English is their second language).

Potential Questions You Can Ask Your Mentee

Following are lists of questions from which you can choose, depending upon the needs of your mentee, whether you are an in-department or outside mentor, and upon your style of mentoring. Asking questions is an excellent form of guidance and avoids the possibility that you will project your experiences onto your mentee.

Questions Concerning Departmental Expectations for Tenure

- Do you know what your departmental expectations are and/or where to find them (in writing)?
- Do you have a sense of senior faculty expectations?
- Do you have a five-year plan?
- What are the most important requirements for tenure? Is there debate about this in the department?

- What type of authorship is expected?
- What is within your control?

Overarching Questions

- Why do you choose to do your work in the academy?
- What do you feel your contribution to your field will be?
- How is your fit within the department?
- How do you find community in your work (inside or outside your university)?
- What is your trajectory?
- What is your projected image of professionalism?

Questions for Regular Meetings

- How was your week/month?
- What are you working on right now?
- How are you managing your goals?
- How is your writing coming along?
- Any new possibilities for funding?
- What do you need/how can I help?

Stages of the Mentoring Relationship

Opening Stage: Set the Parameters

- Get to know your mentee. Consider using some of the questions listed above. In addition, relationship-building activities can be found in Appendix B.
- Talk about expectations for the relationship and set limits. When limits are clear, your mentee will be more likely to feel comfortable about seeking your guidance.
- The mentor makes first contact. Most junior faculty are loathe to ask senior faculty for help or advice simply because they see them as too busy. Within the department this is also due to a reluctance to seem less than competent.
- Define goals (needs assessment checklist). These can include goals for the relationship,



particularly if there is a defined time span for the relationship, as well as long-term and short-term career goals. Needs may vary, depending upon whether the mentee is tenure-track, nontenure-track, or adjunct faculty.

- Discuss confidentiality; this is particularly important for an interdepartmental relationship.

Second Stage: Regular Meetings

- Define the length of the relationship. Consider the possibility that the formal relationship might be only one year. Although the relationship can certainly continue on an informal basis afterward, a regular change in mentor provides new excitement, interest, and viewpoints. A lengthy relationship can become stale and unproductive, and unduly burdensome for the mentor.
- Define the schedule of meetings, which should take place no less frequently than once a month. It may be that for a first-year faculty member, meetings will occur more frequently for the first month or two.
- Discuss where you would like to meet. We suggest informal meetings over coffee or walks on campus, though some prefer a more formal meeting in the mentor's office. Meetings over meals are not as productive, as there are interruptions for ordering and much time is spent eating.
- Discuss attending events together. This is a nice way to introduce a mentee to others across campus and make event attendance more comfortable for a new faculty member.
- Discuss the possibility of a formative assessment of teaching, and whether this would involve one observation, mutual observations of teaching, or multiple observations of the mentee's teaching.
- Do an informal midyear evaluation. One possibility is a modification of a midterm course evaluation. Have the mentee complete the following statements: "Please start" "There is no need to continue" "Please continue"

Third Stage: Evolution Into a Collegial Relationship

- Expect needs to decrease over time. Although your mentee may feel more secure in his or her position and in the knowledge that you are there if something comes up, the second semester is a good time to look at things like annual reports and negotiating next year's workload. We provide closure tasks in Appendix D.
- Connections become infrequent. After the relationship is established in the first semester, you might ask that the mentee set up future meetings. Don't be surprised if these don't happen as frequently.
- Discuss finding new mentor(s). Does your mentee have someone else he or she would like to work with? What qualities is your mentee looking for? Perhaps the next mentor would be someone who can help the mentee with a particular project.
- Assess the efficacy of the relationship in a formative manner. If you are doing interdepartmental mentoring, your department head may require a more summative assessment. A university-wide program will mandate an end-of-year evaluation for both mentors and mentees.
- Become colleagues. Although the formal relationship may last only one year, an informal relationship will continue in many cases, even if the mentee is not in your department. One mentor in our acquaintance formed a writing accountability group with mentees and former mentees, but simply attending events together or having coffee together once or twice a year is more typical.

Interdepartmental Versus Intradepartmental Mentoring

These two mentoring roles are similar in many ways, but different in focus. An external mentor will be able to address many of the issues of new faculty members,



but will not have knowledge of their areas of research. For new faculty members, the most important benefit of an outside mentor is having someone to talk with about their concerns who will not be voting on their tenure. It is natural that junior faculty will not want to express their worries to departmental colleagues. In general, however, an outside mentor can ask all of the questions in the previous section and provide a great deal of guidance that, due to the external circumstances, must encourage self-sufficiency in the mentee to answer those questions.

In some ways, mentoring a new colleague inside your department is more difficult than mentoring one outside your department. Colleagues within a department may be in competition for limited resources. If a mentee makes what seems to you to be an unreasonable demand, an outside mentor can ask, “What is the culture in your department regarding expectations about that?” without the potential for being affected personally. The interdepartmental mentor will know the history of the department but may need to find a tactful way to communicate the history and culture of the department to the mentee.

It can be difficult to juggle the collegial and mentoring relationships. There is a danger that the relationship could be seen as surveillance, resulting in the mentee avoiding certain topics about which he or she could use some advice. The mentor, after all, will be participating in the tenure decision about the mentee. This introduces a power differential into the relationship that cannot be circumvented. If an outside mentor can be established, then each mentoring dyad can be clear about the purpose of its respective relationship.

Advice From Mentors

This section offers advice for those new to mentoring, straight from the mouths of experienced mentors.

You need a good match to be effective. A good match can mean many things. The first mentors, whether inside or outside the department, are most effective if the personalities involved “click.” They also work best if the relationship is mutually agreed upon,

rather than being assigned. Once the mentee is more established, the choice of mentor may be based on expertise.

There is more than one way to mentor effectively, and it changes with each new person. You must mentor from who you are. This advice is similar to Parker Palmer’s advice about teaching from who you are (Palmer, 1998). This follows naturally from the idea that a good match is important. Everyone has a style of mentoring, and no one mentor can fill all the needs of a mentee. You also have to work with the personality of your mentee; we find that most new faculty fall into two general categories. Some will want your time together to relax from their stressful lives. Others will feel the need to be constantly “on task,” concerned that they do not waste one minute of productive time. You may see the need for those in the first category to use you to hold their feet to the fire, and for those in the latter to make sure they include de-stressing activities in their schedule.

Make time to reflect on the process and prepare for meetings. Set aside time in your schedule each week; think about it outside the monthly meetings; and consider what questions you want to ask and what worksheets (found in appendices C and H) you might want to use. In addition, read articles about mentoring or other topics that might be helpful to your mentee. The time commitment is crucial; it isn’t just volunteerism.

Don’t try to fix things; just understand them. This can be difficult, as most of us are natural problem solvers. There is an urge to smooth things over, but it is okay to be frustrated.

Be willing to tell your mentee what he or she should not be doing, including new “opportunities” that may sidetrack the mentee. One method might be to delineate goals, then what supports are available to achieve them, and what distractions or roadblocks there are to attaining them. In some cases, encouragement to find ways to say no will be welcomed, and your mentee may need some ideas for how to do this in a positive way. If a mentee’s department head also wishes to protect his or her time, then an agreement can be made that all requests for service must be run through the department head. Saying no to colleagues in the department can be more difficult, and here is where



actually having writing time scheduled into your calendar can allow the mentee to say, “I’m so sorry; I already have something scheduled at that time.”

It is even more difficult for a mentor to recognize that something the mentee thinks is a great opportunity is actually not in his or her best interest, usually because it is time-consuming and will not further the mentee’s quest for tenure. One method of dealing with this scenario is to ask questions of the mentee: How much time will be involved? Where will you document this in your tenure portfolio?

Make sure there is recognition for mentoring in your department. Mentoring should count for service to the department, school, or university, depending upon whom you are mentoring. If you are mentoring outside your department, ask for a letter of thanks and recognition of your time and effort that is copied to your department head in time for annual review.

Seek peer mentoring for yourself. There are two ways to go about this. One is to find a colleague outside your department, ideally someone who is also mentoring or has done so. Another is to form a small group of senior faculty involved in mentoring. It is very helpful to run issues by colleagues to benefit from the collective wisdom in the room. It is also rejuvenating to discuss the life of academia and the well-being of junior faculty in a community of like-minded

colleagues. Mentors feel that it provides a community-wide scholarly space.

Rewards to the Mentor

Mentors report many personal benefits. One is that by thinking about negotiating an academic career, you learn about yourself in a more holistic way. It gives you time to reflect on your own life as an academic. Mentoring outside your department also gives you a broader perspective on the university community because you learn about how things are done in other departments. Last, mentors say that it makes them better departmental colleagues. They are more aware of protecting junior colleagues, whether or not they may be formally mentoring that person. As one mentor put it, “The work itself is the reward. It adds a piece to my work that would otherwise not be there.”

References

- Boice, R. (1992). *The new faculty member: Supporting and fostering professional development*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Palmer, P. J. (1998). *The courage to teach: Exploring the inner landscape of a teacher’s life*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.