THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION
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October 7, 2013

How to Develop a TSC (Trusted Senior Colleague)

Your first priority as a new faculty member should be to find the right allies

By Larry Cebula

For those lucky enough to land a tenure-track job, the first few years can be overwhelming. You are faced with moving, preparing your courses, trying to get some publications out so you can pass your third-year review, learning the ropes at a new institution, and trying to remember to STFU in department meetings.

With all of those commitments it is easy to forget—or not to realize—what could turn out to be the most important task for untenured faculty members: You need to develop some trusted senior colleagues.

A trusted senior colleague (TSC) is someone with wisdom and

discretion whom you can approach for advice and support when you hit an inevitable bump in the tenure track. Your TSC can help you understand the all-important informal campus culture.

Can you kick a disruptive student out of class, or will you be seen as a bad teacher? Do you really need to drive to campus for that department meeting on Thursday, or can you blow it off without consequence? How can you get the department secretary on your side? The deanis coming for a classroom observation: What does she like to see? Is that committee a useful line for your tenure portfolio or a hopeless time sink that will accomplish nothing?

Common sense is a poor guide to the culture at most campuses. You need someone with experience.

A trusted senior colleague is particularly important when the question is more delicate. Sooner or later, you are going to be accused by a student of having done something horrible. You are going to have a conflict or misunderstanding with someone in your department. You are going to violate some totally asinine yet really important unwritten rule that you were just supposed to know. You are going to need a letter of recommendation for that dream job you want to apply for but don't want your chair to know

that you are interested in. Your tenure portfolio is not going to be as extensive as you had hoped, and the good regard of senior professors may help close the gap.

In short, you will need a trusted senior colleague one day, and when that day comes, you will need one right away. So you need to begin developing such people now.

Whom to choose?

You want someone who has been around awhile, obviously—at least a tenured associate professor. You want someone who is not particularly invested in departmental squabbles and seems at peace with herself. Friendly is nice, though not essential. Someone who has an investment in the institution but is not blind to its faults. Someone who is not isolated but has the respect of other faculty members and the administration.

And you want more than one person, because different faculty members will have different qualities, and because the more friends the better.

A TSC outside your own department can have unique value.

Someone from the outside can give you the skinny on how the campus works, can let you know how your department is perceived by the rest of the campus (almost never as you think), and might know of resources and opportunities that would not have otherwise come to your attention. And your TSCs do not all have to be on the tenure track. Folks in the library, the counseling center, the grants office, or the administration can be invaluable mentors as well.

How do you get regular colleagues to become TSCs? You begin by treating them like mentors. Ask for their advice, starting with minor issues. People love to be asked for advice; it acknowledges their wisdom. Don't go overboard and appear needy or clueless. Do not say, "Will you be my mentor?"

Sometimes you can frame it as a question of institutional culture: "Say, Carol, I am designing my spring course and was thinking about a take-home final. Have you ever tried that here? How does it work with our students?" Maintain and deepen the relationships with the occasional conversation in the hallway, cup of coffee, or lunch.

The desire to mentor is natural in many people. Your TSCs will

quickly come to feel that they have an investment in your future. That can translate to an early warning of impending trouble, a good word about you in the president's ear, an offer to collaborate on a project, or that summer course you wanted. Ben Franklin (who could play people as if they were violins) wrote that the way to gain a powerful mentor was not to do them a favor, but to ask them for a favor. The initial favor made them feel an investment in your future success and paved the way for subsequent favors and patronage.

Your new institution may already have a formal mentoring program. Those vary in quality according to the structure and the faculty members assigned. Not everyone wants to be a mentor, and matching folks at random is not likely to produce a personal connection. Your official mentor may regard the whole deal as another unwanted committee assignment. If assigned a mentor, go ahead and work with that person—but be on the lookout for additional TSCs.

One caution: As with every human relationship, mentoring can go spectacularly wrong.

Watch out for snakes in the nicely manicured grass of your new

campus. Often the first people to befriend you are the most isolated and disgruntled. They are looking for a recruit to their toxic faction. Fortunately they are usually easy to spot. They will tell you who voted against your hire, who has had an affair, what a terrible place this is, etc., etc. Be cordial but distant.

Make a point of befriending some of the more mainstream faculty members immediately, before they get any impression that you have joined the reptile faction. Step over the snakes gingerly, though, for they, too, might serve on your tenure committee. If invited to join the toxic faction, you can explain you have too much work, or plead your lack of tenure, your aversion to conflict, your need to get to know the place.

"You want me to sign a letter to the president denouncing our department chair as a drunken, lecherous tyrant? That is a really generous offer, and I appreciate that you value my input. But I just got here, and I don't have tenure, and I don't really know the issue, and I have so much work to do! How are your kids, anyway?"

Listen. Give noncommittal replies. Redirect. Repeat.

After enough repetitions, you can usually establish a friendly

relationship without joining these folks on their monthly kamikaze runs against The Man.

Now go and make some influential allies.

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Great article. I have three points to make:

1. The TSC can help you with problems you encounter. They're great at talking to the chair for you. At least as important is that they are a way to communicate with the folks making decisions in reappointment and tenure meetings. You need an advocate in those meetings. Two or three advocates is better. This point was briefly mentioned but I wanted to highlight it due to its importance.

2. Sometimes the negative senior colleague is right. Being positive is not a good sign - it can indicate that the senior colleague is comfortable with stabbing you in the back. You should not ignore someone for being negative, and you should not listen to someone because they're positive. You want to do some investigation first. It's rarely the case that someone is negative just for the hell of it.

3. The helpfulness of a TSC outside your department will depend on the size of your university. If you're at a large research
university, departments may be large enough to make their own rules on almost everything. A TSC outside of the department at my university would not be able to help with most issues an untenured faculty member will encounter.
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