How to find mentors and be a good one yourself (essay)

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Publications and awards may be the conventional metrics of success in academic careers, but that is not what ultimately nourishes most of us. What sustains faculty members are our relationships with others. One need only read the acknowledgment section of any dissertation, book or article to see the multitude of ways in which the people around us inspire and gratify our scholarship. Such social relationships are mentoring in action.

Mentorship means different things[1] to different people. In this essay, we define mentors as those at various stages of our careers who have believed in us, shared their knowledge, helped strategize solutions to problems and listened to us when we needed them. Social support is important in all careers, but it is crucial in academe.

Why? In academe, faculty members are often judged on the quality of their research, teaching and mentoring -- and sometimes also on the quality of their leadership and collegiality. Yet many of those aspects of our jobs are not taught in graduate school. One assistant professor relayed to us a story about spending 15 to 20 hours preparing for every class session because he did not know how much was enough. Tenure and promotion criteria are equally ambiguous, in large part because they are based almost entirely on peer review. That makes mentoring from faculty colleagues vital.

Yet unlike the standard office environment, academic work has fewer team situations in which mentoring might take place. Although collaborations are important for funding and publication in many disciplines, such collaborations are not externally imposed and happen only at faculty members’ initiation. We see many of our colleagues irregularly, just once a month at departmental meetings, and scholars in our disciplines just once a year at academic conferences. Without daily contact, friendships and mentoring relationships do not evolve as naturally as they might in other environments.

Identifying Your Mentors

Academics thrive when they have a mentoring network[2] of friends and colleagues with whom they can exchange advice, ranging from the academic to the emotional. Although it would be nice if we each had an all-knowing mentor at our side (think Yoda: “You must unlearn what you have learned, Luke”), the person who provides perceptive feedback on your article revision won’t necessarily be the same person who will have experience navigating a conflict with a graduate student. It is simply unrealistic, and unfair, to ask so much of any one person. What you can ask for are suggestions of whom else to seek out for advice. Black women, for example, often face different challenges in the classroom than white men; connecting mentees to those who can give tailored advice requires having more robust mentoring networks.

Our university’s faculty development center runs workshops that ask faculty members to map their mentoring networks. Faculty members fill out a table identifying the people they go to for feedback across the following four quadrants: scholarly work, work-life balance, career advancement and a self-identified area of need. That helps them identify gaps in their support network, so they can then work on identifying resources and additional people to fill those gaps. The National Center for Faculty Development and Diversity provides a more in-depth mentoring map[3].

Recognizing Yourself as a Mentor

Think of the many ways that you have been mentored through the years and consider giving time of yourself to others in the same way. You need not be a senior professor to mentor others. Mentorship is about sharing experiences and empowering others; reciprocity in the form of mutual mentoring[4] is often a key part of successful mentoring relationships. Senior faculty are often surprised how much they learn from more junior faculty, who frequently have their fingers on the pulse of the most recent teaching technologies and research methodologies.

It is also important to be intentional about whom you mentor. For some people, mentoring relationships come easily. For others, especially faculty of color and women in male-dominated fields, fewer of their senior counterparts are already established in the discipline. One experiment[5] revealed that faculty members are twice as likely to respond to white men’s mentorship requests as other groups, regardless of similar credentials and research interests. Given the underrepresentation of minorities in higher education, it is crucial that white male professors be proactive about adding themselves[6] to the mentoring networks of faculty of color and women.

Mentoring requires an investment of time, which is in short supply for faculty members. As something that is not directly rewarded, it is easy to keep pushing it off until later. But you should keep in mind that you are not expected to be the one mentor who does it all. Given recognition that mentoring networks are far more effective, think of yourself as a node among many. Your main role is to help where you can and then connect your mentee to others. Such a division of labor is healthy for those whom you mentor, as well as for the institution as a whole. The more connections, the sounder the organization.

You should also document the mentoring you do for colleagues in your annual reviews, whether it’s reading grant proposals and papers, observing classroom dynamics, or helping your mentee develop a writing schedule. Articulating this role in formal reviews makes mentoring work more visible and valued.

Successful Mentoring Approaches

Some of strongest mentoring relationships we have seen are those that evolve spontaneously through shared research interests and collaboration among faculty members. Departments or centers can cultivate that by establishing research or teaching working groups where faculty members regularly present and review one another’s work. Relationships that begin in such a setting often expand organically, growing to serve other mutual mentoring needs as well.

In our college, we are working to encourage such groups and to support the establishment of thematic research groups spanning across departments. That serves the combined purpose of promoting interdisciplinary research collaboration while connecting faculty members to potential mentors outside their immediate departments.
Research shows that faculty members prefer these more natural mutual mentoring opportunities to formal programs. Realizing that such opportunities do not always happen for everyone, more universities are now matching each incoming faculty member to a department or college mentor, yet these can easily become “match and abandon” pairings of benign neglect. How many of you reading this now are suffering a slight twinge of guilt over past such pairings you let wither on the vine? You are not alone. Mentees, especially women, often end up avoiding the mentor after just one or two meetings because they fear being seen as too needy. The mentor often takes this lack of contact to mean that the mentee is coasting along fine and does not need -- or perhaps does not want -- their mentorship.

To avoid this, the institution must make clear what mentoring expectations are and explain why mutual mentorship is valuable. At our institution, we provide a set of rationales for the mentor pairings, as well as suggested topics to discuss at each meeting.

It is sometimes effective for mentees to select two mentors in order to increase the probability of connection. Some departments assign one teaching and one research mentor who share similar interests. Other departments match incoming faculty members with a junior and a senior mentor to provide support from someone closer to the challenges junior face and from someone with a bird’s-eye view on career planning.

Effort must be put forth to sustain mentoring dyads. One approach is for the university to provide meal funds to the mentee so that they have an excuse to take the initiative. (They should also be encouraged to use the funds for other potential mentors as they build their mentoring network.) The chair or personnel committee can periodically send a reminder that the pair should be meeting at least a couple times a semester. Sometimes a little external accountability is all it takes to revive the relationship.

Nevertheless, mutual mentors usually need glue to hold their relationship together. Those who organize their meetings around common interests -- for example, attending a teaching workshop or speaker event together and discussing it over coffee afterward -- have longer-standing relationships. Departments can also promote such activities. For instance, in one department at the University of California, Berkeley, mentor pairs are asked to co-organize weekly seminar series together. At more senior levels, an effective approach is to have a full professor co-chair a major committee with an associate professor. That allows for peer mentoring, while also ensuring that committee work is done efficiently.

One common frustration that junior faculty express is the advice they get from their mentors is more about the end goals than the process needed to get there. As mentors, you should share strategies on how you went about achieving success. (Stories of failure are also appreciated.) In particular, faculty members often need assistance in identifying how to build accountability into their work lives for research and writing tasks that lack clear deadlines. Helping each other establish a long-term plan and simply revisiting it each time you meet can provide a critical feedback loop that we do not get from other everyday sources.

Other, more formal, mentoring programs often focus specifically on first-year faculty members. In our college, those faculty members meet monthly to discuss topics of importance to their careers. Themes span time management, academic usage of social media, grant writing, revising articles and handling teaching concerns. The sessions become opportunities for the faculty members to mutually mentor one another over the course of the year.

Alternatively, this can occur at the departmental level. In one department with a large number of new faculty members, a faculty member leads a career development seminar, which also serves to fulfill their service obligation. Similar programming could be extended to facilitate mentors at later career stages. For example, some associate professors may benefit from mutual mentorship as they prepare their pathways to promotion. Full professors may appreciate advice and social support from their peers as they strike out in new research areas or consider pursuing administrative positions.

At the same time, you should develop a mentoring network outside your university. Some mentoring programs on our campus provide funds that enable each participant to fly in a scholar for a public presentation and to meet with them to talk through their grant proposals. Similar programs could be fostered at the departmental level vis-à-vis speaker series, allowing each assistant professor to invite one speaker a year to campus. That would be helpful in fostering external relationships while providing feedback on the junior member’s research, which can be useful when locating external letter writers.

Ultimately, the rub is that while academe lacks day-to-day structures to encourage mentoring, long-term tenure and promotion prospects essentially rely on it. Thus, you must build your mentoring network and solicit and provide feedback to colleagues well before major promotion milestones. The advice and support of those who have been there before have a profound effect on career success and mobility.

Faculty members have endless opportunities to experiment with new teaching methods, take on new administrative roles and venture into entirely new research directions, yet they have few structures that provide training to do so. Academe operates within one of the few remaining apprenticeship models in today’s society. Mentorship is basic to that structure.

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Links:
[1] https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/mentoring/debut_of_new_column_on_mentoring_in_higher_education_careers&source=gmail&ust=1499963560164000&usg=AFQjCNHRY-6adW0_W4kVXEVeTwf2tFe3g
[3] https://sites.hampshire.edu/ctl/files/2016/02/NCFDD_Mentoring_Map.pdf&source=gmail&ust=1499963560164000&usg=AFQCNCHbibeLyf9f4zdXX3EDIOqv8s85g
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