Building a network of mentors after you receive tenure (essay)

Submitted by Kerry Ann Rockquemore on October 25, 2017 - 3:00am

Now that you’ve chosen your posttenure pathway,[1] you have only two more steps left to move forward: 1) to build out your posttenure mentoring network and 2) to plan for your success. I’ll focus this week on how to create a new mentoring network that is appropriate to your new career stage, and then I’ll finish out the series next week by describing how you can plan for your success.

Mentoring Still Matters

Everyone agrees that pre-tenure faculty members need great mentoring. But once you become a tenured professor, the most common assumption is that you no longer need it. Instead, you become the all-knowing, guru-mentor for new faculty members. This flawed assumption can lead you to make one of the common mistakes of newly tenured faculty members: 1) ignoring your own mentoring needs, 2) failing to build a new mentoring network to support your chosen posttenure pathway and/or 3) continuing to rely on an outdated set of mentors that are not appropriate to your new rank-specific needs.

Every transition in your professional career requires mentoring. Every time you move from one step on the academic ladder to the next, you’ll discover a new set of rules (written and unwritten), new challenges to navigate and new skills needed for success. I’m sure you remember the transition from graduate student to faculty member and how much changed during your shift from one role to another. The transition from assistant to associate professor is equally important, and the most efficient way to move through it is to create a new mentoring network.

Please keep in mind that we’re not operating on the outdated model of mentoring [2] where you have one (or a few) mentors who are going to guide you throughout your entire career. As such, I’m not asking you to find a single person to mentor you down your chosen posttenure pathway. Instead, I’m encouraging you to create a big new network full of people who can support you in very specific ways. That means: 1) identifying what you will need to be successful on your new posttenure path, 2) identifying people, organizations and programs who can meet your needs, and 3) learning how to cultivate those next-level mentoring relationships. Your new network may contain a few of the mentors from your time on the tenure-track, but most likely it will need to be...
populated by a whole new supportive group of people.

**Step 1: What Do You Need?**

Creating a posttenure mentoring network starts with your chosen path. Regardless of the approach you took to choosing your pathway (deep dish, entrée with sides, or sample platter [1]), you will need to step back and ask yourself: what do I need to become ________ (whatever you chose as your pathway). Most commonly, tenured faculty have a combination of the following needs:

- **Professional development**: What are the new skills you need to develop for your new path? Can you learn those skills on your campus (for example, through an OpEd Project Public Voices Fellowship program [3] on your campus or other campus based programs to teach you how to communicate with a broader public [4])? Are there off campus programs that you can participate in that will draw you into a national cohort of other people on the same path (for example the HERS Leadership Institute [5] or CIC Leadership Academy [6])?

- **Emotional support**: Have you communicated your vision to your friends, family and/or supportive others? Do you have a support squad? If your chosen path stretches you outside of your comfort zone (and I hope it does), you will naturally have ups and downs as you grow. Transitions are easier when you have a group of people who can support you unconditionally, and I do not recommend you lean on your departmental colleagues as your emotional support system.

- **Community**: If your new path involves activities you have not been doing on the tenure track, you may need a community of others who are already doing what you want to do, or are in the process of moving in that direction. The value of community is that it accelerates your identity transition, it provides a positive peer group, and it makes the shift a bit more fun. This can look a lot of different ways. For example, if you want to start blogging, how can you get in a community with other bloggers? If you want to become an administrator, how can you get in a community of emerging campus leaders? Or if you want to shift your research trajectory, how can you build out a new intellectual community of readers, collaborators and co-authors?

- **Role Models**: You got a head start on meeting this need when you identified and interviewed a wide range of potential role models [7] earlier in this process. Now that you’ve chosen your pathway, you want to drill down and identify a range of role models specific to exactly what you aspire to accomplish. Who are the people who doing what you want to do at a high level of excellence? How can you connect with them?

- **Accountability for what really matters**: Before you were tenured, you may have created accountability structures for writing [8]. After gaining tenure, what really matters is productivity (or consistent forward motion) on your chosen path and your personal health and wellness (which can no longer be considered a luxury item or self-indulgence -- it is now essential). Who or what can hold you accountable for those two areas that will lead to your long-term success?

- **Access to Opportunities**: Pre-tenure you needed mentors and sponsors to help you learn about the broad landscape of opportunities on your campus and in your discipline. As a tenured faculty member, you want to take that to the next level by adding specificity. By that I mean you already know the general landscape, but now you must cultivate relationships with people who are in-the-know about opportunities locally, nationally and globally that are...
specific to your chosen pathway.

- **Substantive Feedback**: No matter what your posttenure pathway, you’ll need substantive feedback on your performance. It may be in the form of readers for your writing, professional editors, your department colleagues or those whom you are newly serving. Consistent objective feedback will help you to grow quickly and effectively (instead of staying mired in mistakes and confusion).

**Step 2: Where Can You Best Get Your Needs Fulfilled?**

Once you have determined your needs in light of your chosen posttenure pathway [1], it’s time to brainstorm the most effective ways to get your needs met. Feel free to use our posttenure Mentor Map [9] as a visual aid to for your brainstorming. It’s important that you fill in each part of the map where you have a relevant need (and feel free to modify the areas that don’t fit your situation).

You’ve probably identified some areas where you immediately know what to fill in, whether it’s a person, program or organization. Other areas, you’ll be brainstorming possibilities. And some areas, you may have no clue where to begin. For those areas, I recommend you ask others for referrals, search online or crowd-source ideas.

**Step 3: Begin Building Your New Mentoring Network**

Sometimes it can feel overwhelming when you map out your new mentoring network. If you’re like they typical participant in our PostTenure Pathfinders Program [10], you’ll start with more blank spaces and questions than concrete ideas about how to get your needs met. That’s perfectly normal. The key to moving from that overwhelmed feeling to creating a mentoring network that will meet your needs is taking concrete action.

You can start taking action anywhere on your new mentor map, but I recommend you pick one area to start and know that it will take time to fully build out a new network for your chosen pathway. Wherever you start, let me lovingly suggest that you not make the most common mistake people make in approaching new mentors. Whatever you do, don’t ask people: Will you be my mentor? [11] It’s a loaded term, most people interpret it as a long-term, time-intensive request (therefore making it a hard thing to say “yes” to), and it’s not effective as a midcareer move.

Instead, start generating concrete and specific questions that you want to ask people whom you’ve identified. Then when you contact them, ask for a brief phone conversation to discuss __________ (insert specific topic). For example, “May I have a 20-minute conversation with you about how to bring the Op-Ed fellowship to my campus?” or “Do you have 30 minutes to walk me through how you started an all-faculty union on your campus?” It is far easier for someone to agree to a brief conversation in an area they have deep expertise than to agree to the vague and sticky request: Will you be my mentor?

When you talk with people who may populate your mentoring network, you want to stay focused the agenda at hand, respect their time, and maintain a highly engaged demeanor. Then when you finish the conversation, simply ask them if you may contact them again if you have a specific question in their area of expertise. If the conversation was lively and engaging, they are likely to say “yes.” And just like that: you have gained a next-level mentor!
The Weekly Challenge

This week, I challenge you to:

- ask yourself what you need to be successful on your new posttenure pathway;
- assess your needs in each of the designated areas;
- identify the people, programs and organizations who can best fulfill your needs;
- brainstorm how to fill the empty spaces;
- pick one area to start building out your network; and
- send the first email requesting a brief and specific conversation.

When you shift from the guru-mentor model that most of us learned in graduate school to the network mentoring model, it will take some time to create the kinds of contacts and relationships you can rely on to quickly and efficiently get your needs met. But I am confident that the time and energy invested in this project will pay off dividends by accelerating your progress and success in your posttenure pathway.

Peace and Possibilities,

Kerry Ann Rockquemore, PhD

Founder, National Center for Faculty Development & Diversity [12]


Links:
[9] https://www.facultydiversity.org/PathfindersMentorMap
[10] https://www.facultydiversity.org/pathfinders