Institutional Approaches to Mentoring Faculty Colleagues

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Institutional Approaches to Mentoring Faculty Colleagues

To build an inclusive climate for faculty, colleges should develop formal programs for mentoring rather than just leave it to individuals, write Joya Misra, Ember Skye Kanelee and Ethel L. Mickey.

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// March 18, 2021

Mentoring faculty colleagues often gets short shrift. Faculty members who never had formal mentors wonder why colleagues need mentoring, even if they themselves have many people with whom they informally consult. Others with ineffective mentors wonder whether mentoring can ever be useful. Still others worry about being responsible for colleagues’ success.

Many campus leaders, including provosts, deans and department chairs -- recognize that they need to develop more robust mentoring models, but they are not sure how to create a mentoring program (https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/faculty-development/creating-effective-faculty-mentoring-program/).

Yet, to build an inclusive climate for faculty, good mentoring is crucial. Mentoring must also be institutionalized and developed as a program rather than treated as an individualized issue, handed off to specific senior faculty. Through effective institutional approaches, all faculty members can access a web of support, leveling the playing field for faculty from underrepresented groups.

The fact is that academe is set up like a maze. It’s unclear which way to turn, which components of the career to emphasize without the perspective of those who have been through the maze themselves. These mazes are also set up differently at each institution, so knowing the structure of the maze at one college or university does not guarantee the way forward at another. Certain faculty members, particularly women and members of underrepresented groups, may also face wrong turns and dead ends -- such as poorly timed service responsibilities -- that do not impact other academics.

In some distant past, faculty members might have “seen themselves” in colleagues, making it easier to develop informal relationships that conveyed how to succeed. In departments where faculty members regularly worked in their offices, had lunch and coffee breaks with colleagues, informal relationships also developed more naturally.
With an increasingly diverse professoriate, faculty members are less and less likely to make personal connections based on shared characteristics. Given the pervasiveness of anti-Black racism, mentoring is particularly important for Black faculty members. Some faculty members may be wary of saying the wrong thing (https://vernamyers.com/what-if-i-say-the-wrong-thing-10-tips-for-culturally-effective-people/) to colleagues, thus distancing themselves, unintentionally worsening the situation. In institutions where faculty often work from home and come to their college or university for teaching, or during COVID-19 disruptions not come into the office at all, making connections becomes even more difficult.

Effective mentoring plays a crucial role in ensuring that no one falls through the cracks, uncertain how to strategize and move their careers forward. Mentoring relationships can also make faculty work much more engaging and enjoyable. Most important, while recruiting diverse faculty is important, retaining diverse faculty (https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2020/03/06/underrepresented-faculty-members-share-real-reasons-they-have-left-various) should receive as much attention. In a country where Black (https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/06/american-nightmare/612457/) faculty members and their families heartbreakingly face higher risks of death from COVID-19 and racist violence, mentoring can help faculty of color find allies and access vital support.

What Is Mentoring? Who Does the Mentoring?

We define mentoring (https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2017/07/13/how-find-mentors-and-be-good-one-yourself-essay) as sharing knowledge with colleagues, providing support, listening to and responding to questions, and strategizing solutions to problems. Mentoring is not confined to one stage of a faculty member's career but rather throughout it, as they take on new roles and follow their individual paths. And all faculty members -- including both those who are not on the tenure track and those who are tenured -- benefit from collegial support.

Mentoring models take many forms. While the "guru model (https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2013/07/22/essay-calling-senior-faculty-embrace-new-style-mentoring)" -- one mentor who knows everything and seamlessly provides support for all of a colleague's mentoring needs -- is how many people envision mentoring, that approach is not realistic in the real world. As Kerry Ann Rockquemore notes, it doesn't work (https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2016/02/03/most-mentoring-today-based-outdated-model-essay) for most people and leads to many unmet needs.

Department and institutional leaders should instead help faculty to build a mentoring network (https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2013/07/22/essay-calling-senior-faculty-embrace-new-style-mentoring). As developed by Mary Deane Sorcinelli (https://www.umass.edu/ctl/staff/mary-deane-sorcinelli-) and Jung Yun (https://english.columbian.gwu.edu/jung-yun), mentoring networks (https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.3200/CHNG.39.6.58-C4) reach a broad array of faculty members and create a variety of supports for many different mentoring needs. Such networks might include peers, senior
Colleges should develop formal programs for mentoring, not leave it to individual faculty (opinion)

Colleges should develop formal programs for mentoring, not leave it to individual faculty members. Thus, mentoring should be embedded in institutional plans, rather than individual mentoring relationships.

One key impediment to good mentoring is that mentoring is rarely compensated; faculty often mentor colleagues out of the goodness of their hearts. Establishing formal mentoring networks, however, can help create compensated opportunities for mentoring and also spread out mentoring responsibilities so that they do not weigh down any one individual.

A more strategic approach to mentoring makes clear that department chairs, provosts or other college leaders are responsible for ensuring that faculty receive the support they need to succeed in their jobs. Rather than handing off this job to individual faculty members on an ad hoc basis, the institution should provide a range of more formal mentoring programs, as well as ensure that faculty members are plugged in to these opportunities.

11 Approaches

It is impossible to create a one-size-fits-all mentoring plan. Instead, institutional and department leaders should carefully consider their resources and the needs of their faculty and then create targeted plans. That said, as researchers with the University of Massachusetts Amherst ADVANCE Program (https://www.umass.edu/advance/), funded by the National Science Foundation (https://www.nsf.gov/funding/pgm_summ.jsp?pims_id=5383), our survey and interview data with diverse STEM faculty point to some general best practices that institutions can adopt to help faculty feel supported and successful. We outline 11 practical steps that institutional leaders can adapt to their particular resources, institutional context and disciplinary norms.

1. Individual mentoring. Departments increasingly either assign mentors or allow faculty members to choose them from among their colleagues. Some assign faculty both senior and peer mentors. Faculty tend to prefer chosen mentors (http://www.dl.begellhouse.com/journals/00551c876cc2f027,6b387569338e6ea6,2500a9c735ceae1b.html) over assigned ones, but it is important that those mentors have institutional knowledge. Individual models should also allow faculty to change mentors, since they may need different mentors at different stages in their careers.

2. Team mentoring. This approach (https://provost.columbia.edu/sites/default/files/content/MentoringBestPractices.pdf) allows faculty members to receive support and feedback from a wider array of colleagues -- a range of people who can view their work and advise their career development. It also allows faculty members to work with a group of mentors who can support different elements of their teaching, research, mentoring or leadership. Members of mentoring teams might regularly meet one on one with a faculty member but also hold a yearly meeting with the whole
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3. **Mutual mentoring.** [These](https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10755-016-9359-6) models bring faculty peers within or across departments together to work in a nonhierarchical and collaborative way toward their own self-defined mentoring goals. For example, pretenure faculty, lecturers or even new department chairs can find support and connection through mutual mentoring groups. Faculty of color across campus, including those at different career stages, may also provide powerful mutual mentoring in ways that enrich and nourish all participants. Providing small amounts of [funding](https://www.umass.edu/advance/mutual-mentoring-guidelines) for mutual mentoring programs centrally or through the department allows faculty to meet over coffee or lunch and helps legitimize the importance of mutual mentoring activities. Getting together over coffee and bagels, for example, may be less expensive than dinner events but still creates connections among faculty that pay valuable long-term dividends.

4. **Meetings with chairs.** While chairs have many other bureaucratic tasks, ensuring the success of faculty members is a wise investment of their time. Faculty members should meet regularly and at least once a year with department chairs. [Department chairs](https://insidehighered.com/advice/2020/06/05/advice-department-chairs-how-foster-inclusion-among-faculty-opinion) often have a wider perspective and can answer questions that faculty members are sometimes not even sure how to ask. In our research, we’ve found that faculty members who meet regularly with their chairs feel more confident that they know how to handle challenges and make strategic career decisions.

5. **Meetings with committees that assess faculty.** Faculty members should meet regularly with and receive constructive feedback from colleagues as they make their way through personnel processes. Meeting each year with members of committees who assess people moving toward promotion can help faculty members plan successful career paths. Some research suggests women are less likely to receive [honest feedback](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0146167220916622). But although it can be awkward for committee members to give colleagues news they do not want to hear, it’s much worse for faculty members to fail because of too little information.

6. **Professionalization seminars.** In settings where faculty hiring is regular enough to create a cohort of new faculty, biweekly or monthly professionalization seminars can be useful, creating a level playing field by ensuring that all new faculty receive needed support. The
Office of Faculty Development could organize these seminars at the university level, or large departments could offer them with the support from central offices like Office of Research Development or Center for Teaching. Asking faculty members to identify issues that they would like discussed in upcoming meetings ensures that these seminars provide the kind of targeted advice that faculty members are seeking.

7. **Workshops.** Focused workshops can provide guidance for specific key elements of faculty careers, particularly when professionalization seminars are not feasible. For example, faculty at different ranks can benefit from syllabus development workshops, teaching support groups and grant-writing workshops. Workshopping with colleagues, including those from other disciplines, can help build relationships as well as intellectual connections.

8. **Writing accountability groups.** For many faculty members, writing gets pushed back to the bottom of the queue because teaching and service requirements have clear deadlines and demands. Where writing is key to assessing faculty, writing accountability groups can play a strong and supportive role. Faculty can connect with colleagues and consistently make progress on their writing. Write on Sites can also provide support by bringing faculty members together to write. Saying out loud what they are working on and being observed by colleagues can help keep people from turning to other work or procrastinating.

9. **Working with professional editors.** Faculty members can also benefit from writing and editing support from professional editors, including developmental editors and copy editors. Many faculty members are trained in fields that do not provide mentoring around writing; they may also be working in different languages. Some institutions pay for the costs of an editor who can help ensure that faculty writing is both polished and clear. A simple fix like an editor can greatly improve grant funding and publication chances and help ensure that good ideas are not lost through awkward writing.

10. **Networking opportunities.** Departments with funding for external speakers could encourage faculty to invite one or more speakers to campus whose work connects to their own. This opportunity might occur once or more frequently, depending
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on the budget and other circumstances. Where speaker series already exist, minor tweaks to the formula of who is invited can pay long-term networking bonuses for both faculty members and students.

11. External mentoring. Resource-rich institutions could provide compensation for external scholars (https://www.amherst.edu/academiclife/provost_dean_faculty/funding/external-mentoring-program) to meet with faculty members; read their grant proposals, articles or book manuscripts; give them feedback; and help them build networks with faculty outside their institution.

Fostering Mentoring Climates

Given the impact of COVID-19, we should note that many of these mentoring models can also operate online. While face-to-face interaction is generally most effective, developing and maintaining supportive and collegial mentoring is especially vital now. Faculty members are rethinking how to succeed in their careers, and advice and feedback from colleagues helps them strategize as well as inform colleagues of how COVID is impacting careers.

In addition, fostering a strong mentoring culture throughout an institution requires rewarding and highlighting excellent mentoring. Faculty members deserve recognition and occasionally compensation for investing their time and effort into ensuring collegial success. Mentoring awards can help make it clear that the institution values mentoring. Providing resources for mentoring, such as through mutual mentoring groups, can also emphasize that mentoring cultures matter.

While we do not think that every college or university needs to adopt all of the approaches we’ve suggested, we are confident that identifying a few key strategies will make a real difference at most institutions. Through developing clear mentoring plans that address the needs of their faculty members, institutional and departmental leaders can foster greater inclusivity, resilience and success among their colleagues.

Bio

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