Faculty Mentorship at Colleges and Universities

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Abstract. Mentoring is a process in which one person, usually of superior rank and outstanding achievement, guides the development of an entry-level individual. Colleges and universities historically have had new faculty orientation programs and methods to support new faculty matriculation. Mentorship programs, if well developed, can integrate new faculty into the university community and are characteristic of good educational practice. This article provides a rationale for, as well as features and benefits of, a new faculty mentorship program at a comprehensive university.

Documented feelings of isolation by novice faculty, coupled with the demise of faculty clubs, have led to renewed interest in mentoring as an effective method of induction for new university faculty. Although mentoring programs frequently are adopted, the effectiveness of the programs has been neither studied nor described. In addition, because of economic constraints within higher education, new faculty are faced with increased teaching and advising responsibilities while they also are dealing with rapid technological changes. Universities must provide new tenure-track and temporary faculty with a broad information base regarding a university's policy and culture, as well as effective mechanisms for structuring faculty collaboration within the university community. In this article, we provide a historical perspective on integrating new faculty into the university community and a definition of mentoring that was developed at one university as a model for subsequent mentor programming.

Review of the Literature

Faculty clubs at colleges and universities traditionally have functioned as meeting places to promote interdepartmental collegiality, intra-institutional collaboration and cohesiveness, and esprit de corps. In addition, faculty clubs have served as a common social ground for stimulating scholarly interchange. Over the years, however, faculty club membership has declined, as has the number of university facilities dedicated to faculty clubs (Schneider 1997). Perhaps contributing to this trend has been the perception that instead of engendering scholarship, faculty clubs were predominantly social and, therefore, not important or relevant to today's faculty. Although more senior professors argue that collegiality and cohesiveness are being lost without a common meeting ground, younger scholars argue that their own research agendas are more important than gaining general social acceptance by the university community. As a result, faculty clubs have become relics in most modern university communities, even as the desire to make meaningful connections among scholars becomes more critical.

Interestingly, and perhaps causally, the national decline of faculty clubs has taken place during a time when electronic communication is facilitating more options for scholarly communications and activities outside of a socially based context. For example, electronic communication and the Internet have provided geographically and disciplinarily disparate faculty with resources to pursue grants, do collaborative research, and obtain scholarly support.

For some, it seems that "in an era of faxes and email, professors often feel
greater allegiance to fellow specialists across the country than to their colleagues down the hall’’ (Schneider 1997, A13). Reinforcing this view are reports from novice faculty that they often experience “isolation, separation, fragmentation, loneliness, competition, and sometimes incivility” at their own institutions, thus forcing them to go outside campus for support from a community of scholars that they have not found in their home departments or institutions (Rice, Sorcinelli, and Austin 2000, 13).

From a more global view of this sense of collegiality, Naisbitt and Aburdene have suggested that our society is “drowning in information but starved for knowledge” (1990, 12). They further argue that what is introduced to society through technology must be counterbalanced by a type of human response they call “high touch” (304). “High touch” provides a human lens through which to evaluate technology, causing individuals to embrace technology that preserves humanness and to reject technology that intrudes upon it (Naisbitt, Naisbitt, and Phillips 1999).

The application of this concept to higher education suggests that in addition to technologically mediated intellectual connections among faceless scholars, personal connections also must be present. The tempering effect of “high touch” also would seem critical as a catalyst for the development of what has been identified by researchers as an “integrated life” for faculty (Rice, Sorcinelli, and Austin 2000, 8).

Mentoring has been defined as a process in which one person, usually of superior rank and outstanding achievement, guides the development of an entry-level individual seen as the protégé or mentee (Carmin 1988; Gerstein 1985; Gehrke 1988; Nankivell 1997). Once common at colleges and universities, mentoring, like faculty clubs, began to decline in the 1950s, as new Ph.D.’s were arriving not merely apprehensive but deeply suspicious of authoritarian structures. With increasing frequency, young faculty were substantially different from their senior colleagues in gender, race, religion, training, or background and upbringing. . . . Suspecting that they were regarded as retrograde, some senior professors prudently retreated; reluctant to intervene, many abandoned their responsibility to teach younger teachers. Essentially, this dynamic interrupted the traditions of mentoring, and as those junior faculty moved to more senior positions, they in turn abdicated their responsibility for training and supporting the new junior faculty. (Bell 1999, 448)

Another obstacle to mentoring was found in the models themselves, through which new faculty were paired with senior tenured faculty. This traditional model of mentoring has been criticized as a “power relationship whereby the mentor is older and wiser, tenured and with rank; and holds all the power. . . . These mentoring relationships are not collaborative, or communal but rather, hierarchical in nature” (Rodriguez and Sjostrom 2000, 9). As some researchers have pointed out, senior faculty at most academic institutions are more likely to be male (Madison and Huston 1996) and therefore potentially less helpful to new female faculty. Within the literature, authors indicate a preference among new faculty members for senior faculty mentors from departments other than the new faculty members’ departments, because these mentors will not be judging them for promotion and tenure (Sands, Parson, and Duane 1991). However, the need for mentoring from within a new faculty member’s department is well documented by Herr (1994) and by Rice, Sorcinelli, and Austin (2000). These researchers stress the need of new faculty for support, especially in the areas of pedagogy within a specific discipline, identification of levels of importance assigned within the departmental culture to specific professional organizations, and learning the subculture of the department.

Related to issues of pairing new faculty with senior faculty who are perceived as more intimidating because encouraging has been the issue of whether, and to what degree, part-time or adjunct faculty should be included in faculty mentoring programs. Commenting on the quality of life issues faced by adjunct professors, Karen Thompson (head of the union at Rutgers University at New Brunswick) would seem to defend the need to include adjunct faculty in mentoring programs when she indicates that “[t]he importance of the conditions of [temporary] teaching personnel is of the utmost because those are also the learning conditions of the students” (Cox 2000, 12). Other researchers highlight the special mentoring needs of temporary faculty who, despite their strong academic credentials that enhance an institution (Millis 1994), feel a need for a sense of collegiality, community, and value (Tal 1999).

Departmental and institutional neglect of new university faculty members for the first two or three years of their career (Leon 1997) and the erosion of a mentoring philosophy (Kuo 2000) have created “barriers of isolation” for new faculty (Hulig-Austin 1990). Those feelings of isolation were first documented in the early 1980s through research by concerned professionals (Boice 1992; Menges 1999; Sorcinelli and Austin 1992; Tierney and Bensimon 1996; Austin and Fraser 1999; Nyquist et al. 1999). The studies suggested that although new faculty enter the profession with an idealistic vision of freedom, autonomy, and opportunities for intellectual discovery and growth, this vision does not fully match what they actually experience over time (Rice, Sorcinelli, and Austin 2000).

Effective mentoring programs that pay attention to three primary components of the mentoring process—career development, psychosocial issues, and modeling—can help mediate the transition from vision to reality (Schwiebert 2000). Mentoring programs in higher education provide an opportunity to cultivate human interactions based on respect, integrity, perseverance, and trust (Bey and Hope-King 1995). The programs also provide basic information regarding resources, assistance, and support for teaching and advisement, and cross-disciplinary collaboration and discussion. Mentoring programs build, foster, and sustain “a community of teachers and a culture of teaching that are both means to multiple ends and invariable ends themselves” (Bell 1999, 448).

**A Definition of Mentoring at a Comprehensive University**

Research that estimates the number of new faculty mentoring programs is not available. In addition, research describing models that have been implemented is scarce. At our university, mentor programming begins with the premise that it must be faculty driven and administratively...
supported. The overarching purpose of the mentoring program is to introduce new faculty to senior cross-disciplinary faculty, provide new faculty with information about on-campus resources, and promote interdepartmental discussion and collegiality (Heller and Sindelar 1991). Drawing from the literature, which indicates that if mentoring partners have extremely precise expectations of each other, they may not reap the full benefits of a mentoring program (Bullington and Boylston 2001; Goodwin, Stevens, and Bellamy 1998), mentoring at our university is flexible and can accommodate individual preferences. The program begins with new faculty orientation and continues through the first year of a faculty member’s teaching experience. The advantage of this model is the creation of faculty communicative channels that are supported longitudinally.

The goals of the mentoring program at our university are

1. to empower new and continuing faculty by supporting their professional growth and renewal (Boice 1992);

2. to promote faculty satisfaction (Menges 1999) through what has been described in recent literature as a dialectical relationship (Kaye 2000) with peers and senior faculty that can foster a sense of community;

3. to attract, retain, and facilitate promotion of new faculty (Luna and Cullen 1995; Kirk 1992) by thoroughly explaining the university’s tenure and promotion systems (Rice 1996) and by introducing new faculty to unique organizational cultures and definitions of work responsibilities;

4. to provide opportunities for interactions between junior and senior faculty to facilitate mutual respect and avoid counterproductive divisions between old and young professors (Magnier 1999);

5. to meet “entry level survival needs” of new faculty by providing information about departmental and university sociopolitical culture (Johnsrud 1994); and

6. to assist new faculty members to “begin to develop, and balance, their commitments to... research and teaching” (Jackson and Simpson 1994).

Alumni of the university’s faculty mentoring program from the past five years have confirmed that the goals of the program match their needs, especially in the primary areas of academic advising, using the university’s instructional electronic infrastructures (for example, e-mail, library resources, and instructional technologies), using the university’s electronic administrative systems, and pedagogy.

The Future of Mentoring Programs at Colleges and Universities

The evidence and critical need for faculty mentoring has longstanding support in higher education research. Recently, the American Association for Higher Education indicated that “good practice [at colleges and universities] encourages mentoring by senior faculty” (Sorcinelli 2000). Sorcinelli outlines strategies that include faculty contacts over a shared meal; recognizing senior faculty for the time that they spend mentoring junior colleagues; creating opportunities for junior and senior faculty to work together (for example, grant writing and collaborative teaching); encouraging new faculty to be proactive about making connections with senior colleagues; sharing teaching insights and creating mechanisms to support informal discussions about issues of teaching and learning; helping new faculty identify institutional resources that will help with grant writing and teaching; supporting a view of scholarship that includes the scholarship of teaching as well as applied research within a specific discipline; and helping new faculty create a balance between professional and personal life, especially for women faculty and faculty of color.

Key words: mentoring, faculty mentoring

NOTE

Readers who are interested in a description of the successful mentoring program at our institution are invited to e-mail Hallie Savage (hsavage@clarion.edu), Rashelle S. Karp (rkarp@clarion.edu), or Rose Logue (rlogue@clarion.edu).

REFERENCES


