DEPARTMENTAL LEADERSHIP: ENGAGING OTHERS IN MENTORSHIP

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Abstract

This paper presents one chairperson's experience using a formalized, structured mentoring program to foster success of newly-hired, pre-tenured faculty. A description of the specific model is offered, as well as an outline of benefits, challenges, and suggestions for department heads interested in starting a similar program.

Introduction

Because filling empty or new positions takes time, energy and human/financial resources, it is important to hire individuals with potential for long-term employment. Chairpersons want new hires to fulfill position responsibilities, adjust to the academic environment, contribute to the department, be successful in teaching and research, and ultimately earn tenure. These expectations can be overwhelming or even unclear to new faculty, and may result in frustration for both the faculty member and department chair. Ideally, the department chair works with the new hire to nurture his/her growth, but being busy with other administrative and teaching duties, how does one provide the necessary mentoring to pre-tenured members of the department? One way to lessen the confusion is for new hires to be paired with a more experienced person (a mentor) in order to help him/her sort through the new environment. The mentoring relationship can be a complex one. Egos, reluctance, resistance, and perception of power can all work against a successful relationship (Hansman, 2003). However, mentoring has been shown to be a positive force in a variety of situations (Golian-Lui, 2003; Jones & Pauley, 2003). Much is written in the literature about mentoring, including historical aspects, benefits, models that work, and more recently, a shift in thinking from one-on-one mentoring to network mentoring. This paper assumes that mentoring is a positive activity and aims to describe the experience with one model, utilizing others' strengths and engaging them as both formal and informal mentors, from the perspective of a department chair.

Just what is mentoring?

A search of the literature indicates the term mentoring means different things to different people, and there are many examples of mentoring in practice. Peer Resources lists the following as just some examples (Peer Systems Consulting Group, Inc, 2008)

- Women executives assist other women to break the "glass ceiling"
- Senior citizens demonstrate hobbies to elementary students
- People managing life challenges provide support and wisdom to others
- Older students help younger students cope with peer pressure
- Experienced faculty members assist their newer colleagues

One definition of mentoring is that of a process in which one person, usually of superior rank and outstanding achievement, guides the development of an entry-level individual seen as the protege or mentee. (Savage, Karp, & Logue, 2004) Savage further described mentoring at a comprehensive university as a way to introduce new faculty to senior cross-disciplinary faculty, provide new faculty with information about on-campus resources, and promote interdepartmental discussion and collegiality. In a recent review article, Sorcenelli not only writes of the traditional definition of a top-down, one-to-one relationship in which an experienced faculty member guides and supports the career development of a new or early-career faculty member, but also describes new and broader models of mentoring.(Sorcinelli & Yun, 2007) The model described below illustrates aspects of these definitions.

One Mentoring Model

K-State Libraries has had a formal mentoring program in place for several years, but it needed updating and strengthening to provide more consistent, quality mentoring. The Professional Development Committee, a library faculty committee, revamped the program in 2004-2005. When looking at ways to improve the program, this committee searched the literature, obtained feedback from the group, and utilized the advice of a campus faculty member whose expertise is in the area of adult education and training programs. One of the first changes was to make the role of mentor voluntary. Experience and common sense told the committee that those who were assigned as mentors, based solely on the fact they already had achieved tenure, may not have the time, inclination, or ability to be effective. The program remains mandatory for pre-tenured faculty. Reviewing other models and past experience with the program, the committee created documents that outlined criteria, expectations and responsibilities of mentors, mentees and their department heads. Once the mentors were secured, the documents served as resources to help them be successful in their role. As noted above, there are many different perceptions and definitions of mentoring, so it seemed important to document the process with some formality. Assessment was conducted after the first year and feedback continues to be incorporated into the program. For example, at one point, there were many new hires and not enough mentors to go around, so a group or cohort approach was started for the first year of a junior faculty member's probationary period. Feedback from the first group indicated many positives about the experience, but suggested that there be two groups – one for those starting near the beginning of the calendar year, and one for those starting near the beginning of the academic year. Although each pre-tenured faculty member is assigned a formal mentor in this program, he or she is also encouraged to seek informal mentoring from any of the tenured professors. Sometimes, these informal relationships prove to be the most valuable and meaningful for the junior faculty member. Feedback continues to be important to the relatively stable and successful program which during this last year consisted of 12 mentors and 16 mentees. Following is a brief outline of the program as it exists today:

- The program is intended to supplement, not replace, the chair as a natural mentor.
- The program is mandatory for all pre-tenured faculty, but voluntary for mentors, Mentors must meet specific criteria such as being well-established, willing to make time for the mentee, being professionally active, and approachable.

- Mentors are not in the same department as their mentee.
- The Professional Development Committee assigns mentors to new hires based on interests, strengths, and availability. In years with several new hires, the first year may be spent in a group situation with one mentor for more than one new hire.
- The mentor/mentee pair outlines goals for the relationship: what they want to gain from the relationship, scheduled activities, and regular meetings.
- Mentors are provided with lists of suggested/encouraged activities and other resources.
- Mentees are encouraged to be proactive in the relationship – they should ask questions and take responsibility to make the relationship work.
- A tenure workshop is conducted every fall to familiarize new hires with the tenure process and portfolio requirements.
- There is a process by which either one of the mentoring pair can request reassignment if the relationship is not working.
- The program is formalized in documents that include: Responsibilities of Mentors; Encouraged/Suggested Activities; Meeting Ideas; Responsibilities of Mentees; Role of Chair.

Impact on the Chair

One obvious benefit to a department chair in having an "outside" mentor for new hires is the division of labor. Typically the mentor will have one or two "official" mentees, where the chair may have many pre-tenured faculty members and not enough time to devote to each. While it is important that the new hire understand his/her chair's expectations, having an outside mentor also means that many questions or concerns can be addressed by that person. This is true especially as the new hire is learning about the specific cultural environment of the unit, what activities his/her colleagues are engaged in, and what opportunities might be available for professional growth and collaboration. It is also important for new hires to hear more than one perspective on his/her activities and endeavors. At K-State Libraries, all tenured faculty cast votes for annual reappointment and final tenure/promotion, so having the perspective of someone outside the immediate department is beneficial to the junior faculty member as s/he moves forward in her/his career.

Along with the benefits of course there can be disadvantages. For example, there is potential for confusion and stress for the faculty member if he/she is hearing one set of expectations from a mentor and another from his/her department chair. Obviously, that is not the intent of the mentoring program so the chair needs to step in to offer clarification and communication among all parties. Documentation in the K-State Libraries program specifically outlines the role of the chair within the formalized program – to clarify for all parties involved:

- Provide a clear statement of expectations for performance in directed and non-directed service and research and creative activities
- Help pre-tenure faculty set challenging but realistic goals for directed and non-directed service and research and creative activities that match the mission and resources of the unit and that align with the central mission of the Libraries

- Formulate, in conjunction with the employee, a program and schedule tailored to the needs of the employee/developing the employee's career in desired ways. Modify if/when needs change. (Identify conferences, committees, publishing opportunities, appropriate service opportunities, service or research activities)
- Communicate with the pre-tenure faculty and answer their questions about the calendar for library faculty, the promotion and tenure process, annual review/self-evaluation, and the tenure portfolios
- Provide feedback to the pre-tenure faculty that highlights what is going well, clarify what needs attention and offer concrete suggestions for improvement through discussions, written comment, and honest evaluations.
- Build responsibility for nurturing new colleagues into the evaluations of tenured faculty the chair directly supervises
- Encourage pre-tenure faculty to be proactive about asking questions, seeking feedback, and making connections with tenured faculty
- Ensure that adequate/basic resources such as office space, equipment, training, etc. are in place
- Encourage pre-tenure faculty to seek collaborative and interdisciplinary research/creative opportunities outside the department/library
- Reinforce and assist in the development of a good working relationship between pre-tenure faculty and his/her mentor
- Attend the Fall Tenure Workshop

Implementation Suggestions for Departments

Not every department or unit has a Professional Development Committee to set up such a program. What can a department chair do to engage faculty who do have an interest in mentoring? Some possibilities to consider:
- Set up a committee to develop a program (structured or informal) that is beneficial to all in the department. This would require a commitment of time and purpose from at least a few people in the department.
- Identify potential mentors and explore with them their readiness to serve in such a role. There may be faculty members who would make excellent mentors, but have not taken the time to do it, or even thought about the need.
- Make it a departmental goal or expectation that senior faculty will take an active role in mentoring new hires. If the chair and the department are committed to mentoring junior faculty, those who take an active part should be acknowledged and rewarded in evaluations.
- Consider one or two mentors for a group or cohort of new hires. This approach has the advantage of using fewer senior faculty members to reach a larger number of new hires. It also allows new faculty to hear the same information (consistency) and benefit from questions that others ask.

- Explore possibilities for collaborative mentoring in two or more departments. If there is another department (or several) on campus who have the same interests, setting up a mentoring program could provide an opportunity for real collaboration.

Each of these options requires discussion with the stakeholders (both junior and senior faculty) and their buy-in, something that may not develop easily. Some senior faculty might see a mentoring role as just one more activity in a schedule that already has too many demands. Others, who are absorbed in their own teaching and research responsibilities, may have no interest in coming forward to help juniors as they are hired. Proposals for whatever approach is taken need to be framed in a way that shows a successful program and success of the junior faculty is a positive thing for the whole department. W. Brad Johnson maintains that department chairs and college deans play a vital role in the creation of a Facilitated Mentoring Environment (FME), which is apt to garner stronger support and commitment on the part of both mentors and mentees. Within such an environment, active mentoring is supported and expected, valued, and rewarded. (Johnson, 2007, pp. 225, 234).

Mentoring the Chair

The program at K-State Libraries is focused on mentoring pre-tenured faculty and nothing formal is in place for those who may be tenured, but move into a new position such as department chair. With busy schedules, demands from both direct reports and those they report to, department chairs can feel overwhelmed themselves. They are often perceived as the one with the answers (whether others like those answers or not), but where do they go for advice or help with developing leadership skills? How does one identify an appropriate mentor or mentoring group? This can be a real difficulty and can take some work to find appropriate and beneficial help. Some of the resources that are offered at K-State include department head roundtables where a topic of relevance is discussed each month. Recent topics have included: setting departmental priorities, dealing with extensive sick or personal leave, and engaging the faculty. There are also department head retreats held at the beginning of each semester that include similar topics. In addition, there is an orientation steering committee comprised of experienced department heads who provide a forum for people new to this position to ask questions and "learn the ropes" about policies/procedures, legal concerns, and performance evaluations. Conferences such as The Academic Chairperson's Conference provide opportunities for learning how others in similar positions are working, and many leadership institutes are held around the country. Finding a trusted colleague at one's institution or elsewhere to share ideas, ask questions, or just plain "vent" is a good idea. Of course, there is always the journal literature, and books written by and for department chairs and how to be a good one.

Conclusion

Mentoring others can be rewarding when the parties involved develop a relationship that is beneficial to both. It can be a two-way street where both members of the pair learn, share, and develop. Mentoring programs as well as informal mentoring can be especially helpful to

department chairs who want to engage others in nurturing newly-hired faculty members to their full potential.

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