

Mentoring early career professionals

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In order to maximize success of early career professionals, these professionals need support and mentoring from senior colleagues on at least four fronts: getting funds for their research,

improving teaching, prioritizing the focus of their time and efforts during the critical early years of their career, and maintaining work-life balance. It is important to recognize that the provision of this type of support is not only mandated if we are to subscribe to generative values, it is also a prime vehicle through which a university can foster the success of new hires, thereby becoming more competitive as an institution.

As senior colleagues we have all undoubtedly gleaned a tremendous amount of information about our particular universities and departments, as well as the larger fields in which we work. There is an accumulation of knowledge over decades that we often take for granted about the way things are done. For junior colleagues much of this may not be obvious, and there are many things about a role as faculty to which graduate students tend not to be privy. The book "The Compleat Academic" (Darley, Zanna & Roediger, 2004) conveys some of this insider information, and has become something of a bible for communicating this information to graduate students. However, there is much that is specific to our subfields, our universities, or our departments that of course cannot be learned from reading the

one book. For this, we need mentors – or we're left learning from observation and the hard way – by making mistakes.

Research funding

Mentoring junior faculty around research funding is perhaps the most important area of need. New faculty need to hit the ground running to get their labs up and running, and of course that requires funding. Graduate students and postdocs may gain some experience in working on grant proposals with their advisors, but it tends to

be fairly limited. As a new professor a junior faculty member is faced with building an independent line of work and quickly getting funding. There may be particular government or scientific agencies that junior faculty need to be able to show evidence of success in receiving funding, and junior faculty may not realize initially

that there are differences in how funding is viewed when one comes up for tenure. It's not just a matter of showing you can get funding to your work; typically junior faculty have to show that they are able to get funds from the most respected agencies. Senior colleagues can read and comment on proposals for junior colleagues, as well as recommend appropriate sources of support.

Teaching

Faculty members at most major universities are



hired based on their promise as an emerging scholar. They may not have been as focused on building their teaching skills. Many faculty members enter their first job with some teaching experience, albeit often only as teaching assistants. If they haven't taught a full lecture course on their own, the amount of time, preparation and energy expended can come as a bit of a shock. Most universities today offer teaching workshops for new faculty, and this may include the opportunity to have senior colleagues sit in on lectures and provide feedback. It can be very helpful to provide junior colleagues with course syllabi, power point slides, and lecture notes for a class they are assigned to teach. Over time junior colleagues will no doubt change the course to make it more of their own, but this can initially be a tremendous time saver compared to starting with a blank slate. Junior colleagues will need tips as well on how to handle both common and perhaps delicate situations with students. What is standard and acceptable at one university may not be at another, and while policy handbooks are important, they often do not provide a roadmap to the nuanced situations that come up in dealing with thousands of students over the course of the first few years of teaching. For this, having a senior mentor to turn to can be most effective in quickly resolving the situation.

Prioritizing

Perhaps the most difficult decision assistant professors deal with is what to prioritize in their everyday work life. Should you agree to review yet another article for that journal in which you never publish? When is it ok to say no to committee requests? Should you put in three grant proposals this year on the chance that the other two will get shot down? How do you find a balance between

teaching and research? These are all issues that benefit from having a senior colleague with whom to discuss.

Work-life balance

Junior colleagues may find it laughable to even suggest there be work-life balance at this early stage of their careers. As we progress in our careers we tend to get more efficient at the various aspects of our job of course, so work-life balance is no longer so difficult to obtain. The question "how did you do it?" is a common one from junior colleagues, and a frank and honest answer about how we prioritized is important. Mentoring here comes in all forms: where to find good childcare, how to negotiate a longer maternity/paternity leave, and how to say "no" to meetings scheduled by well-meaning colleagues for times that occur outside of regular childcare hours.

Given that tenure is all or none, the tendency of junior colleagues can be to give work their all, figuring life can wait until after tenure. A few decades ago the standard advice given was that early career demands were so high that women should not 'risk' having a child pre-tenure. And we have known several young female colleagues who quit their once coveted jobs over this issue when trying to parent young children during the pre-tenure phase of their careers. This is the wrong message to send to highly educated women, and not just because of the profound effect it can have on their own lives. It also means missing out on a unique opportunity to establish new role models that teach the next generation that having a career and having a family are not mutually exclusive.



Supporting the mentor

There may be resistance to putting mentoring programmes in place for junior colleagues from senior colleagues who complain that these kinds of supports and policies were not in place in “their day”, and that it is a further burden on senior colleagues to provide this sort of support. If the type of extensive support recommended here is to be offered, then universities need to provide senior colleagues with resources and recognition for their service. At our university we have put in place a system in which new faculty are assigned a senior mentor who meets with the new faculty member on a regular basis. This counts as committee work for the senior mentor. There is a “mentoring committee” that meets to discuss issues in mentoring that come up, and that provides workshops for junior faculty on topics like graduate student mentoring, with senior colleagues who are known for expertise in this area providing presentations on their style and methods.

One faculty member shared a rating system she uses with her graduate students to help evaluate students and to identify their strengths and weaknesses. The committee chair organized a workshop on grant proposal writing, inviting senior faculty who had served on selection committees for the major granting institutions to provide tips for writing successful research proposals. At the university level too, we have workshops offered on grant proposal writing and teaching. Again, it's important that the university value these services provided by senior colleagues, compensating or recognizing senior colleagues' mentoring of junior colleagues so that senior faculty feel appreciated and valued around this. For example, our university provides a gift certificate to the university bookstore in return for reading and commenting on

a colleague's grant proposal. Although we have never said “no” to a colleague who asked for this type of support, this system means that even colleagues who have never met us feel comfortable listing us as a potential reader, and the university then formally asks us to read the proposal and provide comments to our colleagues.

The times they are a'changin'

Research funding rates have been decreasing for decades in many countries, while class sizes are often increasing. Further, we no longer live in the world that was described by sociologist Arlie Hochschild (2012) in which faculty members have wives who work as unpaid assistants for their professor husbands, while also doing the childcare and housework. Junior faculty are faced with a myriad of demands that come with two career families that were not faced by earlier generations (Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2012). And academia needs to change along with this and provide role models and mentoring for the world in which we now live.



References

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