

Finding a Mentor and Getting the Most Out of the Mentoring Relationship

Center for Faculty Excellence, UNC–Chapel Hill
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Mentoring is central to both individual and institutional success. Good mentorship is a hallmark of successful academic units. ... Junior faculty should be proactive in developing mentoring relationships and are responsible for taking advantage of the mentorship opportunities available to them.

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The materials that follow were prepared by the Center for Faculty Excellence, UNC–Chapel Hill, and consist primarily of summaries of recent research and writing about faculty mentoring in addition to some original material. Although this material is focused on tenure-track faculty, many of the suggestions will be relevant for mentoring fixed-term faculty in the early stages of their careers also.

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Considerations in Selecting a Mentor

The responsibility for getting the guidance and assistance that will help you succeed as a UNC-Chapel Hill faculty member rests directly with you. Finding the right mentor is a critical step in getting that guidance and assistance. Even if you are assigned a mentor or a mentoring committee, developing and maintaining an effective relationship is your responsibility. You also will choose how much you depend on your mentor for guidance and when to seek out others on an informal basis. If you are not assigned a mentor, then the responsibility rests directly with you to identify appropriate individuals to provide you needed guidance and support.

The following considerations are provided to help you select a mentor and develop an effective relationships with him or her.

1. Determine your objectives for a mentoring relationship.

- Assess your needs in the areas of teaching, research development, and socialization.
- Identify your questions about renewal (if fixed term) or tenure and promotion.
- List the questions you have about your career development overall.
- List the questions you have about being a faculty member in your department or school and at this university.

2. Finding a good mentor.

- Get recommendations from people you know and trust on who might be good mentors.
- Consider having multiple mentors depending on your needs and the assistance each can offer.
- Be open to a mentor with viewpoints, background, or experiences different from your own.
- Consider who possesses the specific skill(s) you'd like to develop, has charted a career path that appeals to you, or has overcome challenges to get where she or he is today.
- Determine who is a senior enough to provide you with relevant advice and opportunities.
- Consider who can help you build networks for teaching, research, and social support.

3. Take time to evaluate your choice.

- Would the individual you've selected be willing and able to mentor you in the areas you need?
- How often would he or she be able to meet with you?
- What are his or her expectations of a mentoring relationship? Is there a fit?
- Do you feel comfortable enough with the person to share your genuine concerns?
- Do you think the mentor can respond helpfully if differences arise?

Adapted from University of Texas System Leadership Institute (Producer – Web Seminar). (2009, November 16). Mentoring relationships.

How Good Is Your Mentor?

Nobody's perfect and you don't need your mentor to be perfect, but if you don't recognize your mentor, at least somewhat, in the following list of descriptors, it might be time to consider a new mentor or have a discussion with your chair about how the mentoring relationship is going.

Good mentors are:

- Good listeners. They take time to understand what is going with the mentee before they offer advice and information.
- Self-aware. They know what they can and cannot offer, and they observe and note how what they offer is being received by those they mentor.
- Flexible. They are willing to adjust to the needs of mentees.
- Good role models. They demonstrate effective academic practices.
- Transparent. They make their thinking explicit so mentees understand why they do what they do.
- Positive guides. They recognize and acknowledge progress mentees make; they also provide constructive criticism and helpful advice. They pay attention to the timing of their comments. They strike the right balance between guidance, criticism, and praise.
- Facilitators. They help mentees connect to others who share their interests and who can help them and provide resources.
- People of integrity. They are honest in what they say and do and work for the good of those they mentor; they do not take advantage of the mentoring situation.
- Reasonably available to the faculty member being mentored.

Adapted from Nakamura, J., Sheronoff, D., & Hooker, C. (2009). *Good mentoring: Fostering excellent practice in higher education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, Publishers.

Tips for Faculty Being Mentored

- Be proactive. Initiate contact with your mentor(s).
- Give copies of your CV to your mentors and ask for copies of theirs. (Remember that your mentors often have been in academia for many years, so their CVs will be longer than yours. Be careful about comparisons.)
- Be willing to ask for help and advice. Recognize that your success is important not only to you but also to the department or school and University.
- Be sure to share accomplishments with your mentors. Mentors are there to help you deal with problems and concerns but also want to share in your joys.
- Write down questions as they occur to you and bring the list along to your meeting with your mentor.
- Get to know your junior colleagues in the department or school and across campus. Remember the value of peer mentoring. Those who have been at UNC a few years longer than you can provide invaluable information and advice.
- Take advantage of opportunities to speak about and present your work. That lets others know what you are interested in and can help create partnerships and other opportunities.
- Take advantage of the many faculty support services the University offers, including, but not limited to, the programs and resources of the UNC Center for Faculty Excellence (<http://cfe.unc.edu>).
- Show initiative in planning your own career. Set short- and long-range goals for your teaching, research, and service. Share those goals with your mentors.
- Be respectful of your mentor's time and other responsibilities. Do not expect overnight turnaround on materials you ask your mentor to review.
- Accept advice and guidance in the spirit in which they are intended. You do not need to follow every piece of advice your mentor gives you, but you should give serious consideration to everything suggested.
- Ask for periodic feedback from others in your unit responsible for guiding new faculty. This could be your department chair or assistant chair, division head, dean or associate dean. If you are veering off course in any way, it is helpful to know as quickly as possible. If you are on course, that is good to know as well.

On Being a Good Protégé

*David D. Perlmutter, then a professor and associate dean for graduate studies and research in the William Allen White School of Journalism and Mass Communications at the University of Kansas, published an article in the April 18, 2008, issue of *The Chronicle of Higher Education* in which he gave the following advice to early-career faculty with mentors. What follows is a summary of Perlmutter's advice.*

You can get good advice from people who may not possess all, or even most, of the qualities of the perfect mentor. For example, one person may be able to provide astute advice about research but not be a suitable confidant or a good listener. Perlmutter says, "The ideal advisor may be a composite of imperfect humans."

You should make an estimate of what a given mentor can and can't do for you, but you should never be afraid to ask for help, even if you are not sure the mentor can respond. If the mentor is effective, he or she will guide you to the appropriate resource. You never know until you ask. In fact, it is a good idea to have a conversation about expectations for the relationship to determine what each person thinks the relationship can or cannot do for the person being mentored.

Two areas in particular need attention: regulation of social closeness between the new faculty member and advisors, and the frequency of help-giving. Perlmutter recommends being friendly but not friends with your mentor. He advises against getting socially entangled beyond the occasional cup of coffee and departmental social event. He also recommends that the new faculty member not be over-demanding, e.g., make daily requests for assistance. However, asking your mentor to read and comment on a draft of a paper is totally appropriate.

Perlmutter says: "Being a good protégé also means learning to accept criticism gracefully. ... A useful mentor is one who is willing to give us bad news, but a proper protégé is one who is willing to hear it."

"Both parties must be sensitive to the degree of independence the protégé wants (and needs) from the mentor." How closely linked are the research activities: joint or fully independent? If the faculty member is not doing independent research early on in the relationship, the chances for tenure are diminished.

Finally you should "accept that the protégé-mentor bond may simply fade away" due to changes in the mentor's or your professional or personal life. "Politeness and kindness are called for, but there is no written contract that demands that you return to the same well for advice forever." Find others who are in a better position to help.

Perlmutter, D.D. (2008, April 18). Are you a good protégé? *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Retrieved from <http://chronicle.com/article/Are-You-a-Good-Prot-g-/45755>

Advice for New Faculty Members

Robert Boice, former head of the SUNY Stony Brook Teaching Center, conducted a study of the characteristics of the most successful new faculty members, whom he called “quick starters.” He then taught these approaches to new faculty members who were having trouble adapting to their new roles. By utilizing these practices, the faculty members improved their time management in both teaching and research.

Individuals who are quick starters develop positive habits (Boice, 1991). These habits include allocating time to all tasks in a balanced manner and making an acceptable first attempt on each task. Once the first attempt is made, then work steadily to improve the product (teaching, writing) on an ongoing basis. Overall, quick starters work from outlines when teaching, allocate small blocks of time each day to research and writing, take the time to network with others about research and teaching, and develop confidence and flexibility.

Boice also noted the following among the quick starters he studied:

Attitudes

- They have positive and accepting attitudes toward students.
- They do not complain about their colleagues.
- They have a sense of humor and enthusiasm.

Teaching

- They master the traditional lecture style of teaching, but they also allow time for student involvement and non-verbally encourage students to participate.
- They seek advice about teaching from colleagues and learn about teaching via reading and observing. They use the techniques and tools that master teachers have developed, and they use feedback from students and others to improve.
- By the third semester they have reduced the time spent on teaching preparation from 4 hours to 1.5 hours per classroom hour.

Research Productivity

- They spend about 4 hours a week networking relative to their research and teaching interests.
- By the third semester, they spend at least 3 hours per week on academic writing.
- They publish at the level required by their campus for tenure.

Synergy between Teaching and Research

- They integrate their research and scholarly interests into undergraduate classes, resulting in enthusiasm for teaching and recruitment of students as research assistants.

Boice, R. (1991). Quick starters: New Faculty Who Succeed. In M. Theall & J. Franklin (Eds.), *Effective Practices for Improving Teaching* (pp. 111-121). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, Publishers.

Sample Plan Checklist for a New Faculty Member

For best use, put “a date to be completed” goal for each activity that is relevant to your role or is important to you. It is also helpful to mark time on your calendar on a daily or weekly basis for each activity.

Research and Writing Goals

- Connect to faculty with similar interests.
- Establish a research agenda with a focused line of inquiry.
- Affirm the importance of the line of inquiry with key members of your department.
- Attend faculty development workshops on writing, research, and grants.
- Discuss conference proposal(s) and ideas for articles with faculty colleagues.
- Send drafts of articles or conference papers to colleagues for feedback (e.g., one local, one national).
- Submit conference paper(s).
- Submit article(s).

Grant Activities

- Collect information about grant and fellowship opportunities.
- Identify resources for summer funding and writing.
- Discuss ideas with mentors and others.
- Select grants and fellowships that are worth the effort.
- Submit priority grant and fellowship applications.

Teaching Activities

- Seek out master teachers for advice on effective teaching and time management.
- Prepare syllabus and order books.
- Limit preparation and grading time so that it does not crowd out above activities.
- Get feedback on courses during each semester, conduct your own midterm and end-of-semester evaluations and incorporate suggestions.

Service Activities

- Limit service activities as much as possible during the first year but do attend meetings and social events.
- Confirm service expectations with the chair.
- In the second and third years, take on committee work that will integrate you into the department (e.g., admissions committee, curriculum committee).

Review your plan with mentors and other advisors.

Adapted from Bensimon, E.M., Ward, K., & Sanders, K. (2000). *The department chair's role in developing new faculty into teachers and scholars*. Bolton, MA: Anker Publishing.