



Case Study: Mentoring

Department Chairs Working with Diverse Faculty

Document Overview

This document presents two case studies about departments that want to foster a mentoring culture. One is tailored to the needs of assistant professors, the other to mid-career faculty. Participants will generate practical ideas to create a supportive environment for faculty that helps them acclimate both socially and professionally; encourages non-sexist, non-racist behavior; and builds collegiality and collaboration among faculty members.

Scenario Overviews

Scenario One — Junior Faculty

Key issues for junior faculty raised in this scenario, which can be addressed through effective mentoring, include chilly reception from senior faculty, discrimination and bias against women and people of color, and a department culture of individualism.

Scenario Two — Mid-Career Faculty

Key issues for mid-career faculty raised in this scenario, which can be addressed through effective mentoring, include lack of collaboration among peers, faculty who are ill or are spending considerable time providing family care, and mid-career faculty whose research has hit a slump.

Facilitation

Setup (5 minutes)

- Divide people into groups (6-8 people each) and encourage attendees to sit with people they do not know.
- Distribute Post-it easel paper to each group.
- Ask each table to identify a facilitator, note-taker, and timekeeper for their table. Describe these roles to the group: the facilitator will lead the group through the discussion questions; the note-taker will record ideas on the Post-it easel papers; and the time-keeper will keep track of time and give time warnings as needed.
- Give the Junior Faculty scenario to half of the tables and the Mid-Career scenario to the other tables. (It is helpful to copy each scenario on different colored paper.)



Facilitation Continued

Group Time (25 minutes)

- Assign one scenario to each group and instruct them to take 25 minutes to read and discuss their scenario.
- Instruct groups to write their answers to the discussion questions on the easel paper.
- The Large-group Facilitator should give a 5 minute warning before time is up.
- At the end of the group time, distribute the other scenario to the tables and give 3 minutes for reading only, they will have time for discussion later.
- While participants are reading the scenario they did not discuss, post each table's easel paper on the wall.

Group Share Out (15 minutes)

- Have participants walk around silently reading each other's ideas for generating a mentoring culture.

[OPTIONAL] Activity (20 minutes)

- After the brainstorming discussion concludes, review the list of possible strategies in the second handout. Discuss the strategies and prioritize them, listing the most effective, efficient methods first.

Reflection (15 minutes)

- At the end of the activity, the Facilitator should lead a large group discussion.
 - Did we miss anything?
 - What new ideas did you discover?
 - Which of these will work on your campus?
 - What will you take home and use?





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Scenario One – Junior Faculty

Helen Tratenberg is a brand-new department chair with 29 faculty at a Research-Intensive university. Over the summer, she attended a leadership development workshop that emphasized the importance of cultivating a mentoring culture in one's department. She learned to assess the needs of the faculty in order to discover how mentoring could best be implemented to benefit all. Helen found it easy to get her faculty to open up. The one-on-one conversations she had with each faculty member illuminated many issues that Helen had not thought about before becoming chair.

Some of the assistant professors were surprised that she was interested in hearing about their experiences acclimating to the department. Apparently, the department had not previously warmly welcomed its newest faculty members. The stories of three junior faculty members particularly caught her attention.

David Wong, an assistant professor, told Helen that he was bewildered during his first year. He had hoped that someone would explain the ropes to him and hesitated asking for help for fear of seeming clueless. He spent hours preparing for each lecture and had finally learned from a colleague in another department tips on how to minimize course preparation. He also found the department social climate chilly. A number of colleagues on his floor would head out on Thursdays to the faculty club and no one ever asked him to come along. He perceived the department's attitude towards junior faculty as "sink-or-swim."

As one of only a handful of women in the department, Fiona Jackson, a 2nd year assistant professor, told Helen of feeling isolated and marginalized. On her first day, she found her office still filled with the last occupant's junk. The former chair had welcomed her by telling her he was glad she was here and that he hoped they "got to keep her." (Apparently, he assumed that women leave academia to have children.) She shared with Helen some of her challenges in the classroom: several students in her introductory class asked if she had a PhD and a few male students mumbled to each other that the class was easier than high school.



Enrique Vasquez, a newly tenured associate professor, told Helen a bit more about he felt when he was an assistant professor in the department. “I had just come from graduate school where my colleagues and I looked out for one another. Coming here was a shock. No one asked me about my work or life. The only time a senior member reached out to me was to gather support for a vote at a faculty meeting. All I heard about were people’s complaints and grievances.” Enrique also shared a painful experience regarding his first published paper. He was very proud of it and had hoped it would bring him one step closer to tenure. When it was published however, a colleague congratulated him on the work and then said that next time he should think about writing about a “demographic” outside of his own culture so that he would not seem so biased and would be taken “more seriously.”

Discussion Questions

- List the mentoring issues raised by this case study and discuss what the possible root causes may be.
- Given what Helen has discovered, list strategies you recommend she implement to improve the climate for assistant professors in her department.
- What success strategies would be helpful to David? To Fiona? To Enrique? To all three?
- What could Helen and the department do differently for the next faculty hire? How might Helen encourage these different behaviors, strategies, and actions?
- What could Helen and the department do differently for the current junior faculty? How might Helen encourage these different behaviors, strategies, and actions?
- What strategies would you recommend to peers who were mentoring each of these faculty members?

[OPTIONAL] Activity

Prioritize these strategies, listing the most effective, efficient methods first.

- Set up mentoring program.
- Request professional development for chairs.
- Assess strengths and weaknesses of faculty.
- Examine salary and workload equity.
- Look for improvements in department climate.
 - Teaching: e.g., create teaching circles; offer or refer faculty to seminars on effective teaching seminars and/or time management.
 - Improve research climate, e.g., offer seed funding to research clusters, recognize accomplishments.
 - Sponsor department events, e.g., receptions before/after seminars, weekly coffee/donuts weekly.
 - Refer faculty to University Resources.
- Ask new faculty what would have helped them.



Scenario Two — Mid-Career Faculty

Robert Steele is a 2nd year chair of a department with 38 faculty. Over the summer, he attended a leadership development workshop that emphasized the importance of cultivating a mentoring culture in one's department. The first step he learned was to assess the needs of the faculty in order to discover how mentoring could best be implemented for the benefit of all. Robert found it easy to get his faculty to open up. The one-on-one conversations he had with each faculty member illuminated many issues that Robert had not thought about before becoming chair.

He discovered that the department had several Associate-level professors who had not been promoted to full professor. These professors had been granted tenure based on a great potential that had not yet manifested. For example, Rahul Nanda, an associate professor in his early fifties, told Robert that his field had changed over the last 20 years and that his colleagues no longer value his area of expertise. Rahul enjoys teaching and has developed new techniques for engaging and inspiring students. However, because of his perceptions about the value of his research, his research activities are stalled.

Shirley Bonham is a beloved colleague who has been in the department for almost 10 years. Over the past few years, she has become unreliable, missing appointments with students and making only rare appearances at faculty meetings. She told Robert that she has been caring for an elderly parent and a partner with heart problems, and she has recently been diagnosed with depression. Robert found that her once-stellar teaching evaluations were now below-average and one of her PhD students was growing increasingly frustrated with Shirley's missed appointments and lack of support. Her most recent peer teaching reviews noted some problems but stopped short of criticizing her.

Finally, Joseph Katz, a faculty member who had been highly sought-after and was hired as an associate professor from another university, has grown increasingly difficult to work with. He has been known to disrupt faculty meetings with diatribes against others and to spread gossip about other faculty to students. He had stopped participating in department committees and most of his service commitments relate to the Faculty Senate. He was very candid with Robert about the reasons for his disengagement and hoped that Robert could turn the climate in the department around. He told Robert he was open to new ideas to help him connect with his peers and get further funding.

Discussion Questions

- List the issues that this case study raises and discuss what the possible root causes may be.
- Given what Robert has discovered, list strategies you recommend he implement to improve the climate for associate professors in his department.
- What strategies would be helpful to Rahul? To Shirley? To Joseph? To all three?



- What strategies would you recommend to peers who were mentoring each of these faculty members?

[OPTIONAL] Activity

Prioritize these strategies, listing the most effective, efficient methods first.

- Find out what the issues are
- Proactively seek University resources (i.e., FMLA)
- Recommend sabbaticals
- Point out successful turnarounds of faculty who are now full professors
- Facilitate interactions on campus
- Institute a mentoring program in the department
- Use departmental resources creatively (e.g., national meetings, postdocs)
- Restructure faculty workload
- Promote interdisciplinary or pedagogical research

