BUILDING JUNIOR FACULTY: PEER MENTORING AND LEARNING COMMUNITIES

Six new junior faculty members, each with different concentration areas and research specialties, joined the faculty in a large school of social work over a two-year period. In addition to attempts by senior faculty and administration to welcome and provide initial support for this new cohort, the group began meeting together after experiencing the routine anxieties and frustrations associated with the transition to academic life. Peer mentoring/learning community tasks for junior faculty socialization and development were identified over the course of a year.

Traditional Top-Down vs. Junior Faculty Peer Mentoring

The transition from graduate school to a tenure-track academic position can be overwhelming. In addition to responsibilities related to achieving success in the areas of research, teaching, and service, new tenure track faculty members must become oriented to the university and community, manage the uncertainty of an often-mysterious tenure process, develop professional networks, and strike a balance between their professional and personal lives. Academic departments sometimes create formal mentoring programs in which assistant professors are paired with senior faculty members. However, lack of attention in busy academic environments to mentoring and other acclimation processes sometimes leaves newcomers with the sense that they are on their own to succeed or fail.

It may be difficult for junior mentees to relate to more senior mentors. Also, junior faculty may fear that they cannot be as open and honest about their feelings with senior faculty present. Without a modern-day "blueprint" or peer sounding board to address some of these growing pains, adjustment to academic life could be a rough and lonely ordeal.

Building cohort groups into learning communities works and occurs through intentional activities, such as collaborating on a task or project. Being together over time promotes a comfort level with risk-taking and self-disclosure. Dialogue involves participants sharing personal stories of their own experiences, actively employing critical thinking to evaluate scholarship, and participating in multiple leadership opportunities.

In addition to promoting early adjustment to academic life, a peer-driven mentoring group could help normalize expected challenges. By sharing predictable stressors and common obstacles, a group of junior faculty members may learn to re-evaluate unrealistic early expectations and set more reasonable goals for their first years, based on feedback and experiences from other group members. If the tenure tasks can be reframed into realistic, time-limited projects instead of cumulative accomplishments expected at the end of the tenure probationary period, junior faculty may be more hopeful about their chances for success.

Best Practices: Starting Your Own Junior Faculty Learning Community

Identify group core values and goals. Articulate common beliefs, and develop a unified vision before establishing a group. Even though we each come from different academic and personal backgrounds, our group shares basic social work values and a systemic orientation, and can value different viewpoints and nurture professional and personal relationships. The goals and objectives of the group are to provide consultation and feedback on specific writing, teaching, and research projects; establish psychosocial support networks; and identify and share technical and logistical expertise about university resources and procedures.

Make realistic time commitments, and set a feasible meeting schedule. A peer mentoring group must be efficient in arranging its meeting schedule. If the time requirement is too great, engagement may be limited. We find it beneficial to conduct monthly meetings, lasting only an hour or two. Usually, this meeting precedes the school-wide faculty meeting—a convenient time and location, as junior faculty members are required to attend the larger meeting.

Balance an organized agenda with flexibility for discussion. There is no set format for each peer mentoring session; the group sets an agenda via

email each month prior to the meeting. While there are always planned topics and prepared feedback on scholarship and teaching, we leave time for discussion on psychosocial issues and self-care. Whether we are interacting with a difficult student or feeling overwhelmed by new responsibilities, sharing these "growing pains" in the context of the group normalizes the concerns and provides insight on how to deal effectively with the situation.

Provide direct feedback on scholarly projects. We aspire to create a collaborative culture where it is usual to send out concept papers or grant proposals for critique. Colleagues who want written and verbal feedback submit materials in advance so that other group members can prepare feedback prior to meetings. Giving feedback on scholarly writing is particularly important for this group since we are all approaching tenure within a couple of years of each other. Specifically, we initiated reading a book on academic writing and publishing, including setting aside time to write, selecting journals, and handling publication rejections. The reciprocal nature of the academic feedback process also promotes collegiality. Over time, group members become increasingly familiar with other areas of interest. Academic feedback and associated dialogue increase the likelihood of establishing a spirit of camaraderie as each person "has a hand" in colleagues' success.

Discuss innovative teaching strategies. We share a commitment to bring specific teaching-related projects before the group for feedback. We strive to create an environment where group members can actively seek feedback from colleagues that challenge them to hone their arguments and methods.

Share knowledge and resources. New faculty orientation meetings are designed to provide an introduction to specific resources and protocols, but may prompt feelings of information overload. Our peer mentoring learning community shares knowledge about the technical, logistical, and bureaucratic elements of academic life. For instance, group members assist one another in dealing with annual paperwork and other department-specific procedures that may be routine to tenured veterans, but ambiguous to neophyte assistant professors. Meetings frequently focus on ways to maximize current technology, like Blackboard and other web-based applications. What may seem overwhelming to learn alone appears more manageable when attempted by a group of faculty members at similar points in the learning process.

Establish social opportunities outside of the work setting. Our group makes a commitment to spend social time together, taking time to meet for dinner and other periodic social activities. The comfort and honesty that is created may not be possible at this stage of our socialization with a group of senior faculty, who often play an evaluative role.

Develop group projects and ongoing collaborations. As a product of our time together, we developed the goal of writing this article to document our collaboration and exchange of ideas. As we built solidarity, it seemed important to have some projects in common that would promote a sense of "we are all in this together." Having a project that was mutually beneficial seemed to be an important way of anchoring us to this goal.

Plan outreach efforts to welcome new members. As we move beyond our first year and reach out to new hires, the group facilitates the transition of incoming faculty members even before they arrive on campus. This includes sending congratulatory emails, organizing a welcome dinner, answering logistical questions, and offering information about community resources.

Recognize successes of group members on the road to tenure. Although detours and roadblocks are predictable, it is important at each meeting to acknowledge what is going well in the learning community. For example, at a junior faculty potluck at one member's home, we celebrated the success of several of our members in securing accreditation for a new undergraduate program. We view recognizing individual successes and celebrating accomplishments as essential to creating the social capital necessary to counteract jealousy and support professional relationships during stressful times of our work life.

Conclusion

The concept of developing a junior faculty learning community within an academic unit that not only promotes career development, but creates psychosocial support and culture change, may have special appeal to social work faculty. However, in any discipline area, creating a learning community increases the likelihood that trust and support will be developed, and that these foundations will lead to a vibrant and dynamic academic unit that is equipped to face the challenges of academic life.

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