
THE COLLEGE OF
WOOSTER

Mentoring New Faculty

Although The College of Wooster has a formal mentoring program for new tenure-track faculty, the Department Chair is the first and foremost mentor for a new faculty member. New faculty members generally come to us well trained in their fields, but they may be new to the experience of teaching full time and may have difficulties making the transition from graduate school to a liberal arts environment. Even new colleagues who have substantial experience elsewhere may need some guidance as they adjust to the specific culture of the College (the “Wooster Way”). Some of the needs of new faculty are self-evident; they need to know where to find the paperclips, what the deadlines are, and where they need to be when. But the chair can help in other ways to shorten the learning curve for new faculty, and reduce as much as possible the stress involved in negotiating a new institution.

As Marjorie Olmstead argues in her very helpful summary of advice for department chairs on mentoring, junior faculty seek following from department chairs:

Tell us what we are supposed to do, give us enough information and resources to get the job done, tell us how we are doing in time to fix any problems, and do a reasonable job as a "blocker" so we can make it across the finish line without getting too badly hurt along the way.¹

Below are more specific issues departmental chairs might think about:

1. Navigating the organizational culture: Institutions differ in their organizational cultures and expectations, as do departments. Talk with new faculty about those expectations. How many office hours are typically offered? How accessible do we expect faculty to be? Is it okay to close your office door sometimes?

You might talk with other members of your department, particularly those hired within the past few years, and get a sense from them about what they would have liked to know in their first year and what their greatest hurdles were.

2. Understanding teaching expectations: A central part of the organizational culture involves the expectations of students and the particularities of teaching at Wooster. Offer to review a copy of the syllabus before the beginning of classes. Is the reading load appropriate for our students? Are the expectations of the instructor clear? Does the syllabus abide by College regulations (i.e. having graded work returned before the drop date)? Are there specific topics the Department or Program expects faculty members to cover in particular courses?

Beyond the syllabus, new faculty might want to talk about particular assignments, including grading expectations, or how extensive comments on papers should be.

¹ Olmstead, M. A. (2005). Mentoring new faculty: Advice to departmental chairs. Retrieved July 15, 2009 from <http://faculty.washington.edu/olmstd/research/Mentoring.html>

3. Making connections in the discipline or field: Certainly (or hopefully) new faculty have mentors from graduate school who introduced them to the culture of the discipline, but negotiating particular aspects of the field is different from the perspective of a new faculty member. Which meetings would be most beneficial to attend? How do you get invited to review boards? How involved should you be in the governance of the professional association? Are there people you should be making connections with in the discipline? How do you connect with people who might serve as external reviewers?
4. Awareness of departmental and institutional expectations for evaluation: Be very clear with junior colleagues about departmental criteria for successful work, and how the tenure process plays out at the departmental level. Are there departmentally specific expectations for research and scholarship? Does the department or program have expectations about summer research or research with students? How does the department evaluate particular journals or publishers? When will department members visit classes? What feedback will the junior faculty member receive from the class visits?
5. Providing timely feedback: In addition to informing new faculty of expectations, chairs should provide timely feedback on their performance. This includes letting new faculty know early on if there are hints of a problem. Chairs might also read drafts of grant proposals or articles and provide quick and constructive criticism.
6. Achieving balance: We all struggle with how to balance all aspects of our job and our lives. Chairs can help new faculty negotiate the competing demands. When is it okay to say no when a Dean asks you to serve on a committee? How do you set aside time for research and writing? How do you keep the job from consuming your family or personal life? What events are important to attend, and how do you distinguish between those events you want to attend, and those you are obligated to attend? This might be particularly important for women and diverse faculty. One responsibility of the chair, then, is to help protect the new faculty member from unreasonable demands early on, including unreasonably burdensome departmental responsibilities.
7. Making connections: Help new faculty make the connections on and off campus they need to do their jobs more effectively. This might involve providing them with a list of whom to call when; whom do you call when a student is crying in your office? When your computer doesn't work? When you need to apply for travel funds?

You also might think consciously about other faculty members who might share professional or personal interests. This might include potential collaborators on grants or on research, faculty members with shared pedagogical interests, or faculty members you know of who have encountered similar personal issues.

8. Interpersonal Issues: Be available to help new faculty sort out interpersonal issues occurring in the course of their work. These might include conflicts with other faculty members, on-going student conflicts, or staff issues.
9. Finding Resources: In addition to helping faculty eliminate roadblocks to success, chairs can help faculty find the resources they need to be more productive. This begins before they get here, by helping them figure out what their startup needs will be. Once on campus, this involves keeping an eye out for granting opportunities for the new faculty member, helping

10. Establish a department culture of mentoring: Additionally, a chair should facilitate a culture of mentoring within the department. This involves being available for the casual questions in the hallway, thinking proactively about the needs of the new colleague, and encouraging senior members of the department to get to know the new colleague. Additionally, some departments have formal mentoring programs in place. You might consider assigning a departmental mentor to each new faculty member, and rewarding senior faculty members for their mentoring activities (i.e. comment on strong mentoring activities on annual performance evaluations). Encourage members of the department to visit one another's classes on a regular basis, and provide one another with constructive feedback.

Helpful Resources

Collins, Tracy; Scott Slough, Hersch Waxman. 2009 Empirical Research: Lessons Learned about Mentoring Junior Faculty in Higher Education, Academic Leadership.
http://www.academicleadership.org/emprical_research/626_printer.shtml

Duke University. 2006. Mentoring of Faculty: Principles and Practices.
http://www.provost.duke.edu/policies/Faculty_Mentoring_Initiative.htm

Indiana University Office for Women's Affairs (1995). The gender politics of mentoring (In The Majority Report) Retrieved November 2, 2000 from the World Wide Web:
http://www.indiana.edu/~owa/mjreport/95_octmr.html#mentor.

Olmstead, M. A. (2005). Mentoring new faculty: Advice to departmental chairs. Retrieved July 15, 2009 from <http://faculty.washington.edu/olmstd/research/Mentoring.html>

Turner, C.S.V. (1998). Keeping our faculties: Addressing the recruitment and retention of faculty of color in higher education (Executive summary of symposium).

University of Maryland. 2007. Mentoring of Junior Faculty
<http://www.faculty.umd.edu/Mentoring/MentoringGuide.pdf>