

Collected Wisdom: Lessons Learned in the Trenches

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MISSION, GOALS AND STRUCTURE: UNIVERSITY OF HAWAII WOMEN FACULTY MENTORING PROGRAM

The formal Women Faculty Mentoring Program at the University of Hawaii was established in 1991, under the Office of Faculty Development and Academic Support. The goal of the Program then remains what it is today: to help women new to the faculty at UH develop their academic careers and to “ensure institutional change through their retention in the [UH] system.” The establishment of the Program followed systematic data collection and analysis that demonstrated isolation, neglect, and subtle bias experienced by many women in academic positions” (Wunsch and Johnsrud, 1992). We achieve these goals through various individual and collective activities, including the pairing of individual new women faculty with experienced tenured women faculty, workshops and seminars, and informal social gatherings. The Program has been enormously effective. While new women faculty have reported in surveys that the support and guidance they have received is and has been crucial in their successful bid for tenure, tenured faculty, also, have reported that the mentoring relationship has been beneficial for them on many levels.

The structure of the Program is fairly simple. The Women Faculty Mentoring Program is housed in the Office of Faculty Development and Academic Affairs precisely because the program is a faculty development issue. A Director leads the Program with support from an advisory board relative to program implementation and evaluation. The mission of supporting new faculty in the development of their professional careers is actually carried out by tenured senior women who volunteer as mentors. We seek to inform about and help women participate in activities that will help them get tenure, and not spend much time with activities that do not lead to tenure or promotion.

The cost of the Program is minimal: approximately one-half to one-third time for a director from the faculty, approximately one-twentieth of a secretarial appointment and about 4 reams of paper and associated duplication costs. Relative to what it probably saves a university in administrative time and potential lawsuits, the program is overwhelmingly cost effective.

MENTORING PROGRAM ACTIVITIES

Colleague-pairing: The most important thing we do is to pair new women faculty with experienced tenured faculty. We *never* pair a new faculty woman with any woman in her department, and we try to pair across colleges. Where we know there are particular problem areas on campus or a particularly chilly climate for women, we may ask two tenured women to help a new tenure-track woman. All new, tenure track women faculty members are invited by letter and postings within colleges and departments to attend an introductory workshop about the mentoring program. Tenured women are asked to come as well. After introducing the concept of mentoring and how it works and why the program exists, both untenured women and tenured women who have agreed to be mentors, are asked to fill out a questionnaire. The questionnaire asks the usual questions about home department, college, but it also asks some lifestyle questions--married or single, children, interests, what they think they would like to get from a mentor-mentee relationship and, if they think they know, the characteristics of a mentor that they think they want with regard to ethnicity, and so forth. The purpose of such questions is to try to prevent the pairing of a couch potato with a marathon runner, and to match women from similar circumstances.

The advisory board meets with the Director and, while I, as Director, may have done some initial pairing, we look for mentor-mentee pairs with similar interests and needs. Both mentor and mentee are sent a letter announcing that "you are a pair," and letting them know that if either one of them thinks they would rather be paired with a different person, they can notify the Director and I will handle it, "no questions asked." The letter asks that they set up a time to meet, determine how the mentoring relationship would work for each of them with regard to getting together regularly, and what their expectations might be of each other. They are asked to write a simple contract stating they will meet once a month, at least, to talk about how things are going. Mentors encourage mentees to call them with any questions they might have about anything--from the university workings to just living in the community.

Essentially, it is the goal of those of us who have been involved in the mentoring program for 5 to 8 years, to replace ourselves with recently and newly tenured and promoted women--women who will mentor the generation of women currently entering the faculty ranks and those now in graduate school. When a newly tenured woman says to one of us "I couldn't have done it without you. How can I ever thank you enough." We insistently say, "Pass it on to another woman. That's the thanks." And then we push hard to make sure that the former mentee continues in the Program, as a mentor.

What does a woman mentor do on our campus in mentoring a new woman faculty member? Some researchers have called it active listening. Other words might include coaching, actively caring, pushing, guiding, pulling, demanding, soothing, consoling, intervening, teaching, advising. Every mentoring relationship is somewhat different. Some become great friendships and some colleague pairs continue as professionally

interactive colleagues.

We also offer valuable focused workshops and seminars. Throughout the academic year the Mentoring Program calls on senior women, and sometimes a man or two, from the faculty and staff and administration to talk about issues we have learned, or are learning, that women need to know to start moving towards tenure. Workshops and seminars include: Developing a professional agenda: The big picture---and then session II, titled Developing a professional agenda: The details; Developing and nurturing department and college relationships; Forming academic writing groups; Time management; and our most popular one titled "From Year One to Tenure" which is always led by a woman dean on our campus who is also a member of the advisory board. The "Year One to Tenure" workshop panel consists of senior women who have served on department and university-wide tenure and promotion committees. The panel members discuss materials that should be collected to support the tenure document and how to do that. They talk about how to present contract renewal and tenure documents. Workshop and seminar topics change as new needs are identified.

SOME OF THE LESSONS LEARNED--THE HARD WAY

1) The challenges begin before the new women faculty arrive on campus. Many women come to the university thinking that they will need no help whatsoever and that everyone in their particular department and college will be undyingly supportive of every breath they take. Often they are so green and inexperienced, especially if they have just left graduate school, that they don't even know what they don't know. Every so often a woman does seem to breeze right through. Often, though, they are entering a mostly male, academic and political minefield.

2) The challenge for mentors is that mentees feel that they don't want to "bother" senior women and hesitate to call them with questions. It is vitally important that the mentor take the time and make the effort to dispel those feelings in the first few weeks. Mentees *never* ask enough questions. *Never*. It's not their fault. They know so little, especially if this is their first appointment since finishing graduate school, that they don't even know what to ask. Mentors often need to anticipate or answer questions without the question being asked by the mentee. Mentors must take the initiative and make the time to check with the mentee, often, about what is going on in the mentee's department, her interactions with other faculty, classes, research, funds for research and funds for travel, her interactions with her chair and dean. Mentors need to ask a lot of questions, without seeming to "grill" the mentee.

3) Mentees, especially new graduates, know very little about the university system and how it operates. Many mentees do not know what information they need, how to get the information, the importance of relationships across the campus and how to form those relationships. In informal coffee or lunch conversations, questions can be

asked and information exchanged that will help the mentor help the mentee.

4) Mentees, especially new graduates, know little or nothing about the tenure process relative to their department, the college and the university. Those who have been through the tenure process at other universities may know about the process, but not how it different at the current university. New women graduates don't know how to prepare for contract renewal during the probationary period, and subsequently, tenure, and when to start preparing documentation. Every activity the mentoring program offers, even the social ones, pulls and pushes mentees toward promotion and tenure. Many don't interpret university guidelines for tenure and promotion accurately, and may not know enough about the campus culture to understand what "counts" for tenure purposes.

5) Many mentees don't see, clearly, between the lines of department personnel committee statements and chair statements in annual reviews, one of the first formal obstacles for new faculty. We have learned the hard way over the years that mentors should insist on seeing the contract renewal papers submitted by the mentee, and then after the department personnel committee and the department chair have made its statements, the mentor must read those statements for herself. One of the hardest lessons we have had to learn is that new faculty often don't see clearly what is written *between* the lines of personnel committee and chair statements--the yellow and red flags offered as recommendations or suggestions. A verbal summary from the mentee is NOT sufficient.

6) Whether intentional or unintentional, authority figures don't always give new faculty the straight scoop. We have learned that mentees can be gently advised that not every word a department chair utters is the alpha and the omega--and if a mentee has any doubts or questions, she should talk to her mentor, or another mentor that she have met. This includes the male dean who tells women in a workshop that any dean's decision regarding annual contract renewal cannot be appealed or overturned. While deans on our campus are powerful with regard to contract renewal, that is simply not the case if there has been discrimination or some other grievable procedural problem. We have seen those decisions overturned several times, and the faculty member eventually obtain tenure.

7) Mentors can sometimes intervene, positively, with chairs or deans, in support of a mentee. If a mentor knows or suspects that there is a situation in the department that may be negatively impacting a mentee, the mentor can sometimes address that as a person outside the department, more easily than if they were part of the department. Often, a mentor may share information in a social situation with a dean or chair that someone in the department may not feel comfortable sharing. Remember, we never pair mentors and mentees within the same department, and we make every effort to pair across colleges.

8) "Listeners" are an asset for many women in many different situations at the academy. A "listener" is a woman, often a mentor, who goes with another woman when

she needs to talk with an administrator. We think a listener is helpful in several ways. One, there is a second perspective when options are reviewed later. Two, since administrators often use a "listener" or witness to back them up, it is often helpful for both the mentee and the administrator to know that there is yet a fourth ear listening. Third, an untenured mentee feels supported and more self-assured when she has an ally present. The listener is introduced at the meeting as a listener. The listener may ask a question or two, but for the most part they listen, take notes, and try to read what is going on in the meeting.

9) Not every woman hired by the institution is a good "fit" for the institution. While the problem may not be the institution as a whole--it may be that particular department or college--that woman needs to find a different place where she will be nurtured and find success. We have seen several situations where a woman has been successful at moving from one department to another in a given college, or moving from one college to another on campus. The tenure clock may or may not be restarted. Sometimes, a particular woman may, for all kinds of reasons, personal or academic, need to move on to another institution. In that case, mentors and other women can be quite helpful in facilitating such a move. When such situations arise, we consider it part of our job to help facilitate that, just like men do for each other.

10) Tenured women/mentors, must learn to understand the difference between when someone is not getting a fair shake in the system and when that person, or mentee, may be, somehow, creating her own problems. A mentor cannot *fix* a mentee. This has been a very hard lesson for many of us. That does not mean that the mentee should be abandoned. It does mean that the mentor may be able to help by simply being supportive of the mentee personally. The pitfall is that the mentor puts resources of time and energy into "rescuing" a mentee in a situation that is simply not salvageable.

11) New women faculty, especially those with newly minted degrees, need active mentoring through the completion of the tenure process. When the mentoring program was initially established, we thought that women could be mentored for a year and then move on entirely on their own. That is simply not the case. Even with our "collected wisdom", the collected wisdom does not apply to every mentee, and the wisdom needed may not make itself known until the third or fourth year. Just when we think we have heard and seen everything, new situations and challenges arise. Policies change. The actors in departments and colleges change. Upper levels of administration change or are shifted. Members of the Board of Regents changes. In the case of Hawaii, changes in the governor's office or legislature may have a strong impact.

12) Other big little lessons. A) I tell anyone, not just mentees, do *not* save data, personal, professional or research or anything else to a hard drive. Save only programs to your hard drive. With disks that now hold more than one gigabyte of information, there is no reason why we should not be saving to, and making a back up to, a disk instead of a hard drive. B) Document everything. It's good for your mental health,

anyhow, to keep a daily journal. You don't have to become compulsive and write in it every single day, but if you can make a habit of jotting down the day's events, it is not only soothing, but may come in handy. C) Do *not* put anything in email that you wouldn't mind having broadcast, live, from Times Square to the world, on New Year's Eve. D) Ditto for paper. While you may mark your correspondence confidential, it may not remain confidential. At least consider that. E) Do write memos of understanding to people when that seems appropriate--but take care in wording them. F) Don't shoot from the lip, especially on paper or in email. This is for all of us. Have a close friend or colleague read your statements before sending them, or if that is not possible, write what you have to say and then sit on it for a few days, reread, rewrite and then send. G) Write thank you notes and notes of congratulations, and encourage your female colleagues to do the same. It is one of those things that women do well and it often sets us apart from our male colleagues in a special and positive way. H) Don't sweat the small stuff---but contrary to current popular statements, not everything is small stuff. Some things are life changing. And remember: The best exercise for your heart is reaching down to lift someone else up

REFERENCES

Wunsch, M.A. & Johnsrud, L. K. (1992). Breaking barriers: Mentoring junior faculty women for professional development and retention. To Improve the Academy, 11, 175-187.