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FACULTY DEVELOPMENT

Target Mentoring: A Tailored Mentoring Program for Faculty

Susan K. Gardner, PhD • September 1, 2019



At the University of Maine, my colleagues and I have conducted a lot of research on faculty mentoring. The campus-wide [Rising Tide Center](#)—funded originally by a National Science Foundation ADVANCE grant—has helped implement several kinds of mentoring programs across our campus, finding that a combination of mentoring programs is best for our faculty.

Years ago the provost required that a mentoring plan be submitted and approved for all new faculty hiring proposals (both tenure-stream and lecturer). This mentoring happens at the departmental or school level and follows the traditional format wherein a new faculty member is assigned a more senior faculty member who provides feedback and serves as a touchstone within their academic unit. Our research found that while this was helpful and needed, it didn't go far enough for some faculty. Namely, new faculty found they had specific questions that perhaps their assigned colleague couldn't address, had issues they didn't want to discuss within their departments, or had specific goals that went beyond the discipline in which they were housed. So entered the target mentoring program (TMP) to address this gap.

The TMP is an optional, supplemental mentoring program housed within the Rising Tide Center. Unlike the department-specific mentoring program, TMP is open to all faculty regardless of rank or career stage.

Faculty apply for a target mentor through an online form that lists many of the areas that we have found to be of general interest but also provides an open-ended option. Faculty applying for a mentor can choose up to five areas of interest from this form. Simultaneously, we solicit help from faculty from across campus to serve as mentors; they each select five areas of strength or expertise. We then match these mentors and mentees to the best of our abilities by comparing the lists. While we originally were able to provide monetary compensation to mentors during the years of the grant, we have found that just as many faculty are willing to participate without compensation as service to their colleagues. We do provide a dining card to buy them coffee or lunch during mentoring meetings if they so desire, and we also have begun giving out a campus-wide faculty mentoring award to recognize this important work.

Our list includes the following topics, divided by theme:

Research

- Building your reputation as a scholar
- Developing a research agenda
- Establishing a research laboratory
- Establishing a research program
- Managing a research program
- Protecting research time
- Publishing scholarly work
- Reinventing: changing research focus

Teaching

- Assessment
- Creating engaging assignments
- Creating engaging classrooms
- Curriculum development
- Developing and teaching online classes
- E-learning: using digital resources effectively
- Teaching large classes
- Transitioning to active learning classes

Success in academia

- Academic life: finding balance
- Finding appropriate grant opportunities
- Fulfilling the tripartite mission of UMaine
- Interdisciplinary collaborations: keys to success
- Integrating into male-dominated disciplines
- Preparing competitive grant applications
- Review of promotion and tenure (P&T) materials
- Understanding the P&T process

Leadership

- Pursuing academic leadership roles

We have found that the open-ended option for the TMP is especially helpful for those with challenges related to their status on our predominately white and very rural campus. For example, we have had requests from faculty who identify as gay looking to connect with the LGBTQIA+ community, new parents seeking other new parents on the faculty, and underrepresented women in STEM units who are looking to connect with others.

An additional TMP service we provide is for our associate professors seeking promotion to full professors. We have found this program helpful to those who may need additional feedback on their dossiers or guidance from others who have traversed the typically less-than-clear process. We accomplish this part of the TMP pairing process by connecting an associate with a full professor, typically in the same college. The guidance we provide for this pairing is through a series of handouts that we provide the pairs, talking about goal setting and preparation of the dossier.

Our continued evaluation of both the required and the optional mentoring programs has resulted in several updates. First, we offer two workshops each fall on research about and guidance in faculty mentoring. These two optional training sessions provide context for not only how to mentor, including the outcomes of mentoring and active listening strategies, but also thinking through scenarios and resources to address those scenarios. We particularly emphasize issues that might arise among underrepresented faculty members.

The other piece of feedback we have garnered from our evaluation is that the required mentoring matches in their academic home often flounder when the mentee doesn't have a specific topic to discuss or question to ask. To address this concern, we have begun sending out what we call *monthly mentoring memos*. Each of these memos includes timely topics and resources that might provide a platform for a deeper conversation between the pairs. Examples include using the university's grading system (early December), reflecting upon first semester successes (January), and planning for summer research time (April).

Finally, new faculty have commented that they want more social opportunities to connect with other new faculty and mentors on campus. As a result of this feedback, we have implemented a few different social events to which mentors and mentees are invited. One new program we initiated last year with our partner, the [Center for Innovation in Teaching and Learning](#), was called Blue Drinks. A take on Green Drinks, the program for environmentally minded professionals in various cities, our program occurs twice per semester in different locations on campus. The sponsoring office or division pays for the cash bar fee and a few snacks. They also get the opportunity to talk for a few moments about what they do or offer in that location. This program has spawned additional social events that the newer faculty seek out as well as opportunities for entities across campus to show off their locations, offerings, and services to faculty who might not otherwise know about them.

In the coming year we hope to implement an additional mentoring component to our TMP that will connect new department chairs and school directors with more experienced chairs and directors. A new chair or director's first two years are often overwhelming and, despite our best efforts to provide ongoing training and professional development opportunities for people in these positions, we know that more support is always helpful. The idea behind this program is that the new chair will have a designated individual in the same academic college that can be an available touchstone for issues and concerns that may not rise to the level of need of seeking out a busy dean. Beyond providing helpful advice and guidance, this pairing will also provide a confidential connection to a peer in what can often feel like a lonely job.

We believe that the TMP at the University of Maine has provided faculty with several outlets for connection and support throughout their careers. We hope this overview gives you ideas for expanding mentoring efforts on your campus.

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Tags: department chairs faculty mentoring new faculty

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