

The Difference Mentoring Makes

by Beth McMurtrie

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When Stanley N. Katz began teaching at Princeton University, in the 1970s, a senior historian by the name of Lawrence Stone haunted the faculty lounge. "He had a little black calendar," recalls Mr. Katz. "If he hadn't seen you in a while he'd say, 'Stan, let's have lunch.'" And they'd pencil in a date on the spot.

Mr. Katz is now the senior historian who roams the halls of Princeton, reaching out to younger scholars, and he credits the late Mr. Stone for inspiring his efforts.

While not everyone is lucky enough to cross paths with someone like Mr. Stone or Mr. Katz, mentoring is on the minds of a lot of faculty members these days.

How can you be a good mentor? How can you find a mentor? And what do you need to do to make that relationship work? There are no simple answers, but plenty of analysis and advice for those looking for help. Universities, foundations, and scholarly associations have been studying and supporting mentorship since about the 1980s, when higher education's increased complexity made clear the need to offer young faculty members better and more-explicit guidance, particularly for the rising number of women and minority scholars entering academe.

Mentoring can take many forms. Some universities provide structured feedback for young scholars on the tenure track, which advocates say is critical to navigating an increasingly demanding career. In earlier times, says Rayna Rapp, an anthropologist at New York University, "there was an assumption that you understood what the standards were. But standards have changed ... and are much more complex for the ranks that have come up recently."

At the same time, informal mentoring remains an integral part of faculty life. Academics are given a lot of latitude in what to research, how to teach, and what forms of campus service to engage in, yet there are many potential land mines on the path to success. Which meetings are important to attend, and which relationships are important to cultivate? Being able to turn to departmental or campus colleagues to get a sense of how to navigate campus culture is invaluable, mentors say.

While the ideal remains the "super mentor"—that one wise adviser who guides you from graduate school onward—the reality is that mentoring can be done by many people over the course of an academic's career. "A smart person finds many people whose judgment they can trust," says Jim Grossman, executive director of the American Historical Association.

If a younger scholar turns to you for advice, how can you be a good mentor? Those who do it well say it helps to have an open-door policy—literally. Let younger faculty members know that you're available to talk to them, read drafts of their work, or share your professional networks. Being the new person on campus can be intimidating, and few people really want to show their ignorance, so it's important that mentors be proactive.

"That means you have to spend a fair amount of time just chatting," says Mr. Katz. "They have to have the confidence to come to you."

How close to get to people is a matter of personal style. "I look at people holistically because I know that sometimes the personal stuff can impact your productivity," says Rhonda Sharpe, associate director of the Diversity Initiative for Tenure in Economics, based at Duke University, and a visiting professor of African and African-American studies. "So I won't just ask, How's your research going? Have you published a paper yet?" She might also ask how things are going at home.

Other scholars prefer to stick to the topic of work. "In terms of personal guidance, I don't give it," says Robert T. Paine, an emeritus professor in the department of biology at the University of Washington.

But Mr. Paine, legendary for his sense of fun and camaraderie, proudly notes that at least three couples among his vast network of graduate students have married. That suggests that good mentors, whether or not

they're comfortable talking about personal issues, are people whom others like being around.

That brings up another important point: A good mentor does not make himself the focal point of conversation. "I really disapprove of the master-slave relationship, where the student is essentially an apprentice," says Mr. Paine. He refuses, for example, to put his name on papers of students he has advised unless he has contributed a significant amount of research. "That's not mentoring, that's academic thievery."

Plenty of mentors say they've seen this kind of destructive relationship play out, in which a senior scholar molds others in his image or sets up the relationship as a battle of egos.

"Too much competitive drive between mentor and mentee discourages younger scholars from bringing up their concerns," says Ms. Rapp, of NYU. "If you feel like you're always being judged on whether or not you're getting an A-plus, you'll be hesitant to reveal your doubts."

Instead, a good mentor seeks to understand what younger faculty members want to accomplish and helps illuminate the path that will take them there. Topics for discussion can range from the technical, such as which conferences to attend, to the philosophical, such as how to survive the pre-tenure grind without burning out.

Really thoughtful, sustained mentoring, though, doesn't happen quickly.

"It's repeatedly spending lots of time and care in nonefficient ways," says Sarah Barringer Gordon, a professor of law and history at the University of Pennsylvania. "Reading broadly, serving on prize committees where you get dumped with 75 or 100 books, writing tenure letters, having people over for dinner and introducing them to people who might be useful. You're helping nurture a system that doesn't go of itself."

The University of Massachusetts Center for Teaching & Faculty Development breaks down the subject of mentoring into five broad areas: getting to know the institution, excelling in teaching and research, understanding tenure and evaluation, creating work-life balance, and developing professional networks.

Because it's virtually impossible for one person to provide guidance in all of those areas, advisers suggest that young faculty members ask their peers who provides the sagest advice on those topics. A good mentor will tell you when he or she doesn't know the answer, and may suggest someone else to talk to.

At the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, which has an institutionwide mentoring program, online guides describe the sorts of challenges younger scholars face. "Giving and Getting Career Advice: A Guide for Junior and Senior Faculty" lists more than a dozen topics of discussion, including how to get grants, what types of service work to take on, the tenure-and-promotion process, family issues, and how to plan a career trajectory. Carol Fierke, chair of Michigan's chemistry department, praises the effect that deliberate, structured mentoring has had on her department during the past 10 years. "It changed the culture of the department from a place of dog eat dog, sink or swim, to we're all in this together, we're trying to build a great place."

A small committee of senior faculty members is convened to guide each new assistant professor. They are asked to meet at least once a semester, but the focus of the advising is determined by the junior scholar and her committee. Senior scholars may read grant proposals and first drafts of papers, or discuss which grants to apply for or how to get nominated for awards. "Having to sit down as a conversation and have somebody ask you questions, there is this realization that, 'Oh, I need help' or 'Help is available that would be good for me,'" says Ms. Fierke.

As for how to be a good mentee: Don't seek help only when you're in trouble, advisers say, but also don't expect any one person to be that mythical mentor.

And start small. "If a junior faculty member knocked on my door and said, 'Will you mentor me?,' I would have found that weird," says Kathleen Conzen, an emerita professor of history at the University of Chicago. "But if they knocked on my door and said, 'Let's have lunch,' that's great."

Mentoring can be particularly helpful for women and minority scholars who work in fields where their numbers are relatively small. Marie T. Mora, an economics professor at the University of Texas-Pan American, has served as a mentor in the economics-diversity initiative housed at Duke,

which is supported by the National Science Foundation. She says women and minority scholars are often asked, for example, to sit on a lot of committees to fulfill campus diversity requirements. Getting the advice of a senior scholar helps give them a reality check: "It's important for people to know it's OK to say no."

Ms. Fierke says that in the 20 years before the chemistry department changed its mentoring, hiring, and promotion procedures, in 2003, only one of four female assistant professors reviewed for tenure was promoted, compared with 13 of 16 male assistant professors. Since the changes, all four of the female assistant professors who have come up for review have been granted tenure.

While mentoring is important at all levels, advocates say, some worry that the largest group of faculty out there—adjuncts—may be getting the shortest shrift.

"They are in desperate need of some career-development help. How can they make themselves more attractive in the employment market?" says Edward Liebow, head of the American Anthropological Association. "And they are the least likely people senior faculty are going to want to take under their wing and offer guidance."

Maria Maisto, head of the New Faculty Majority, which advocates on behalf of contingent faculty, says universities should include all faculty members, not just those on the tenure track, in their institutional mentoring programs. More broadly, she says, mentoring that perpetuates the importance of unwritten rules and plugging into the right networks only widens the divide between those inside and outside the tenure system. "Faculty members are far too focused on individual advancements rather than thinking more collectively about the professoriate," she says.

Mr. Katz, meanwhile, worries that mentoring in general doesn't get the attention it deserves. He considers that an institutional failure as much as an individual one: "There are very few rewards in terms of treating other people thoughtfully, and there are a lot of penalties for not getting other work done."

But when it is done well, mentoring fosters collaborative relationships, not competitive ones, advocates say. Equally important, it inspires the next generation of mentors.

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