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## Chairs Mentoring Faculty Colleagues

Jeff Kerssen-Griep\*

*Many academics struggle to manage the changes that come with suddenly being responsible for chairing a group of peers. As in skilled classroom instruction, leading an academic unit invokes specific structural, strategic, tactical, and interpersonal abilities. New chairs often quickly have to add ways of thinking and acting that are beyond the precise expertise that got them to that point in the first place. With our focus on understanding process, communication scholars may be better equipped than some others to understand this role shift's dynamics, but often we struggle as mightily as our chemist or engineering or nursing peers to convert those understandings into practices that helpfully develop without overwhelming or harming either our colleagues or ourselves.*

**Key Words:** Mentoring, Faculty, Peers, Communication, Relational, Interpersonal

This article is meant to spur discussion about relational and interactional aspects of leading an academic unit. Its focus on such mentoring leaves aside for others some key, more impersonal departmental leadership components such as strategic planning. What is known about how we can be productively involved in regular interactions as chairs with our colleagues? Hoped-for reactions might include noting important omissions or situational circumstances, applying these principles to particular problems, or spotlighting particular practices as key, among many other possibilities. This article consults applied and conceptual literature to form a starting point for that discussion.

### Key Needs

Skilled community participants are continually learning to recognize and negotiate the norms, conventions, and traditions of a group (Merriam, 1982; Nicholls, 2002). Engaging these patterns successfully means getting conversant with the shared symbolic systems members use to signal, comprehend, and shape their community's key meanings and ethics.

Joining an academic department means having to navigate a lot of new learning, much of it not part of professional training up to that point. Most new faculty arrive with some teaching and perhaps publication experience, but lack experience in advising, obtaining research funding, and most aspects of working within a collegiate culture's system (Li, Hemami, Brown, Sohn, Willett, & Lee, 2005). Faculty from less privileged societal positions often face special constraining/enabling circumstances that often are less apparent to colleagues from less marginalized standpoints (Jackson-Weaver, Baker, Gillespie, Ramos Bellido, & Watts, 2010; Smith, 2000). And senior faculty face their own evolving challenges and goals (Garvey, 2011); needs for mentoring are not limited to early-career faculty members.

The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation's Faculty Career Enhancement (FCE) program names three key issues requiring faculty guidance, time, and space across a career arc. These include the need for faculty professional and personal balance; the need for intellectual and social community; and the need for experimentation, risk-taking, and innovation (Chang & Baldwin, 2008). Successful mentoring is one means by which department chairs can help their colleagues reflect about and address these and other needs.

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## Mentoring

Mentoring others differs from manipulating, informing, hectoring, or befriending them. Mentor relationships are a type of instructional connection distinguished by individualized professional and personal (not impersonal) contact and a focus on guiding professional and personal growth, resourcefulness, and self-efficacy (Golian & Galbraith, 1996; Zimmerman & Paul, 2007). Skilled mentoring involves psychosocial components such as challenging, counseling, and role modeling for a protégé, as well as professional activities like exposing protégés to new situations, sponsoring their work, and protecting them from threats (Kram, 1985; Ragins & McFarlin, 1990). It works best as a mutually active relationship built on trust, constructive criticism, development, and support (Blandford, 2000). Mentoring relationships rely on communication skill and perceptions of mutual respect; they need not be formal or official to achieve their outcomes (Kalbfleisch & Davies, 1993; Ragins & Cotton, 1999). Protégés should feel mentors' investment in their progress toward goals.

It is pragmatically helpful to think of mentoring as a type of instructional communication accomplished with peers. Learners in many situations are more motivated to interact with instructors they perceive as mentors, and more readily accept criticism, attend to instruction, work harder, strive for mastery, and cope with difficulties when they perceive supportive instructional relationships (Bippus, Kearney, Plax, and Brooks, 2003; Darmon, Muller, Scharager, Pannuzzo, & Butera, 2007; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). And supervisory communication abilities themselves help shape participants' role perceptions. In classroom contexts, skillfully communicating feedback helps learners feel they are being mentored rather than subjected to some kind of lesser instructional treatment (Kerssen-Griep, Trees, & Hess, 2008). Adroit instructional communication over time is within a chair's power to develop, and it helps chairs earn that "mentor" perception from colleagues.

### Structured Mentoring

Some mentoring opportunities are built into the formal structure of a faculty position relative to a department chair. Formal frameworks can by their nature give participants permission to discuss important knowledge, goals, and needs. As one example among many, (Massaro, 2010) advocated meeting one-on-one with faculty to discuss perceptions, strengths, and priorities. She suggested these four prompts:

- What is your perception of our department?
- What strengths do you bring to what we are about and the students we are here to serve?
- What are your priorities for the next year?
- What departmental priorities are most important for our advancement and academic excellence?

Any mandated feedback situation offers a venue for mentoring, of course, such as teaching observations, annual self-assessment consultations, and rank and tenure file preparation meetings. While much relational mentoring takes place informally—and even tacitly—using university-required frameworks for interacting can bring about helpful conversations that might be more awkward to create in purely informal interactions.

### Informal Mentoring

Aside from required interactions, new faculty take a great deal of learning from informal interactions with more established group members including faculty peers, administrators, and students. The applied literature is rich with advice about interactional insights faculty would

benefit from gleaning through those encounters. Synthesizing several such articles (Chang & Baldwin, 2008; Danielson & Schulte, 2007; Jackson-Weaver et al., 2010; Massaro, 2010; Mills, 2009; Nicholls, 2002; Li et al., 2005; Seelig, 2009) offers a variety of hoped-for relational mentoring outcomes.

**Faculty expectations.** Some of that guidance centers on mentors learning and helping faculty develop and adjust their own expectations. Mentors can help faculty peers gain clarity about their strengths, interests, and values, as well as where those fit within what the department hired them to do, so they can deliver it. It is important to re-open this particular conversation over time as faculty and university expectations evolve (Massaro, 2010). Seelig (2009) in particular advocated getting mentees to craft their role's "story" with intention so they will be proud to tell it later; to think about how others' long-term perceptions could be shaped by current actions.

**Finding one's place.** Some mentoring guidance moves beyond helping individuals' reflective self-work to focus on guiding faculty's fit within existing structures. It is important to help faculty understand the nuances of their institution's and department's missions, for example, so they can further those missions in meaningful ways through their work (Chang & Baldwin, 2008; Mills, 2009; Nicholls, 2002). Mentors coming from more privileged cultural positions have to find ways to understand and empathize with the many ways their colleagues' experiences are impacted by their race, sex, sexuality, age, and so on (Jackson-Weaver et al., 2010; Sorcinelli & Austin, 2006). In this situation and many others, listening intentionally is perhaps the key communication ability chairs need to develop. Mentoring well also means confronting one's own biases or fears about particular identities and finding ways to talk openly about them and their implications. Most concretely, mentors aid their colleagues' progress through the rank and tenure process by helping them increase their visibility in the field through grant applications, publications and talks at conferences and organizations, and service as a reviewer or disciplinary organization officer (Li et al. 2005).

**Teacher preparation.** Beckerman (2010) argued that successful faculty mentoring programs should revolve around classroom teaching. Skillful department chair guidance can help faculty peers regularly interrogate their own instructional practices to determine how well their personally-applied theories and values align with currently accepted knowledge about teaching and learning. She advocated a faculty mentoring curriculum including four key components: (1) review of current educational theory; (2) developing a variety of teaching techniques toward mastery; (3) collegial networking, and (4) the reciprocal process of testing theory, and regular examination of teaching practices in light of this knowledge. Chairs' in-class observations then can offer formative guidance framed by this knowledge, not just summative feedback at prescribed faculty evaluation intervals. This attention benefits both parties in exposing for regular discussion all parties' tacit knowledge about teaching and learning (Nicholls, 2002). It also increases the chances that colleagues will be able and willing to similarly mentor coming generations of their teaching colleagues, which is an excellent cultural outcome for a functional department (Beckerman, 2010).

**Connecting with others.** Some interactional mentoring advice addresses everyday communication principles to encourage among faculty wider rules for conduct that transcend the academic setting but clearly have relevance there. Encourage faculty to respect everyone's time and effort, and to avoid burning bridges or creating antagonistic relationships within academia's small world, no matter how tempting (Mills, 2009; Seelig, 2009). Communication principles key

to achieving that outcome include picking ones battles, owning ones mistakes, focusing on others' brilliance rather than ones own, and "never lying" in encounters with others (Mills, 2009). Others name a healthy sense of humor as a facilitator of such good practices and rarer than it should be in academe, so important to encourage by action and guidance.

**Staying current.** Chairs should consider adding at least two types of resources to their reading diets. Applied research summaries offering advice, reviews, and higher education trends can be found on several professional sites, including the "Chairs' Corner" of the National Communication Association's website (NCA: <http://www.natcom.org>), the Association of American College and Universities (AAC&U: <http://www.aacu.org/>), and the Tomorrow's Professor electronic mailing list and archive (<http://cgi.stanford.edu/~dept-ctl/tomprof/postings.php>) based at Stanford University. Complement those materials by checking in with up-to-date research on organizational socialization (e.g., Fang, Duffy, & Shaw, 2011; Taormina, 2009) and communicating social support (e.g., Bodie, Burleson, & Jones, 2012). Doing so periodically gives communication chairs richer explanatory bases needed for the theory-based problem-solving techniques they offer others and try themselves.

### **Maintain Boundaries**

Finally, hold two parameters firmly in mind to moderate and guide all involvement in colleagues' development. First, faculty are chairs' peers, not subordinates, and need to be treated accordingly. Aside from occasional assessment or disciplinary encounters mandated by administrative structures, skilled department chairs most often are mentoring as if beside rather than above their colleagues. Nicholls (2002) argued for mentoring as a means to encourage systematic critical reflection rather than impose evaluation. That stance affects what sorts of power bases and techniques chairs tap to earn influence with their peers. Artfully done from "alongside," mentoring encounters thus become means to open conversations about mentors' and colleagues' skills and knowledge, which otherwise might remain tacit and unexplored for both parties.

Second, effective mentoring means faculty members ultimately must be equipped to make their own way rather than forever feel addicted to a chair's guidance. Although misbehaving faculty understandably draw much of a chair's attention and energy, most colleagues in fact work hard and collegially and will learn the most by watching, questioning, and doing, rather than only listening. Chairs must listen more often and at least as well as they talk. Think about moving through stages of mentoring with each colleague, allowing peers to move into different relational roles as appropriate (Nicholls, 2002). Still, mentoring efforts might pay off very slowly, or not at all. Remember that mentoring also is a powerful tool for professional development and learning for the mentor.

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