Mentoring Tenured Faculty: Rationales and Programs


In professional fields such as business and law, mentoring is increasingly recognized as a way to promote individual and organizational growth. In academia, however, mentoring is often misunderstood and underutilized. In fact, it is not uncommon for professors to think that good faculty should be able to get by without mentors — in other words, that “figuring it out” is part of how one proves oneself in academics.

The university attitude toward mentoring, however, is changing. Formal mentoring programs are gaining ground in academics as a way to promote the success of individual faculty and improve the collaborative culture within departments and across campus. This article summarizes the experience and best practices of two formal mentorship programs at the University of Missouri, managed by Mizzou ADVANCE team members Jackie Litt, Sheryl Tucker, and Jill Hermensen.

Why Has Mentorship Become Important?

For faculty members, the academic playing field has shifted dramatically in the past few decades and is now harder to successfully navigate alone. There is declining public and state support for higher education, which has intensified the need for faculty members to obtain their own research funding from grants and contracts. At the same time, new technologies have erased geographic boundaries and accelerated an environment where research is done in collaboration, with groups of colleagues within and between fields and across universities and businesses. In short, faculty careers in the 21st century are less linear and less predictable than in past decades. The greater unpredictability means faculty must make tougher decisions about where and how they spend their time, and the greater collaborative environment means a faculty member’s social capital (whom you know) is now nearly as important as her or his knowledge capital (what you know). In this new environment, mentoring stands out as an effective component of faculty success.

Mentoring relationships can help faculty members succeed in several ways. First, academics often work alone. Mentoring can help faculty reduce feelings of isolation — something especially apparent among female faculty. Female faculty often report feeling distant from the important happenings in their department or left out of potentially helpful “shop talk” that takes place among colleagues who meet socially. Mentorship programs can help mentors and mentees foster social networks — these linkages with people in their department and across campus can inform and instruct participants in unexpected ways.

For both women and men, formal mentoring programs can also be a way of signaling that working together is important and that isolation need not be the norm. This can help improve the collegiality of a department and also create opportunities for meeting and possibly conducting research with faculty from other fields. This more collegial and interdisciplinary spirit is a better fit for the environment in which faculty now work than the go-it-alone mentality that has dominated in the past.

The potential importance of mentoring programs is perhaps the greatest for mid-career faculty. Among many tasks, department chairs are charged with helping faculty succeed, and their emphasis has historically been on helping untenured faculty launch their careers and achieve tenure. Mid-career faculty — those individuals with tenure but without a promotion to professor — have a strong, but more often unrecognized, need for continued professional-development support from department chairs. The post-tenure years mean another transition for faculty — teaching loads and committee responsibilities may shift and start-up funding and early grants are gone. Stagnation and inertia are a risk. At this point, mid-career faculty face many forks in the road — and without help, many may see their productivity decline and their upward trajectory level off.

What Does a Mentoring Program Look Like?

Mentoring programs can take several forms—at the core they need only be an intentional bringing together of junior and senior faculty with the expressed goal of supporting the continued success of faculty. Mentoring programs can be some combination of one-on-one mentoring, peer mentoring in small groups, and/or workshops.

Because mentoring programs are a social endeavor that depends on each individual’s sense of comfort and trust, they can be tricky to implement successfully. This is overcome if chairs design a mentorship program that pays close attention to what faculty in their department say they need and what fits within the social norms and culture of their field. The following are characteristics of a successful mentoring program:

1) State goals clearly and include input from faculty. For some faculty, their need for mentoring may come from concerns over how to teach more effectively; for others it may be concerns about how to write grant proposals or manage grant-funded projects. To make sure the mentoring program meets participants’ needs, explicitly write the mentoring program goals. For example:

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Faculty Profile: Lesa Beamer

X-ray crystallography and childbirth may seem like two wholly different things, but according to Lesa Beamer, MU associate professor of biochemistry, the two have some things in common.

“One thing that’s neat about crystallography, since what we do is look at structures of molecules,” she says, “is that each time you look at a new structure, it’s exciting because it was unknown, and now it’s known, and you were involved in it. In some ways,” she continues, “I think of it as almost like having a child, where you go through the whole pregnancy and all the struggles, and at the end of it there’s the baby. Well, what I do is at the end of crystallography, there’s the structure.”

The Ohio native had always been interested in art and music, but Beamer’s parents, who are both educators in the humanities fields, encouraged her to pursue something more “employable.” And this she did — she and a colleague recently received a grant to conduct research on nuclear magnetic resonance, which is one of only a few techniques that can be used to look at the tiny three-dimensional structure of molecules. The best part of the project besides the coveted structure at the end of the tunnel? “We actually have money to work on it!” she says, laughing.

To learn more about Lesa Beamer, visit http://biochem.missouri.edu/faculty/faculty-members/beamer/index.php.
Mizzou ADVANCE Programs

Mentoring

The Mentoring Program continues to emphasize one-on-one relationships and professional development workshops, but now to a larger audience. The program has been expanded to include more departments, encouraging a larger number of assistant, associate, and full professors to participate. This year, there are 25 mentees in the program. Participants have benefited from professional development workshops such as “Conflict Resolution,” a Lunch & Learn session featuring Paul Ladehoff from Campus Mediation Services. Other workshops offered this semester included “Media Training” with the MU News Bureau. Mizzou ADVANCE was also proud to co-sponsor a promotion and tenure workshop with the Provost’s Office, modeled after a past Mizzou ADVANCE workshop. For information on these and future events, visit http://mizzouadvance.missouri.edu/news/.

Research

Invitations to participate in focus groups have been sent to female junior faculty; a few focus groups have already convened. Once those interviews are complete, a matched sample of male junior faculty will be invited to participate in focus groups. The interviews focus on departmental climate issues, mirroring the individual interviews in which 50 senior faculty participated. Also, this fall and spring those 50 faculty members who participated in individual interviews in year one of the grant will be invited to complete a follow-up interview. The purpose of that interview is to help us understand any changes in their work lives since the beginning of the grant. In addition, Jeni Hart and Jackie Litt have recently submitted an article to the Review of Higher Education based upon findings from the qualitative interviews with senior faculty.

Theatre

On Aug. 29, the Mizzou ADVANCE Interactive Theatre Troupe started off its season by performing Foie Gras for the 2009 chairs’ retreat. Other performances of Foie Gras this fall included a geology department seminar on September 11 and the Conversations in Science Teaching Group teaching series on Nov. 19. The Interactive Theatre Troupe also performed A Knock on the Door for the American Association of University Women on Oct. 17.

STRIDE

The STRIDE Committee continues to educate the campus community on gender issues; it is finalizing policy recommendations based on information from the STEM departments. The policy recommendation focuses on performance reviews, mentoring, and promotion and tenure, with the goal of helping STEM departments improve in these areas. The STRIDE Committee has also developed and delivered a new presentation for STEM search committees on the best recruiting practices and procedures.

Participating STEM Colleges, Divisions & Departments at MU

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<td>1) Identify participants’ goals and use this information as you put pairs or small groups together.</td>
<td>2) Value department buy-in and work to cultivate it. Programs should recognize potential initial hesitancy among faculty; in response, deans and chairs should show clear and explicit support for mentorship and networking as strategies for success.</td>
<td>3) Complete the evaluation loop. We’ve already discussed the importance of starting with faculty members’ goals and needs during program design. Successful mentorship programs complete this feedback loop by continuously communicating with participants to keep a handle on developing challenges so the program can adapt and stay relevant for all participants.</td>
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The competitive pace of academia appears set to keep accelerating, while resources for faculty support will likely remain flat or decline. In this environment, we expect mentoring programs will prove to be a cost-effective means of improving the departmental quality of life for faculty.
Another Successful Professional Development Seminar

For the third year in a row, Barbara Butterfield and Jane Tucker returned to MU to conduct a professional development workshop for the STEM community. The two previous workshops focused on strategic persuasion skills and building leadership strengths in academics. This year’s workshop, “Balancing Your Career Portfolio: Merging the Professional and Personal,” focused on work/life balance. Thirty-five faculty, representing MU, UMKC, UMSL, and Lincoln University, attended the workshop. Butterfield and Tucker outlined the difficulties experienced by many maintaining balance in the three main areas of life: family, personal, and professional. One challenge of maintaining balance in these areas is the need for constant re-evaluation due to life transitions. Transition can take on many forms such as new children, children becoming teenagers, personal or family illness, changing job titles, relocating, or retirement. Butterfield and Tucker advised workshop participants to ask themselves two questions before enacting changes: First, who else will this affect? Second, how will they react? Anticipating these answers may make the transition toward balance easier.

Among many useful ideas, Butterfield and Tucker encouraged the group to think of their lives in terms of a financial portfolio. Most in attendance admitted that they had long-term financial goals that they were working toward, but that this same type of planning did not spill over to their professional and personal lives. Some other key suggestions for achieving balance are outlined below.

**Professional Life**

In order to manage your career portfolio, first develop a career plan. As with financial investment, the career plan needs to be realistic and attainable. Then put the plan into action. This can be done by “investing” in fundamentals that will support your career in the long term. Determine “allocations” of time, energy, and resources to have the biggest impact on success. And “diversify” your talents to create more options when transitions in your life occur. Finally, be sure to stay on your career track by continuing to progress toward your goals and by instituting periodic career check-ups.

**Personal Life — Balancing Tactics**

The first step in creating work/life balance is to determine your own personal definition for success in each area. Success in one's career is often defined in tangible measures or overall goals that can be achieved but are not measured by the academy. To help define success in personal life, a values clarification may be useful. This exercise promotes thinking about core values to help you define a successful personal life. Finally, realize that your definition of success could change over time. However, starting now to develop a goal or vision for what you want will help you achieve it in the long run.

**Creating Boundaries**

One way to balance work and life is to create boundaries that separate the two areas. The tactics for creating boundaries fall into four categories: behavioral, temporal, physical, and communicative. Behavioral tactics include using other people and/or technology to help prevent interruptions. Temporal tactics are those that involve controlling time and the environment to maintain a consistent schedule at work and home. Physical tactics involve changing the physical environment to maximize time and efficiency at work and home. Finally, communicative tactics include setting expectations for a division of time between work and home and then confronting those who violate these expectations.

Mizzou ADVANCE Speaks to Preparing Future Faculty Class

Jerry Taylor, STRIDE member, and Carol Lorenzen, steering board member, presented “Frank Talk and Helpful Solutions for Women Entering the Academy” to MU Graduate School’s Preparing Future Faculty program. The presentation, available online at: mizzouadvance.missouri.edu/resources/Frank_Talk.pdf, was modeled after the STRIDE committee presentation and focused on unconscious gender bias that women in the academy face and how women can package their candidacy for an academic position. Advice offered to address unconscious gender bias included avoiding pitfalls on a C.V., enhancing impact, selecting references, negotiating offers, and recognizing a female-friendly workplace during the interview. The presentation led to a lively question-and-answer session with the graduate students and post-doctoral fellows from a wide range of academic disciplines.

A follow-up panel discussion, “Women in the Academy: Tips for Success,” took place in October. The panel included Marie-Helene Cormier, College of Arts and Science; John Gahl, College of Engineering; Carol Lorenzen, College of Agriculture, Food and Natural Resources; and Jerry Taylor, College of Agriculture, Food and Natural Resources.
A Message from Roger Worthington
Chief Diversity Officer

It has been truly impressive to observe the work of the Mizzou ADVANCE program over the past years. As chief diversity officer at MU, I have had the unique opportunity to work closely with Jackie Litt and the Mizzou ADVANCE team in championing the value of inclusion and equity for female faculty in the sciences, technology, engineering, and mathematics fields.

Even as we anticipate this phase of the NSF ADVANCE program at MU coming to a close in June 2010, it is imperative that we continue to focus our united efforts toward the representation and progression of women in academic science and engineering careers. Mizzou ADVANCE has served a critical role at MU in doing just that, and the Chancellor’s Diversity Initiative is committed to working diligently in collaborative partnerships with department chairs, deans, and central administration offices to bring transformational change by continuing those efforts.

I congratulate the entire Mizzou ADVANCE team for their outstanding work and tireless dedication over the course of the past four years in moving MU forward on these important issues. I also want to challenge everyone involved to maintain your commitment to the essential work that has yet to be accomplished in the coming years. I hope we can build a larger community of faculty, staff, students, and administrators who will continue to be involved in efforts to diversify the workplace and enhance the campus climate.

A Message from Jackie Litt
Principal Investigator, Mizzou ADVANCE; Chair, Department of Women’s & Gender Studies

As Mizzou ADVANCE enters its third year at our university, I am pleased to acknowledge the many accomplishments we have made because of the efforts of everyone involved in the program.

To date, we have raised awareness of gender equity issues for STEM faculty by presenting gender equity information to the Promotion & Tenure Committee and by sponsoring interactive theater performances that depict some of the challenges faced by STEM faculty in their departments.

We have supported the professional development of STEM faculty through our mentoring program and professional development workshops.

Additionally, we have increased our awareness of career and life issues through our close work with Institutional Research to collect institutional data on STEM faculty, as well as through interviews and focus groups conducted to understand STEM faculty experiences.

As this year marks the final year of the grant, we are focusing on ways to extend the longevity of Mizzou ADVANCE by institutionalizing certain elements into our university. There are many examples of the ways in which Mizzou ADVANCE is being integrated into our campus community. For example, the Provost’s Office has developed the humanities mentoring program “Focus on Faculty,” which is based on the Mizzou ADVANCE Mentoring Program.

I encourage you to contact me with suggestions on how to imbed ADVANCE elements in the Mizzou community as we look past the scope of the grant into the future. Please feel free to e-mail me at LittJ@missouri.edu.