



A Professional Development Program  
for Graduate Students and Postdoctoral Fellows  
Offered by the Teaching Resource Center

## Junior Faculty: How to Find Good Mentors

The needs and methods of junior faculty differ markedly from those of a graduate student. Be prepared by absorbing all you can from your graduate school mentor before you leave; “be prepared” is good advice for more people than Boy Scouts. Many of the desirable attributes and effective strategies still apply, but many are no longer relevant. Perhaps the biggest difference is that you now have an entirely new system to learn. With luck you will know something about such things, but most likely you will not be well equipped to handle them. Most beginning assistant professors have had minimal teaching experience, no experience obtaining research funding, no advising experience, and little grasp of “how things work” in academia.

Some schools have organized programs for mentoring new faculty, sometimes forming teams based on preferences. Investigate to see if you have such resources available to you. Some departments assign mentors for new faculty, and that gives you someone to talk to and it may be enough. Often, however, it is not sufficient and you may need to seek additional council, possibly even from other institutions. It is particularly important at this stage to find someone with a reputation for both strong teaching and strong research and for a good balance between the two. Unfortunately deans and chairs are not always suitable for this role because they are less active in both teaching and research because of their administrative duties. Two attributes often mentioned for good mentors are that they should have a good sense of humor and that they should be pragmatic.

Probably the best strategy for finding a primary or secondary mentor is to chat with many possible candidates and pursue conversations with people with whom you feel comfortable. Take advantage of any connections you might have, for example local friends of your PhD supervisor or other professors you know and like. It is best to look for someone who is tenured, because learning about the tenure process early can make it far less scary. Every institution operates differently, but all have similar criteria for excellence in research, teaching, and professional service. Finding good advice for allocating your time can be very helpful.

### How Can A Mentor Help?

In addition to addressing the skills needed to survive and prosper in academia already mentioned as reasons for seeking a mentor, there follow many other helpful influences a mentor can have on a new faculty member.

\* A mentor can provide good advice on the key academic responsibilities of teaching and advising, including negotiating which courses to teach (balancing core and advanced), giving tips for getting good teaching evaluations from students and taking advantage of available resources for improving teaching skills, teaching the basics of students and advising (and where to find all the program and other requirements you will need to have at hand), supervising undergraduate and graduate projects, writing exams, grading strategies, interpreting course evaluations, and preparing for the unpredictable crises you are likely to encounter when advising students. Know your resources!

\* A mentor can help guide you through your department's maze. You need to know how to get things done, whom to see for what, how teaching assistants and research assistants are approved and appointed, and, unfortunately, what to do when you encounter cheating or violations of the university ethics or honor codes. These things happen at the best of places. This type of mentoring requires inside knowledge and hence a mentor within your department or school.

\* A mentor can be invaluable when you write grant proposals for research funding. They can provide you with successful examples and review your draft proposals. They can also be a big help in dealing with the rejection that often comes with a failed proposal.

\* A mentor can be a demystifier of the tenure process, and in planning ahead for the process. This often means encouraging you to maximize your visibility in your field through publications, talks at conferences, talks in industry and other universities, grant applications, and professional service as reviewer, associate editor, program committee, professional society officer, and other visible positions that enhance your field. Key to a successful tenure process will be having people in the field know and like your work.

\* A mentor can help build relationships with other colleagues both within your department and elsewhere on campus.

\* A mentor can help you to keep things in perspective—they often have a more global and experienced viewpoint that can transcend the daily crises that can beset junior faculty. In particular, mistakes will happen. Get past it. Grants and papers will get rejected, don't take it personally and try again (and make it better).

These advantages only accrue if you maintain regular contact with your mentor, and regular lunches or walks or coffee provide a good opportunity for doing so.

Mentors at other institutions are less helpful in dealing with the home institution, but they can be a big help in many other aspects of your career. They can provide independent advice on your grant applications and an outside objective perspective on your career advancement. Sometimes they can find out useful information through their own informal networks. They can also nominate you for editorial and program committee service that can provide an excellent means of expanding your knowledge of the field and its members.

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