

## **The Mentoring Relationship**

Successful mentoring relationships are built around the needs and career goals of the mentee. Each mentoring relationship is unique and must be negotiated on an individual basis to match the needs of the mentee and the resources the mentor brings to the relationship. Mentors can help new faculty in the following areas:

### **I. Getting to Know the Institution**

Mentors frequently assist new faculty in:

- Understanding the academic culture of the institution
- Identifying and using resources to support teaching and research activities
- Building a network of junior and senior colleagues
- Appreciating the social and political dynamic in their new departments and faculties

### **II. Career Development**

Questions a mentor might answer include:

- What does the promotion and tenure process look like? What are the formal and informal criteria for promotion and tenure? How do I build a tenure file?
- How do I find or get nominated for fellowships, grants, awards?
- How do I write a winning grant?
- What organizations should I join, what conferences should I attend? Who can help me get on the program of important meetings?
- What are the leading journals in the field? How do I handle co-authors in my dossier? How do I get the attention of editors? What are the best ways get feedback on a paper?
- How do I handle concerns, issues, problems in the department? What are appropriate ways to bring them up?
- What are strategies for handling the balance of research, teaching and service? Between career and home-life?

### **III. Professional Development**

Mentors can support mentees by providing:

- Constructive feedback on grant and research proposals
- Assistance in the development of a long term research and writing plan
- Suggestions for the development of effective teaching strategies
- Advice on the selection of appropriate service commitments
- Access to an expanded network of professional contacts

## The Challenges of Mentoring Relationships

Mentoring relationships are dynamic in nature, and each one will be unique. There are, however, several easily avoidable pitfalls for any mentoring relationship:

- Overly pronounced concern for mentoring partner's time: Mentees may be hesitant to “bother” their mentors with “silly questions” when they are obviously such busy people. Conversely, mentors who are not regularly asked for help often do not wish to seem pushy and thus do not contact their mentees without express invitation. This concern for the mentoring partner's freedom, time and independence can have a negative impact on the usefulness of the mentoring relationship. A large part of the success of a mentoring relationship lies in the trust that builds up over time when mentors and mentees get to know one another. This trust is what will allow the mentee to ask important questions about being effective as a faculty member and get honest answers. Effective mentoring partnerships are the result of efforts to meet and/or communicate outside formal departmental events—even if just a few times per year. *It is important for both the mentor and the mentee to be pro-active in the relationship* so that the mentee gets the support he or she needs for professional success. Mentors cannot begin to help if they do not know what the mentees' questions and concerns are.
  - Consider setting up your own breakfast, lunch, coffee or dinner opportunity with your mentoring partner to enhance the trust and collegiality necessary for an honest exchange.
- Unrealistic expectations: Mentees' expectations for their mentoring partners can be unrealistic. One or two mentors cannot be the *only* resource on every topic. Mentors should be able to admit that they do not have expertise in a particular area, but should then look for other people who might be appropriate resources on that topic. *Mentees should be looking for additional mentors* to help them get their questions answered.
- Relationships that don't “gel”: Often, mentors are assigned to mentees without the input of either party. This is not necessarily negative: research shows that assigned mentors are as effective as mentors chosen by the mentee. However, it is important to remember that, through no fault of the mentee or the mentor, some relationships may not gel. This possibility is much less likely if you begin your mentoring relationships with a frank and honest discussion about what you want and need, and how you see the role of mentor and mentee. Any mentoring relationship should have a no-fault termination possibility.
- The ‘seasons’ of a mentoring relationship: all mentoring relationships undergo changes as the career needs of the mentee are gradually met. A successful mentee often becomes increasingly independent of the mentor. This can lead to disappointment on the mentor's part as contact with the mentee may decline. Mentors and mentees need to take into account the natural “seasons” of a normal mentoring relationship, and accept that contact with their partner may vary over time.

### Adapted from:

- Faculty Mentoring Program for Women, University of Texas at El Paso
- University of Manitoba Teaching Services Center  
[http://www.umanitoba.ca/academic\\_support/uts/services/mentoring/success.php](http://www.umanitoba.ca/academic_support/uts/services/mentoring/success.php)
- University of Wisconsin, Madison Women Faculty Mentoring Program  
<http://www.provost.wisc.edu/women/mentor.html>