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Chapter 24- Intentional Onboarding and Mentoring of New Faculty at Central Michigan University

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INTENTIONAL ONBOARDING AND MENTORING OF NEW FACULTY AT CENTRAL MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY

Sarah Marshall

Abstract

Recognizing that faculty who are mentored are more likely to successfully navigate the tenure process and become effective members of the academic community, Central Michigan University's (CMU) College of Education and Human Services (CEHS) developed a comprehensive mentoring and professional development program for all new, full-time faculty. This program provided a network of support, resources, and guidance for navigating inevitable challenges. Prior to the development of this program, departments varied in the ways they encouraged and addressed faculty mentoring. Most informally assigned a faculty mentor, but as our initial assessment demonstrated, little to no mentorship occurred. With the recruitment and retention of faculty as our motivator, we developed a 2-year new faculty development program to aid in their transition and onboarding. Moving away from informal, spontaneous mentorship, we intentionally crafted a comprehensive, research-based program including summer support, orientation, faculty mentorship, professional development, and peer interactions. In our first year, eight new tenure-track faculty participated in the program. In the second year, we added six additional new faculty including three who were full-time and non-tenure-track. This chapter overviews our program from its origins through assessment and is organized into three sections: mentoring context and program development, mentoring activities, and lessons learned.

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Mentoring Context and Program Development

Committed to ensuring that new faculty were in the best possible position to succeed professionally, Central Michigan University's (CMU) College of Education and Human Services (CEHS) developed a comprehensive mentoring and professional development program for all new, full-time faculty. While faculty attrition was not a major concern at CMU, our dean recognized that the college's investment in faculty warranted a comprehensive approach to their indoctrination into the college. Not unique to CMU, while most new faculty had terminal degrees, they had limited experience navigating academe and its unique culture. While most had a perceived familiarity with expectations related to teaching, research, and service, the reality of successfully navigating professorial expectations was very new to them.

Need for This Program

Our journey began with the appointment of a Professional Learning Community (PLC) with faculty representatives from each of our five departments and the associate dean. We were charged with assessing the needs of new faculty and developing resources to aid in their transition to the professoriate. We discovered that departments varied in the ways they encouraged organization socialization and addressed faculty mentoring. Most departments informally assigned faculty mentors to new faculty, but little to no mentorship occurred. In most cases, onboarding was happenstance more than intentional. The PLC recommended the development of a comprehensive faculty development program to aid in the transition and onboarding of new faculty.

Purpose and Objectives

Research indicated that best practices in faculty indoctrination should be intentional and comprehensive (Lumpkin, 2011). Some of the key factors to effective mentoring programs include clear purpose and goals, support from faculty and leadership, evaluation for continuous improvement, visible support from senior administration, adequate resources, orientation for mentors and mentees, and intentional matching of pairs (Fountain & Newcomer, 2016). The goals of our program included:

- Help newer or more junior faculty members acclimate to formal and informal norms of the department, college, and university.
- Foster effective research skills and publishing strategies.
- Encourage faculty members to refine and expand teaching strategies.
- Foster development of a productive balance between research, teaching, and service.
- Guide faculty members in progression toward promotion and tenure.
- Foster an atmosphere of collegiality and community.

Organizational Support for Mentoring Program and Infrastructure

Annually, our dean appointed a faculty fellow to work on college-wide special projects. Participants often had administrative aspirations, and the fellowship program was a way to receive mentorship and

career guidance while pursuing ideas to improve the college. The fellowship included a 2-year appointment of a tenured faculty member who received a reduction in teaching load, additional professional development funds, a summer stipend, and mentorship from the dean. With the recruitment and retention of faculty as our motivator, in the capacity of a faculty fellow, I developed a 2-year new faculty development program to aid in the transition and induction of new faculty.

The research and planning phase began the semester prior to program implementation. Via the literature, I researched best practices in faculty mentorship and organizational socialization, spoke with department chairs about their current onboarding practices, and received feedback from new faculty regarding their transitional experiences. Throughout the planning stages, I had the ongoing support of the dean and the department chairs. As a member of the leadership team, I regularly informed the chairs of the initiative and sought their feedback. I was intentional in valuing the ongoing mentorship chairs provided and encouraged the continuation of those relationships. The developed program was not intended to replace their mentorship and guidance, only to enhance and expand the intentional nature of our faculty indoctrination process.

Typology of Program

This program evolved into a hybrid of hierarchical mentoring and peer mentoring. In accordance with hierarchical mentoring, a more senior, experienced faculty member was paired with a new faculty member. Throughout the course of the academic year, these pairings resulted in improved socialization to the profession and university, positive performance outcomes, and career clarity. Additionally, the program included monthly professional development seminars for the new faculty. As a result, peer mentoring occurred as the new faculty developed relationships and sought guidance from their peers. These monthly peer meetings provided a safe environment where new faculty could speak candidly about their experiences.

Mentoring Inputs and Resources

Curricular Description

The designed mentoring and professional development program included summer communications and resources, a kick-off dinner, monthly mentoring sessions, and monthly professional development sessions. First, recognizing that faculty onboarding should begin as early as possible, we launched our faculty development program toward the end of the spring semester/early summer. For example, new faculty immediately have questions regarding relocation, research space, office operations, and teaching resources. As faculty are not under contract during the summer, the faculty fellow and faculty's chairperson served as contacts. In early summer, all new faculty received a welcome letter, the book *A Survival Guide for New Faculty Members: Outlining the Keys to Success for Promotion and Tenure* (Baken & Simpson, 2011), a university/college resource guide, and an overview of the faculty professional development program. The resource guide included information about IDs, parking, phone service, library access, keys, computer purchases, start-up research funds, lab access, food service, classroom management systems, email, and more.

Second, to launch the mentoring and faculty development professional program, the dean hosted

a dinner that included the dean, associate dean, faculty fellow, department chairs, mentors, and mentees. During this dinner, introductions were made, advice offered, and sincere welcomes extended. During this meal, mentors and mentees met for the first time and arranged a meeting date for the following week.

Third, monthly mentoring sessions occurred between the mentor and new faculty member. While monthly topics were assigned and discussion questions provided, the pairs could discuss any topics pertinent to the mentee. These monthly coffee or lunch dates allowed for relationship building and provided a dedicated time to discuss the mentee's transition.

Last, at the beginning of each month, as the faculty fellow, I coordinated a 60-minute lunch and professional development seminar based on the assigned monthly topic. I personally facilitated two of the seven sessions, and the other five were facilitative by CEHS faculty or university professionals who had expertise in that topic. While the intention of these sessions was information sharing, the peer interactions and relationship building between new faculty are also noteworthy. During these sessions, the faculty became acquainted, shared experiences, formed writing groups, and developed a bond. They often arrived early or stayed late to connect with one another. Outside of the meetings, they regularly shared information, developed friendships, and supported each other.

Funding

Funding for the program was provided by the CEHS dean. Expenses included faculty fellow compensation, welcome dinner, professional development seminar lunches, monthly mentor lunches, books, and training resources.

Mentoring Activities

Faculty work is complex. To address this complexity, mentorship should come in a variety of forms. We debated multiple mentorship models and their associated advantages and disadvantages (Viravong & Schneider, 2018; Zellers et al., 2008). Some argue the provision of multiple mentors with different areas of expertise—teaching, research, discipline-based. Others argue that mentors should come from within the department as they understand the discipline, political dynamics, and department culture. Others argue that mentors need to be from outside of one's department in order to ensure confidentiality. In our case, we did not have the capacity to provide multiple faculty mentors. Additionally, departmental approval is the first step in the reappointment, promotion, and tenure of new faculty. Thus, we decided that mentorship from outside of the department was important to ensure confidentiality and vulnerability. Research tells us that new faculty are often guarded in disclosing what they do not know (Mancuso et al., 2019). They are reluctant to ask questions for fear of appearing uninformed. Often not wanting to be vulnerable to department colleagues, they hesitate in voicing their concerns, confusion, or questions. Having a mentor outside of the department, removed from any personnel decisions, allowed for more candor and frank conversations about the realities of faculty life.

Recruitment Activities

Mentors were solicited in two ways. First, a call for mentors was shared with all tenured faculty

members in our college. The call outlined the purpose of the program, expectations, and time commitment. Second, department chairs recommended faculty. They identified key faculty within their departments who they believed would best serve in this capacity. Based on their recommendations, I personally invited these faculty to participate in the program. Once identified, each potential mentor and new faculty (mentee) shared pertinent information about themselves via a Google Doc. We recognized that the transition of new faculty is both professional and personal. Many are navigating a new community, placing children in new schools, or trying to establish social networks. So that we could pair people based on both personal and professional connections, we asked both mentors and mentees to share information via a Google Doc that disclosed their teaching, research, and service interests (including methodological expertise), hobbies, relationship status, number and ages of children, and residential status. Only about half of our faculty live in the university community, so we worked to pair those who lived within the community with mentors who did so as well.

Training Activities

Eleven faculty from all five departments expressed interest in serving as faculty mentors. While we only needed eight, we opted to train all eleven, explaining that some may serve as mentors the following year. Additionally, we anticipated that not all initial pairings would result in a strong match, and a change may be needed. We also had one chairperson express reservations about a volunteer mentor, so we did not initially assign that person a mentee. At the end of the spring semester, we trained the mentors in a 2-hour workshop. During this time, we fed them lunch, and they received the shared text and a binder containing key mentoring program documents. The binder included a program overview, mentor/mentee expectations, budget information, a reading timeline for the assigned book, monthly topics and discussion questions, and tips for being a good mentor. We started the conversation by discussing their previous mentoring experiences both as mentors and mentees. Collaboratively, we outlined characteristics and actions of effective and ineffective mentors and discussed our expectations for serving as a good mentor within the program. We also spent time overviewing the program, expectations, monthly responsibilities, and paperwork. A couple of key points that were made during training were the intentional nature of mentorship and the importance of regular mentor-initiated meetings. Our program was designed to encourage meaningful dialogue centered around topics of importance to the mentee. Understanding the power differential, meaning most mentees will not reach out first to mentors because they perceive their mentors as being too busy, mentors were asked to initiate meetings (Mancuso et al., 2019).

Matching Activities

We saw mentorship/guidance potentially coming from three people: the chairperson, the assigned mentor, and what we called the department liaison. While the faculty development program only involved structure for the mentor/mentee relationship, we encouraged regular interactions (formal and informal) between the chairperson and the new faculty member. We promoted to the chair and new faculty the significance of their relationship in answering questions, onboarding within the department, and understanding the reappointment, promotion, and tenure process. Again, to encourage the intentionality of faculty socialization, we asked chairs to meet formally at least once per semester with the new faculty.

Recognizing that having a mentor outside of the department had its limitations, we asked that those serving as mentors also serve as department liaisons who provided information to either the mentor or mentee regarding departmental procedures, dynamics, or other departmental happenings. These liaisons served as mentors in the program—mentoring a faculty member outside of their department—but also served as departmental resources to new faculty within their department when necessary.

Based on mutual interests outlined in the google doc, each new faculty member was assigned a mentor from outside of their department. Assignments, contact information, and background details were provided to both the mentor and mentee when the contract year started (about 10 days prior to the first day of class). With intentional mentorship in mind, the faculty development program had a monthly theme, including university logistics; effective teaching and teaching resources; establishing a research agenda; meaningful service; annual review, reappointment, promotion, and tenure; grant writing/funding; surviving and thriving in the professoriate. At the beginning of each month, mentors and mentees would receive an overview of the topic, assigned book chapters to read, and possible discussion questions relevant to the readings or the topic. They were expected to meet for a meal or coffee at least once that month to connect and discuss the monthly topic. While the assigned topic was provided to spark conversation, (some) deviation was also expected based on the needs of the mentee. Meetings were initiated by the mentor. Meals were to be paid for by the mentors who were reimbursed for any incurred expenses. During these times, mentors were encouraged to review and offer feedback on teaching materials; help shape research agendas/read written pieces; suggest service opportunities; offer connections/insights into the community, and so on. We wanted their time together to be productive, helpful, and something they looked forward to. In many cases, relationships went beyond the monthly meeting. Mentors would regularly check in via email, mentees would ask questions outside the monthly meetings, and some became friends and co-authors. The mentor/mentee commitment was for one academic year. After the completion of the first year, mentors and mentees could continue to meet, with their meals paid for, but there was no obligation to continue or any formal structure.

Evaluation

We assessed the faculty development program throughout the academic year. Each month, mentors shared meeting dates and times, along with meal receipts, with the faculty fellow. This ensured that they were meeting monthly. As the facilitator of the monthly professional development seminars, I would frequently inquire with the new faculty about their pairings and the productivity of their monthly meetings. Last, we evaluated the program via a survey both at the semester break and at the end of the academic year. From both the mentors and new faculty, we learned about the effectiveness of the pairings, the quality of time spent, and the overall level of satisfaction with the program. Based on the feedback, we made modifications to the program. Some changes included extending the seminars from 60 minutes to 90 minutes to allow for more socialization among new faculty, expanding the program to include contingent faculty, and the provision of small group mentoring where multiple mentors and mentees would meet and discuss relevant topics. Besides program feedback, we also solicited qualitative feedback regarding the impact of the program on faculty understanding of promotion and tenure; feelings of inclusion and connectedness to the department, college, and university; comprehension of faculty responsibilities; and overall level of confidence regarding faculty expectations. The responses were overwhelmingly positive. Faculty felt the program unquestionably

aided in their transition to academe.

Mentoring Outputs

In our first year, eight new tenure-track faculty participated in the program. In the second year, we added six additional new faculty including three who were full-time and non-tenure-track.

Lessons Learned

We sustained our program for 3 years while our college experienced regular faculty increases. During this time, with the help of our Center for Innovative Teaching, we expanded the professional development series university-wide to include all new faculty. After 3 years, with the departure of our dean, coupled with the end of the faculty fellow appointment and a year with no new hires, the program, unfortunately, dissolved. In transition, department chairpersons and senior faculty provided ongoing mentoring and onboarding of new faculty. The program awakened us to the challenges encountered by new faculty in their transition to CMU and the professoriate. Our biggest takeaway was that we could not take their indoctrination and professional transition for granted—that it would just “happen naturally” over time. Intentional support, conversation, and the provision of resources are essential to their success. We also learned that new faculty often do not ask for help. As a result of the professional development program, mentorship and organizational socialization remain a college priority. While we may no longer have the college-wide program, there remains intentionality behind the transitioning of our new colleagues to our institution and to the profession.

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