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Essay on mentoring and minority faculty members

Submitted by Kerry Ann Rockquomore on November 14, 2011 - 3:00am

Several times a week, someone calls me out of the blue to ask the question: *Will you be my mentor?* I cringe a bit when I hear this because the request feels so undefined, long-lasting, and all-encompassing. I have no idea what the person wants from me, but I've encountered enough academics who have the guru-mentor in mind, that it feels like they are asking for a deeper and more serious relationship than I can commit to with someone I've never met. These calls almost always come from underrepresented faculty and the implicit assumption is that I *should* be their mentor because I am *like them* and am therefore uniquely qualified to guide their experience through the academy. It only takes some brief clarification to reveal that they aren't getting what they need from their departmental mentors, and the senior faculty on their campus who are *like them* don't have the time or energy to be their mentors.

I find this troubling so I'm going to go out on a limb this week. Having already challenged [the dominant framework of mentoring](#) ^[1] (the singular guru-mentor), [the sink or swim approach](#) ^[2] to integrating new faculty into a campus community, and [the utility of senior faculty anecdotes](#) ^[3] as a substitute for meaningful professional development, it's time to take on a more delicate subject: mentoring underrepresented faculty.

Irrespective of their demographic, tenure-track faculty members have a similar set of challenges that are directly linked to their probationary status. Those rank-specific stressors include: feeling unprepared to perform all the varied aspects of being a professor, minimal and irregular evaluative feedback on their performance, a lack of support for work-life balance, unclear criteria for promotion and tenure, ever-escalating expectations for research and external funding, and the stress that accompanies six years of probationary status. These challenges are commonly described by tenure-track faculty members because they are inherent to the rank of being an assistant professor. Once an individual passes on to the next rank, these concerns will fade away and be replaced by a new and different set of concerns that are unique to the rank of tenured associate professors.

I work with large numbers of underrepresented faculty who -- in addition to the stressors of the tenure-track just described -- also experience an *additional* set of challenges related to "solo status." By that, I simply mean the status of being the only (or one of few) _____ in their department (women, racial minorities, etc.). These extra stressors include the disproportionately high numbers of service requests associated with diversity work across campus, students who are *like them* seeking their support and guidance (even if they aren't in their class), differential classroom dynamics associated with race and gender, navigating hostility and micro-aggressions on campus, persistently being mistaken for various types of service staff and having to explain who they are, and managing issues of visibility, invisibility and belonging. Unlike the stressors that are directly tied to the tenure track, the stressors that emerge from solo status don't end when faculty earn tenure and promotion, but remain as an ongoing feature of their campus experience.

Two mentoring errors stem from this circumstance. **The first error is the denial of differential**

experiences. I regularly hear faculty members say that they sought assistance from their Center for Teaching Excellence or Faculty Development Center and were told that race and gender don't matter in the classroom, or they were interrogated as to why they would "pull out the race card" to explain their experiences. As a result, their genuine desire to resolve conflicts is met with dismissal or they are challenged to prove what they are describing exists before receiving assistance. This can drive faculty away from such campus-based centers of support permanently with the story that the people working there "don't get it" and therefore, can't help them. **The second error is taking differential experience to the extreme and believing that underrepresented faculty can ONLY be mentored by other underrepresented faculty.** In other words, only people *like them* can effectively help them navigate their experience on campus. The regrettable outcome is that mentoring underrepresented junior faculty gets added on as additional unrewarded, labor-intensive, and invisible diversity work for the small numbers of already over-burdened senior solo faculty.

So what would be the middle ground that doesn't dismiss the common experiences of solo faculty or create an additional burden for underrepresented senior faculty? I suggested [in my first column](#) ^[1] that we shift our thinking about mentoring from an individual relationship between pre and post-tenure faculty to one that focuses on needs. I suggested that it's perfectly normal for new faculty to need: professional development, emotional support, intellectual community, role models, safe space, accountability for writing and research, sponsorship, access to opportunities, and substantive feedback on their manuscripts and grant proposals. Many people find this to be a helpful model because it encourages new faculty members to develop the skill of asking: *What do you need and how can you get it?* It opens the possibility for all different kinds of mentoring (peer mentoring, zone mentoring, one-time mentoring, etc...) It also leads to a more targeted, efficient and specialized form of mentoring for all parties. Wouldn't you prefer to ask (or be asked) a specific question than the amorphous and all-encompassing *Will you be my mentor?*

If it's the case that some needs are shared by almost all new professors while other needs are specific to solo faculty, why not directly address that through targeted professional development, formal or informal safe spaces, and support that recognizes people may have different experiences? What this means in a concrete way for mentees is that it's impossible (and unhealthy) to get ALL of these needs met by any one person. Instead, try being strategic about getting your needs met. For example, if you check in with yourself, you may find that this week you need:



- Help figuring out which journal to submit an interdisciplinary article and the consequences it may have on your tenure decision (substantive feedback).
- Guidance on how to manage student's open hostility to learning about racial inequalities when you're a young, African-American, female professor (professional development).
- Venting after the third person this week assumed you were service staff instead of a faculty member (safe space).

These are all different and valid needs; the key is to figure out the best place to get them met. If you're a mentor to underrepresented faculty, you can learn about common solo experiences even if you don't have them (or currently believe they exist). You don't have to have those experiences yourself in order to understand them, identify the negative consequences they can have on new faculty members, and learn about the skills and strategies successful solo faculty use to resolve the conflicts, manage their time, and

focus on their productivity.

For the mentor-less faculty I've dedicated this column series to helping:

- If you're underrepresented and you're not experiencing any of the things named above, congratulations! You're in a great environment! If you are experiencing the things I've named, know that these are common experiences and you're not the only one having them. It's time to start asking yourself how these experiences may be impacting your time management and your research productivity. If it's negatively, it's time to get some professional development training that's targeted to solo success.
- Map out your current mentoring network and the range of people you currently have in place to meet your needs.
- If you find there are more empty spaces than names in your mentoring network, start brainstorming about where and how you can reach out for specific types of assistance.
- If you've only been reaching out exclusively to people who are *like you*, consider expanding your notion of allies.
- Get in the habit of asking yourself daily: What do I need? Where can I get that need met?
- Stop asking people: "Will you be my mentor?" Start asking people for what you need.

I hope that making the challenges solo faculty face explicit is helpful for those being mentored and for those trying to expand the range of their mentoring network.

Warmly,
Kerry Ann

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[1] <http://www.insidehighered.com/.../advice/2011/10/03/dont-talk-about-mentoring>

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[3] <http://www.insidehighered.com/.../advice/2011/11/02/essay-questions-story-telling-effective-mentoring>