Guest Column: Rethinking Mentoring ? Building Peer Communities for Accountability and Support

Rebecca Mosher, Commission on the Status of Women ? Faculty Affairs Workgroup, and Laura Hunter, Office of the Provost
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Editor's note: This guest column is part of an occasional series that explores diversity and inclusiveness at the University of Arizona.

The Office of Faculty Affairs, the Office for Diversity and Inclusive Excellence, and the Commission on the Status of Women's Faculty Affairs Workgroup are offering several opportunities this semester to support the development of faculty peer mentoring communities at the University of Arizona.

Importance of Mentoring on Faculty Careers

Research on faculty mentoring points to numerous benefits. Faculty with mentors have been found to have: increased productivity, including more publications, more external grants, and an increased likelihood of publishing in a top-tier journal; enhanced tenure and promotion prospects; heightened teaching effectiveness; higher career satisfaction; and lower feelings of isolation.

In a survey of UA faculty conducted by the Collaborative on Academic Careers in Higher Education in 2013-2014, most of our faculty respondents felt that having a mentor is important to their success, yet many felt they did not receive effective mentoring. For example, 92 percent of the pre-tenure respondents said that having a mentor in their department was important to their success. However, only about half of faculty felt they received effective mentoring.

Peer Mentoring Communities for Success

In peer mentoring, faculty members with equal stature develop supportive networks in which they meet regularly to discuss issues and challenges they're facing, as well as share information and strategies to offer support, share successes and address challenges. Research shows that faculty peer mentoring is effective and offers several advantages to more traditional senior-junior mentoring pairs. For example, in peer mentoring, participants are exposed to a range of opinions, advice and diverse perspectives rather than relying on the sole opinion of one mentor. Additionally, peers confronting similar challenges may be best suited to give practical advice since they likely have the most recent experience with similar issues.

Rebecca Mosher, assistant professor in the School of Plant Sciences and chair of the Commission on the Status of Women's Faculty Affairs Workgroup, shares her experience with a faculty peer mentoring group on campus.
I have been surprised at how quickly the peer mentoring group helped me. At each meeting, we start by sharing successes and struggles. It is easy to dismiss or minimize our own accomplishments and focus instead on problems, but group members help me recognize my progress and celebrate my victories.

Group members are also a great source of ideas and encouragement. For example, when I received a large grant the group encouraged me to publicize the success via college and UA news venues, even though I cringe at self-promotion. They even followed up with reminder emails to make sure I didn't chicken out. In the end, speaking up led to recognition by my college and new opportunities for me. I was able to return the favor later when I noticed a university award that would be perfect for a member of the group. I worked with her department head to make sure she was nominated. In an academic world that can be very competitive, my peer mentoring group is working as a team to build each other up.

I think one of the keys to the success of my peer mentoring group is that all six of us are in the sciences, but we represent six departments in three colleges. This allows us to share diverse perspectives on similar challenges, like negotiating a raise, what kind of service to perform and how to take a sabbatical.

Thus, faculty can benefit from developing peer mentoring networks to complement their traditional mentoring relationships. Having just one mentor places enormous pressure on that one mentor's expertise for success, whereas a mentoring network allows faculty to access "mentors of the moment" whose expertise is most appropriate. Peer mentoring also offers mentorship from outside of faculty members' home departments, which offers unique benefits, such as increased comfort voicing concerns and struggles, more objective perspectives uninfluenced by departmental politics, and a wider range of professional networking.

Upcoming Faculty Events to Support the Development of Peer Mentoring Communities

On Feb. 22 from 12-1 p.m., we will host "Rethinking Mentoring: Building Peer Communities for Accountability and Support [4]" (RSVP required) as part of our Diverse Faculty Career Discussions [5]. We will discuss research-based strategies for getting the most out of your mentoring relationships and how to build and sustain peer mentoring communities. Attendees can also share strategies and challenges from their own experiences. A later discussion in this series will be "Developing Productive Writing Habits [6] (RSVP required) on March 9, 8:30-9:30 a.m., which will allow faculty to meet others interested in peer mentoring groups to specifically support writing productivity.

For midcareer faculty planning to go up for full professor, we'll have our annual workshop "Going Up for Full [7]" (RSVP required) on Feb. 22, 3:30-5 p.m. Notably, peer mentoring can be an effective form of mentoring for both junior faculty and midcareer faculty. For example, associate professors who will be going up for promotion in the next year may form a peer mentoring group to discuss promotion issues (e.g., documenting impact of work) and get feedback (e.g., candidate statement). Faculty could use this workshop to meet others going up for full soon to develop a peer-mentoring community to support this process.

Additionally, the Commission on the Status of Women's Faculty Affairs Workgroup, chaired by Mosher, hosts First Friday Faculty Lunches [8] on the first Friday of the month to facilitate the networking of faculty from across campus. These networking luncheons can potentially create self-sustaining peer networks and offer opportunities to create friendships. Lunch is
provided. The next lunch will be **March 3, from 12-1 p.m.** [9] (RSVP required).

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**Links**

[4] https://uarizona.co1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_74gTDyaX1VZHVLd  
[9] https://uarizona.co1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_43mMrmoGaMPTm0R