New Mentoring Program Supports Junior Faculty

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Celeste González de Bustamante, an associate professor in the School of Journalism, has long been interested in better ways to retain diverse faculty and create a more inclusive environment at the UA.

Now, in her new role as assistant director of faculty initiatives in the Office for Diversity and Inclusive Excellence, she'll have the chance to address those areas as she oversees the office's New Faculty Mentoring Program.

The initiative, launched in the fall, aims to connect junior faculty with mentors, resources and peers from other disciplines. The program is sponsored by ODIEX and UA Health Sciences' Office of Diversity and Inclusion. Its first cohort includes 24 faculty.

González de Bustamante said her years on campus – first as a journalist for Arizona Public Media and then as an academic – give her a unique perspective on the challenges new faculty members face at a large institution.

"That's what interested me in the position," she said, "to be able to share my own experiences with new faculty coming in, and hopefully make this an easier place to negotiate and navigate."

The program is based largely on research that shows faculty who have mentors are more productive and satisfied with their jobs, said Laura Hunter, associate diversity officer in ODIEX. Getting new faculty to connect with their peers in other disciplines is also a goal for the program, she added.

"It's really important for them to have peer mentors – people they can turn to and discuss any problems or issues with, or share strategies with," Hunter said. "It's kind of twofold, to try to build community and to really help faculty advance their careers."

The program is open to tenure-track and continuing-eligibility faculty who are within their first three years at the UA. Those in the inaugural class of mentees come from a wide variety of disciplines, including emergency medicine, German studies, theater, journalism, and microbial biogeochemistry.

Prospective mentees go through a brief application process explaining their research and what they hope to gain from the program. Once selected, mentees choose their own mentors from their schools or departments.

Since September, mentees have been meeting monthly with program leaders for sessions that cover topics such as networking, career planning and publishing research. They also have been hearing from experts from across campus.

In a session in late January, mentees listened to a presentation by staff from the UA's Research Development Services.
Susan Swanberg, a mentee and assistant professor in the School of Journalism since 2015, said that in addition to fostering mentorship, the program provides a venue for junior faculty members to speak comfortably with peers about the challenges they’re facing.

"You don't want to walk the tenure track alone," she said. "You want people who can help guide you, help you avoid pitfalls and tell you when you're getting off track."

In just the last few months, Swanberg said the program has taught her key lessons about her new profession, like how to search for research funding, and what resources are available on campus to help in that effort.

"It's extremely rewarding to see that we're having an impact on the first cohort of folks coming through," González de Bustamante said.

Mary Wildner-Bassett, a professor in the Department of German Studies and former dean of the College of Humanities, is one of the program's mentors. Wildner-Bassett said she has informally helped guide doctoral students and early- and mid-career faculty for years. The concrete examples mentors can provide from their own careers make it a particularly effective way to learn the ropes of teaching at a university, she said.

"I think there almost can't be enough mentoring," she said, "as long as it's thoughtfully done, carefully done, and you're not just teaching someone to be a clone, but saying, 'These are some options, these are some things to think about.'"

Rajesh Khanna, a professor in the Department of Pharmacology, serves as the program's distinguished faculty mentor. With limited research funds available, faculty mentorship is even more important, Khanna said.

"You really need to have somebody shepherd you and guide you," he said.

As the program nears the end of its first year, González de Bustamante is collecting input from the first cohort of mentees, which will be used to improve next year's program, she said. One upcoming goal, she added, is to help create more formal mentorship programs in individual schools and departments instead of leaving it to new faculty to connect with their more experienced colleagues.

"I'm really, really excited about having been chosen," González de Bustamante said. "I see this not just a great opportunity for me to share my experience but also to learn from the new faculty to understand the pulse of the University."

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