

# A Guide to being an Academic Mentor

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Mentoring a young faculty member through the tangled academic underbrush of the first 5-6 years of academic life can be extraordinarily satisfying and stimulating.

“ As people begin their journeys in their professions, they need to understand the ropes that lead to success and promotion in their career. Related to this is to find one's niche, develop one's skill, continue education, and understand the politics and climate of the work place. Where does one go for guidance? Finding one's way through these can take place through a mentoring relationship”. (Frazier, IV. *Relationships Are Foundational to Mentoring*, The Mentoring Connection, Quarterly Newsletter of the International Mentoring Association, Spring, 1998).

The effective mentor is a special person whose professional and academic career serves as a model for those starting out as assistant professors. Bland et al<sup>1</sup> identified three realms in which young faculty need to be socialized: 1) adopting academic values, 2) managing an academic career, and 3) establishing and maintaining a productive network of colleagues. It is in this socialization role that a mentor is most important as there generally has been no specific training for becoming an academic professional other than observation.

Each mentor will have her or his approach to a mentor-mentee relationship. Some prefer formal, established meetings and others more casual ones. In any event, it is suggested that you schedule a meeting with your mentee as soon as possible after the mentee takes up his or her position but at the latest within two months of that date. After that, regular meetings for the first six months and a less formal schedule after the first six months might be reasonable. At least two meetings of mentors and mentees every six months is recommended.

This document will draw on written material as well as advice from our own faculty regarding how one might be a good mentor. A bibliography is also provided at the end of this document.

## From the Literature

Setting Career Goals This may prove an excellent place to begin a good mentorship relationship: ask the mentee to explain to you her or his long term, mid term and immediate career goals. If no specific goals (measurable ones - eg, to publish two papers in high impact journals within the first three years of my appointment") have been identified, help the mentee to work on this. Specific goals are extremely important.

*If your efforts are to be effective, the different goals you accomplish should reinforce one another rather than cancel one another out. The efforts you make over time should be cumulative, each building on the last. They should be in the same direction, both right now and in the future. This means that your distant vision, your mid-distant vision, and your immediate objectives should be aligned. Together they should serve as a compass that will point out a direction in which to proceed. (from Getting It Done by Roger Fisher and Alan Sharp. New York: HarperCollins, 1998).*

## Listening

1. Perhaps the most important role for the mentor is listening. To listen, the mentor needs to create the atmosphere in which the mentee feels comfortable talking about anything that affects his career. One of the ways to create this environment is to meet frequently in a variety of settings.
2. The approach to creating a bond with the mentee is dependent upon the personalities of the individuals and initially upon the personal preferences of the mentor. Some ideas include:
  - A. A monthly lunch at a restaurant near the University.
  - B. Take every opportunity to introduce your mentee to others in the Department, Faculty and hospital, helping them establish networks.
  - C. Introducing the mentee (and his family) to some of the activities available to them in Edmonton: cross-country skiing in the river valley, Oilers hockey, the various golf courses, the large range of theatre in Edmonton, orientation to the downtown or Old Strathcona, a day trip to Elk Island National Park or Fort Edmonton, dinner with spouses in one of Edmonton's many fine restaurants, etc.
  - c. Sharing some of your own experiences as a young academic, particularly those you would not like to see your mentee repeat.
  - D. If you participate in some regular exercise such as squash, running, weight training, etc, invite your mentee to join you. Not only is this a means of facilitating communication, it makes the point that exercise is an important part of wellness.

## Listening (continued)...

E. Identify your mentee's strengths, expertise and interests and express an interest in learning from and about them. The literature stresses that successful mentoring is the result of a two-way learning and support process.

F. Campus facilities - perhaps take them to see the Pulse Generator in the WMC and the facilities at the Butterdome and explain how they can use these facilities.

G. Politics - insight into Faculty, Department, University and regional health authority politics is always useful.

H. Personal Issues - where junior faculty encounter personal issues with which they are clearly having difficulty or where they appear not to be coping well with their new position, the mentor may recommend that they contact the Employee Assistance Program at the U of A. This program is contracted to Priority One, a psychological services organization at arms length from the University and free of charge to all employees. They deal with a wide range of issues from stress, depression, marital difficulties, time management, etc. Their number is 433-6811 and they are located in the basement of Campus Towers next to Earls.

3. To ensure your communication skills are as sharp as possible, you might want to read a little on the subject. Stephen Covey's book "The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People" has an excellent chapter entitled Principles of Empathic Communication. He states that the most important principle in achieving effective interpersonal communication is: "Seek first to understand, then to be understood".

## Promotion and Tenure

1. Ensure that soon after his or her academic appointment, the mentee becomes familiar with the criteria for attaining promotion and tenure. The Faculty Evaluation Committee has published criteria which are part of the orientation binder given to the mentee. One approach to this is to ask the mentee to map out a series of goals or mileposts to achieve in order to have fulfilled the criteria by one year before the end of the second probation period (usually year 5).

2. Encourage your mentees' attendance at a promotions workshop sponsored annually by the Department of Medicine.

2. If your mentee has a scientific mentor, it might be useful for the three of you to meet to set goals and then meet perhaps every six months to check progress toward achieving them.

Teaching

1. Offer to observe the mentee in various teaching environments and then discuss the events with the mentee in a positive, constructive way. If you are unsure of how to help, you might refer the mentee to the Division for Studies in Medical Education.
2. Encourage attendance at one of the Faculty's teaching workshops
3. Identify to the mentee the various publications which serve teachers in medicine such as Academic Medicine, Medical Education, Teaching and Learning in Medicine, etc.

Faculty Agreement/Association of Academic Staff:University of Alberta

1. The mentor can bring to the attention of the new staff member the existence of the Faculty Agreement and of the AASUA and its role in the life of the University.

Decision-making processes at U of A

1. Ensure the mentee learns about the role of Faculty Councils and General Faculties Council in making the major academic decisions of the institution such as approving major changes to courses, approving new academic programs, etc
2. Review the decision making structures in the Department, including the role of the various committees and administrators.
3. Introduce the mentee to the informal leaders in the Department and describe their influence on the formal processes.

The grant game

1. New academics are often not familiar with the sources of research funding available to them, particularly internal start-up or pilot project funds. The mentor can help fill this information gap and also help the mentee with ideas for searching for funding sources. If the mentor is unfamiliar with the processes they should refer the mentee to the Department's and Faculty's research personnel.
2. Young academic staff do not have the experience of preparing grant applications. The mentor can help here by offering to read over the grant application well ahead of the deadline and offer comments and suggestions that will increase the grants chances for success.
3. The processes for having ethics and grant applications approved internally are complex and time consuming. The mentor can help the mentee become familiar with these well before the deadlines approach.

Converting research to published papers

Strongly encourage mentees to follow up their research by publishing the results so as to enhance their academic profile for promotion and merit increments.

Research in general

1. Where a new academic staff member has a significant time commitment to research, the mentor should try to determine if there is sufficient protected time to ensure research success. If getting adequate protected time is a problem, the mentor can alert the divisional director or the Department Chair or the Director of Career Development.
2. The mentor can be an excellent resource to the new faculty member for identifying others on campus with similar research interests and who may be interested in scientific collaboration.
3. Grant writing workshops are offered by the Faculty and Department from time to time.

Converting teaching activity and research to published papers

Scholarly educational activity should be strongly encouraged for clinician teachers.

1. For a new faculty member whose major role is as a teacher, the mentor can facilitate the establishment of a relationship between the mentee and the Division of Studies in Medical Education with expertise in publishing educational research.
2. The mentor can assist the mentee in identifying teaching activity that can be studied and in discussing possible research approaches to these topics.

### Committee membership

The mentor may be able to recommend participation on committees with links to the mentee's interests and research.

### Bibliography on Mentoring

Much of this material is available for borrowing in the office of the Director of Administrative Services.

1. CJ Bland, CC Schmitz, FT Stritter, RC Henry and JJ Aluise. Successful Faculty in Academic Medicine. New York: Springer, 1990
  
2. Jeffrey A. Morzinski, MSW, Deborah E. Simpson, PhD, Douglas J. Bower, MD, and Sabina Diehr, MD. *Faculty Development through Formal Mentoring*. Academic Medicine, 69:4, 1994
  
3. Mary Deane Sorcinelli and Anne E. Austin, eds. *Developing New and Junior Faculty*. In New Directions for Teaching and Learning, No. 50, Summer. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1992.
  
4. A. Clay Schoenfeld and Robert Magnan, Mentor in a Manual: Climbing the Academic Ladder to Tenure. Madison, WI: Magna Publications, Inc, 1994
  
5. R. Boice. *Mentoring New Faculty: A Program for Implementation*. J. Staff, Program and Organizational Development.8:143-160, 1990
  
6. S. Covey. The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People. New York: Simon and Shuster, 1989.