A Helping Hand for Young Faculty Members

Mentor programs in which experienced professors advise junior colleagues are on the rise

By AUDREY WILLIAMS JUNE

When Cheryl Moore-Thomas arrived at Loyola College in Maryland in 2001, she knew that her nontraditional path to the professoriate made her an outsider of sorts. The longtime school counselor had worked in a public-school system for 15 years before entering the world of academe.

But early in her first year at the 6,000-student Roman Catholic institution, Ms. Moore-Thomas became the protégée of a seasoned professor of law and social responsibility as part of Loyola's campuswide faculty-mentor program. Now an associate professor of education at the college, Ms. Moore-Thomas trumpets the program as instrumental in helping her sidestep potential pitfalls while plotting her new career in higher education.

"I was so naïve, I didn't even know what to ask," says Ms. Moore-Thomas of early meetings with her mentor, Andrea Giampetro-Meyer. "She wasn't really familiar with my discipline, but she was able to give me perspectives about the institution from a different vantage point. I really grew to appreciate that."

With the academic year just under way, many junior faculty members in search of much-needed advice and guidance have begun to make critical connections with senior colleagues. Departmental pairings are the most standard form of faculty mentoring, as is the practice of newly minted professors' tapping colleagues on their own to answer questions over a cup of coffee or via e-mail. But an increasing number of colleges now rely on formal mentor programs, many of them campuswide, to give new faculty members guaranteed access to senior professors who can help them.

In fact, some junior faculty members have come to expect institutions to offer formal assistance with the transition from graduate student to professor, says Cathy A. Trower, a Harvard researcher who studies junior professors.

"If you have to look at" pre-tenure Generation X faculty members "and say we don't have a mentoring program, they may choose to go somewhere where there is one," Ms. Trower says.
Growing Encouragement

These days, actively seeking career guidance within the ivory tower doesn't hold the stigma for new professors that it once did, says Peg Boyle Single, a former director of the faculty-mentor program at the University of Vermont and research associate professor in the university's department of education.

"Pretty much the whole culture is changing," says Ms. Single, whose research examines mentors and the development of effective mentor programs. "It used to be sink or swim." Either you were cut out for the professoriate, or you weren't, she says. "But now you walk into a new place and it's not shameful to need help."

By all accounts, the transition from graduate student to faculty member can be a tough one. Junior professors, fearful of making some career-ending faux pas, struggle to quickly learn the nuances of their institution's culture. They must find the time to hunt down grant money, write, and get published. And then there's that baffling task of pinning down the right mix of research, teaching, and service that will lead to tenure.

For those on the tenure track, faculty mentors are deemed key to their success, according to a recent survey of junior-faculty job satisfaction from the Collaborative on Academic Careers in Higher Education. On a scale of 1 to 5, with the highest number representing "very important," the mean score for informal mentoring was 4.49. Formal mentoring was slightly less important with a mean score of 4.04.

For Erica Bastress-Dukehart, an assistant professor of history at Skidmore College, a combination of both types of mentors seemed to work. When she met with a mentor assigned to her from outside her department, as part of Skidmore's mentor program for new faculty members, she wasn't looking for answers to specific questions but for "someone who could teach me about the culture of the college," she says.

After a year, Ms. Bastress-Dukehart sought out informal mentors on her own. She turned to professors across the campus to help with issues like time management, understanding tenure requirements, and choosing which committees to serve on.

"My first year here, there was a senior faculty member in my department that I could talk to about anything," says Ms. Bastress-Dukehart, who came to Skidmore in 2002. "Then, as I got to know people on the wider campus, I started asking bigger questions outside of the department. I was really proactive."

The voluntary faculty-mentor program at Skidmore began in 1993 and is meant to supplement the mentors whom faculty members have in their departments. "We try to have multiple pathways for people to engage in finding mentors," says Muriel E. Poston, dean of the faculty at the college. Senior professors in the program typically start out by going to lunch with their protégés, who are "encouraged to discuss what would be most helpful to them," she says.
The junior faculty member decides how often the two meet or keep in touch. After the initial meeting, "things are pretty informal," says Ms. Poston.

**Ad Hoc to Formal**

Officials at Yale University are fast-tracking efforts to shape the informal faculty mentors that is common on its campus into a more formal mentor process. Early this year, an institutional survey of junior faculty members in the arts and sciences at the university revealed that 58 percent of pre-tenure faculty members said they didn't think they had received adequate mentoring at Yale. Ms. Trower says that the more corporate mentorship mode — which includes training mentors and protégés, setting goals, and measuring the end result — isn't yet common in academe. Meanwhile, formal mentor programs do have at least one drawback: a mismatch can result in a strained relationship from which neither party sees a way out.

Ms. Moore-Thomas, though, talks of how she has stuck with her mentor longer than some of the other junior professors in the Loyola program. At first the two tackled Ms. Moore-Thomas's teaching style and preparation and then moved on to how to carve out time to do research. They also talked about ways to keep committee work from becoming overwhelming.

"Before you know it, you can be until midnight in your office doing some committee work," Ms. Moore-Thomas says.

When Ms. Moore-Thomas went up for tenure, her mentor "went over my dossier with a fine-toothed comb," she says, and wrote a "really reflective" letter to the tenure committee on her behalf. The two have also had some "very, very frank discussions about race and gender" as it relates to the faculty at Loyola, says Ms. Moore-Thomas, an African-American. She views the mentor program at Loyola as a key recruitment and retention tool for the institution, particularly for women and ethnic minorities.

"I don't want to lose faculty because they feel they haven't had the opportunity to succeed here," says Martha Wharton, assistant vice president for academic affairs and diversity at Loyola, whose office runs the program. New faculty members, have "more added to their plate that they're fully responsible for, and they have all these senior colleagues who are looking at them expecting something," Ms. Wharton says. "If we can reduce some of the stress, that's a good thing."

Meanwhile, the future of mentor programs for faculty members should include outreach to midcareer professors, Ms. Single says. Associate professors may have cleared the hurdle of achieving tenure, but they can still use guidance in other areas. Ms. Moore-Thomas says she and her mentor now talk mostly about what it will take for her to get promoted to full professor.

"I think I would have found a way to be successful on my own, although I would have probably come out on the other side very battered," says Ms. Moore-Thomas, imagining life without her mentor. "But she really made it an aim for me to make it and for me to find some level of joy in what I'm doing."