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"Mentoring at Dalhousie"

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"Mentoring at Dalhousie," is a campus-wide new faculty mentoring initiative in its second year of operation. In this issue of Focus on University Teaching and Learning, program co-ordinators Bruce Barton and Susan Holmes offer a description of its objectives, design, operation, and potential.

The Right Idea...

The benefits of a new faculty mentoring system are multiple and well-documented. Incoming faculty members arriving at a university encounter an often daunting array of issues and challenges, particularly in the realm of instructional methods. The experience and insight of a more senior colleague can represent a major source of information and inspiration for a new academic during this transitional period—and well beyond. In return, the junior faculty member can bring fresh ideas and new energy to the mentoring relationship, encouraging the senior faculty member to reflect upon old problems through new eyes.

... At The Right Time

Creating a university-wide faculty mentoring program has been a topic of discussion at Dalhousie for many years. However, while many individual academic and professional units within the University have histories of formal

and/or informal mentoring opportunities for new colleagues, it was not until the 1998/1999 academic year that the Senate Committee on Instructional Development (SCID) began discussing in detail the possibility of initiating a full-university system of faculty mentoring. The Office of Instructional Development and Technology (OIDT) assumed responsibility for the initial research and conceptualization of the project, and theories of mentoring, along with the practical experience accumulated within a broad cross-section of related initiatives, were examined. Consultations were conducted with the Dalhousie Faculty Association, with University Administration, with Dalhousie faculty members, and with faculty of other institutions who have participated in similar programs. The result of these inquiries and discussions was the decision to launch a modest mentoring initiative, informally identified as "Mentoring at Dalhousie," in 1999/2000.

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Defining Objectives

Although there are many different reasons why a new faculty member would seek the guidance of a mentor, Mentoring at Dalhousie is not intended to serve all of these purposes. Issues of research activity, career path decisions, and professional activity are often best served by colleagues directly involved in a new faculty member's specific discipline, and may thus be best discussed within one's own academic or professional unit. The intention behind the new campus-wide initiative is to address, in particular, issues of teaching: pedagogy, strategy, and methodology. While it is quite likely that the mentoring relationships established will consider a wide range of issues, the resources and training made available by SCID and OIDT directly address the topic of teaching. As strongly suggested in the mentoring literature, the most productive arrangement for mentoring relationships based upon these priorities is cross-disciplinary. This mentoring program is not, therefore, seen as a substitute for discipline-based relationships, but rather

as a complement to the other resources available to new faculty.

The Process

Lists of incoming faculty members were established through consultation with all Dalhousie academic and professional units, and all individuals identified as holding new tenure-track appointments were invited

to participate. The result was an initial list of 11 interested "learning associates," representing ten separate departments

from the Faculties of Science, Health Professions, Business Administration, Dentistry, Computer Science, Medicine, and Law. Once this initial list was formed, invitations to participate were issued to an equal number of senior faculty members from a wide range of disciplines who have won local, regional, and/or national awards for teaching. Ultimately, because of scheduling, time commitments, and other constraints, the list of new faculty participants decreased to six individuals. As such, potential mentors outnumbered the learning associates by almost 2:1. This created a situation where the new faculty members had considerable choice; however, it also guaranteed an inevitable element of disappointment on the parts of some senior faculty members. (Numerous steps are being put into place to ensure an appropriate increase in the number of new faculty mentoring candidates in future years.) All participants were asked to complete an "Expectations Questionnaire" and to provide a brief biography. Combined, these instruments supplied key information on individual scholarly activities/interests and teaching practices/environments for the purposes of effective partnering.

The next stage of the process involved a series of four workshops. Only the new faculty members were invited to the first workshop, and only the senior faculty members attended the second. These sessions were meant to introduce each group, separately, to the research and planning behind the initiative, and—more important—to establish participant expectations, hopes, and concerns about involvement in the program. Following these introductory sessions, two additional joint workshops were held. These

"The Mentoring at Dalhousie Program helps me to feel part of the larger university community. It is wonderful to meet other new faculty. My Mentor is a wise friend and advisor. At our monthly lunches we iron out problems, get excited about successes, and enjoy a needed break from responsibilities."

New Faculty Member

- to independently approach a potential mentoring partner.
- ▶ In a single instance, the degree of difference in teaching practices, research paradigms, and working environments greatly disadvantaged a cross-disciplinary pairing, as few true parallels of experience could be identified by the participants.
- ▶ In another instance, the failure on the part of the participants to clearly identify objectives within their mentoring relationship resulted in a degree of frustration and uncertainty.

“As a new faculty member, the mentoring program at Dalhousie has been of enormous assistance. Mentoring has provided me with an opportunity to dialogue with colleagues regarding achieving a successful balance between teaching, research, and service. My mentor has played a pivotal role in my development as a teacher. With her coaching, I have been able to make positive changes within the classroom and beyond. In coming to a new university, I have found the program to be advantageous for negotiating the university environment. I look forward to continuing my involvement in the program, and would definitely encourage new faculty members to get involved.”

New Faculty Member

- appropriate level of commitment.
- ▶ The enduring emphasis placed on assistance in research remains a challenge. The orientation towards teaching of Mentoring at Dalhousie has been even more thoroughly empha-

3) Modifications to the Program

The co-ordinators of the initiative have attempted to identify solutions to each of the obstacles noted above, and have incorporated several modifications in the second year of the program.

- ▶ While the program can do little to lessen the workloads of its participants, it is the case that the required commitment can be quite minimal in terms of time and still highly beneficial. It is emphasized to all participants that regular meetings, once a month, represent an entirely

sized in the second year of the program. In addition, the co-ordinators have attempted to assist new faculty members in identifying other possible sources of guidance in issues of research activity.

- ▶ In the second year of the initiative, the period of time in which new faculty members were ‘left on their own’ to explore potential mentoring partnerships was reduced, with an increased willingness on the part of the program co-ordinators to facilitate pairings. In addition, from the outset the co-ordinators have assured participants that “discomfort is natural” in this type of process and that the development of trust takes time.
- ▶ The co-ordinators have this year attempted to ensure that, while all pairings are cross-disciplinary in nature, attention has been paid to specific characteristics of academic profile (e.g., clinical teaching) when facilitating appropriate partnerships.
- ▶ All faculty pairs in the second year of the program were asked to provide the co-ordinators with a ‘statement of purpose’ for their mentoring relationship. This can involve specific objectives, or the identification of the relationship as more informal and even socially-oriented, but ensures that the partners have clearly and openly discussed their individual and mutual aspirations and expectations.

Moving Forward

As the second year of Mentoring at Dalhousie draws to a close, six additional mentoring relationships have been established, representing a similarly broad cross-section of the university. Building upon this success, plans to

- were conducted around a series of case
- study exercises intended to facilitate a
- focused dialogue about specific yet
- representative issues common within the
- experience of new faculty members. The
- objectives of the exercises were to provide

“Mentoring is a wonderful and fulfilling experience. It provides the opportunity to share experience about teaching and other aspects of academic life. Most importantly, it also provides an opportunity to cross disciplines and exchange ideas with someone in a different field.”

Senior Faculty Member

a comfortable forum for participants to discuss various strategies for problem-solving and to observe different individual approaches and personalities, so as to determine the pairings most conducive to productive partnerships.

Following the workshops, a fixed period of

- time was established during which the
- participants were encouraged to consider
- and independently explore potential
- mentoring partnerships. Research on
- mentoring programs consistently indi-
- cates that greater success is reported when

mentoring pairs are self-selected, given appropriate opportunities for prior interaction. However, when some new faculty members remained without a mentoring agreement after the established period of time, the program coordinators proposed possible partnerships, and all six learning associates entered into agreements with little difficulty.

Evaluation

The pilot year of Mentoring at Dalhousie was successful on multiple levels, and the program clearly holds huge potential for the future. Evaluation of the first year took the form of a detailed survey of all paired participants, as well as a group review workshop. The feedback received can effectively be organized in the following categories: 1) Perceived Benefits; 2) Obstacles to Success; and 3) Suggestions for Program Modification.

Benefiting the Entire Community

In preparation for the “Mentoring at Dalhousie” initiative, an extensive literature review and consultation process resulted in a series of key findings and recommended characteristics for successful mentoring programs. Among these are the following fundamental observations:

Primary Mentoring Roles

- 1) Career Guide (e.g., professional enhancement, advice on opportunities)
- 2) Information Source (e.g., discussing expectations and supplying information on practices and policies)
- 3) Intellectual Guide (e.g., reviewing instructional plans and drafts of papers, proposals, applications)
- 4) Friend (e.g., emotional support, help with individual difficulties, sounding board)

(adapted from Maryellen Weimer, *Improving College Teaching: Strategies for Developing Instructional Effectiveness*, 1990.)

Anticipated Outcomes of Successful Mentoring

- 1) Faculty Career Development
- 2) More Effective Teaching
- 3) Quality Research
- 4) Improved Leadership Skills
- 5) Increased Spirit of Community and Collegiality Across the University

(adapted from Gaye Luna and Deborah L. Cullen, *Empowering the Faculty: Mentoring Redirected and Renewed*, 1995.)

- 1) Perceived Benefits
- The comments that accompany this
- article speak volumes. Participants
- identified benefits in a wide range of
- areas. Some of the most significant are
- explored below.

“Serving as a mentor has multiple advantages for the mentor as well as for the learning associate. Obviously, teachers gain much satisfaction from being in a helping role. But there is more. Firstly, it brings back into conscious awareness some things that we, over time, tend to take for granted. This in turn brings us to think about them critically; there are always advantages to being a “reflective practitioner”! Secondly, since our learning associates are usually from another Faculty, it broadens our perspective of the university’s mission. Indeed, we can become very restricted in our peripheral vision. Thirdly, it is energizing and inspirational for those of us in mid-career to be in contact with junior faculty members, who are passionately future-oriented. Finally, if all goes well, we stand to gain a new friend.”

Senior Faculty Member

- elements of research, career planning,
- administrative responsibilities, and
- teaching within the life of an academic.
- ▶ Another benefit regularly reported
- relates to the challenge of balancing
- these diverse responsibilities at the
- same time as one is attempting to
- maintain a personal life with family
- and friends. While few senior faculty
- members claim knowledge of the

- ▶ In relation to the primary stated aim of the program—facilitating enhanced teaching practice—both new and senior faculty members reported benefits. For new faculty members, who frequently have extremely limited experience in the classroom, mentoring provides access to the triumphs—and productive ‘stumbles’—of a seasoned colleague. For senior faculty members, the same relationship can provide exposure to new and innovative approaches.
- ▶ The mentoring pairs also cited the diverse nature of their conversations, which allow for reflection on, and insight into, the truly integrated

‘secret’ to this combination, new faculty members report receiving valuable advice and guidance in these important early years of their career.

- ▶ All participants noted the benefit of the ‘cross-disciplinary’ nature of the program. In terms of teaching practice, research interests, administrative structures, and many other aspects of university life, the ‘window’ into other disciplinary cultures provided by the program design clearly holds the potential for a greater sense of community and interaction across the university. Indeed, even those senior faculty members who were not, ultimately, involved in a mentoring partnership identified the cross-disciplinary benefit of the workshop exercises.

2) Obstacles to Success

To the gratification of the program coordinators, the list of obstacles to success reported was not extensive. However, of those issues identified, some were significant and challenging in terms of remedy.

- ▶ Foremost on the list of obstacles is **time**. Participants noted the challenge of finding regular opportunities for meetings within their extremely busy schedules. Indeed, scheduling was identified as a central challenge by the single mentoring pair who decided to discontinue meeting entirely.
- ▶ The desire for assistance in terms of research activities remained a priority for several new faculty members, despite the clear indication that the Mentoring at Dalhousie program was not intended nor designed to directly address this need.
- ▶ Initially, some participants found it difficult to move past their reluctance

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expand the program (for instance, with the possibility of including non-tenure stream faculty members) are being discussed. There is little doubt that the positive impact of faculty mentoring has already been experienced, and the potential to contribute on both the individual and full community levels can hardly be overestimated.

(For information on any aspect of the Mentoring at Dalhousie initiative, including information on participation, please contact Bruce Barton, Director of Instructional Development Services, OI DT, at Bruce.Barton@Dal.Ca or 494-1894. General information on the topic of mentoring, including a selected bibliography, are also available from OI DT.)

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