Unwritten Roles for Survival and Success: Senior Faculty Speak to Junior Faculty

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Abstract

*An evolving body of research has examined the process of mentoring relationships among senior and junior faculty in health education and health promotion academic programs. However, little attention has been given to understanding the specific content of interactions between mentors and protégés. This qualitative research was conducted to identify the knowledge, behaviors, and skills senior faculty believe are important for success of new health promotion and health education faculty. Senior faculty (*n=*11) in health education/health promotion at major universities in the United States were interviewed to determine the kinds of advice they have given to junior faculty whom they have mentored. Data were collected by in-person and telephone interviews. Research-related themes included having a research focus; working with teams; knowing institutional expectations; and balancing quantitative versus qualitative methodology. Teaching-related themes centered on the importance of working with students; using resources; and balancing teaching load with other responsibilities. Themes related to service included seeking appropriate types of service for achieving promotion and tenure; realizing the quantity of service required; and using service for learning opportunities. These results can be useful to developing junior faculty in health education and health promotion and to senior faculty mentors in terms of advising their protégés.*

A mentor, according to *Webster's New World Dictionary* (1991), is "a wise, loyal advisor; a teacher or coach." It follows that the practice of mentoring is to advise and guide another, providing wisdom and inspiration as a result of experience. Scholars in higher education have written about the importance of mentoring relationships in professional development (Boice, 2000; Moody, 1997; Ogletree, Brey, & Hardman, 1998; Olsen, 1993; Ransdell, Dinger, Cooke, & Beske, 2000; Torabi, 2001). Early in an academic career, mentoring relationships can ease the way for new faculty by providing experienced guidance as to the "unwritten rules" that exist in the world of academia and in specific institutions.

An evolving body of research has examined the process of mentoring relationships among senior and junior faculty in health education and health promotion academic programs. Examination of the process of mentoring relationships reveals that a variety of activities occur within that context, for example, collaborating on research projects, discussing career goals and opportunities for development, and providing mutual support (Ogletree et al., 1998). Yet, with few exceptions, little attention has been given to understanding the specific content of interactions between mentors and protégés.

Mentoring relationships occur in different contexts within academia. Relationships exist in which senior faculty mentor junior faculty, faculty mentor undergraduate and graduate students, and students mentor other students. Torabi (2001) recently published a study that presented advice for both junior faculty and students. Torabi's scholars advised students and junior faculty to engage in professional development, to be hard-working and disciplined, to be prepared to function as a professional, and

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to maintain a balance in one's professional and personal life. In addition to this advice, Torabi's study provided an extensive and insightful summary of pathways experienced by successful scholars in health education; identification of multiple factors the scholars believed contributed to their overall achievement; and factors related to overall achievement including motivation, interpersonal skills, and preparation with regard to training and education. Key factors leading to achievement in research were training, the desire to succeed, and knowledge.

Ransdell and colleagues recently published a study that was similar to Torabi's. Ransdell et al. (2001) identified factors related to success in publishing among women health educators. These factors included personal attributes such as self-discipline and situational factors such as access to mentoring and grant funding. Mentoring was clearly important, because 40% of study respondents attributed success in publishing to mentoring relationships. Another study that examined experiences of faculty was conducted by Olsen (1999), who found that early experiences in academia have been shown to exert a great influence on later success. Olsen noted that early in the academic career, new faculty are receptive to learning and understanding the norms and values of the institution and profession, and that an early introduction enables faculty to "hit the ground running" (p.1).

Faculty-graduate student mentoring was the topic of a paper by Brey and Ogletree (1999). They offered eight suggestions for health education faculty with regard to how to mentor graduate students. Examples of these suggestions include striking a balance between personal and professional issues and being "prepared to invest time and patience with your protégé" (p. 28). Ogletree, Brey, and Hardman (1998) described the types of behaviors that occur in mentoring relationships between faculty and students, for example, helping students conduct research, aiding in making career plans, and presenting papers together.

Figure 1. Interview guide

1. What is your rank and position?
2. Are you primarily involved in school health, public health, health promotion or another area?
3. How many years have you had an academic appointment?
4. With how many junior faculty have you had mentoring relationships?
5. One of the areas that can sometimes be a problem for new faculty in getting promotion and tenure is research. What advice do you give or would you give new faculty about research?
6. What kinds of things would you advise a new faculty member about service?
7. Let's talk about teaching. What kinds of advice would you give in this area?
8. Do you have any overall advice about promotion and tenure?
9. What are the most critical pieces of advice you would give to a new faculty in his/her first position?
10. Is there anything else you would like to share or talk about that we not have touched on during this interview?

Note: Figure shows questions used for analysis for the current study. Other questions and responses are addressed elsewhere (Miller & Noland, in press).

The qualitative approach of the current study distinguishes it from other existing studies that have examined mentoring in health education and health promotion. Creswell (1998) described several reasons for engaging in qualitative inquiry, including the "nature of the research question" (p. 17), the desire to explore a topic and to present a "detailed view," and the interest on the part of the researcher to be an "active learner." These reasons guided the researchers in the present study in selecting to interview participants. For this study, the content of mentoring relationships in academia, specifically health education and health promotion, was of interest. The researchers hoped to explore that content to provide a view into how successful professionals in health education and health promotion advise their protégés.

The present study was undertaken as a qualitative study to obtain practical, specific suggestions from prominent, experienced health educators for junior faculty. Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative study was to gain understanding of the content of mentoring relationships between senior and junior faculty in health education and health promotion programs. More specifically, we examined the knowledge, skills, and behaviors senior faculty believe are important for the success of new health education and health promotion faculty.

METHOD

Procedures

The study was approved by the Human Subjects Committee of the Institutional Review Board at the University of Kentucky. A recent study in the *Journal of Health Education* identified the top 20 doctoral programs in health education and health promotion in the United States (Notaro, O'Rourke, & Eddy, 2000). This list was used to identify and contact senior faculty who had appointments in health education or health promotion to determine whether they were eligible for the study and were willing to participate. Potential participants were identified primarily through the educational institutions' web pages. Web pages were perused to identify people who initially appeared to meet study requirements. This yielded a list of 16 people to be contacted. This list was not exhaustive; the sample should be considered a convenience sample.

Potential interviewees were contacted first by e-mail to explain the purpose of the study and to invite them to participate. Requirements for participation were that the faculty member must have had an academic appointment for at least 10 years and had

an opportunity to mentor junior faculty. If the faculty member expressed an interest in participating, he or she was contacted by phone or e-mail to schedule the interview. For recruitment purposes, if the faculty member did not respond to the initial e-mail, a second e-mail was sent. Of the 16 people initially contacted, 11 participated in the study. In one case a faculty member was recruited who was from an institution that was not ranked in the top 20 doctoral programs, although the institution was a major state university. This was to assure approximately equal representation of men and women in the sample, so we could obtain a diversity of perspectives with regard to mentoring.

Participants

Study participants were 11 senior faculty members (6 men and 5 women) in health education or health promotion at major universities across the United States. The participants were prestigious and productive faculty members. They averaged 24 years in their academic appointments. Five were Fellows in the American Academy of Health Behavior, meaning that they met demanding criteria for productivity in terms of articles published, professional presentations, and grant money received. All but one were full professors, and one was an associate dean. Participants listed their academic areas as community health, health promotion, health education, public health, and health science education. They had mentored an average of five junior faculty members.

Interviews

Some interviews (n=4) took place at the national convention of the American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance in Cincinnati, OH, between March 27–31, 2001. Other interviews (n=7) took place by telephone from late March to early August 2001.

The interview guide consisted of 18 structured questions. Figure 1 lists the 10 questions from the interview guide that were used for the current analysis. On the original interview guide 6 questions elicited background information, and 12 related to advice the senior faculty member gives new faculty members.

Administration of the Interview

Interview questions were read to the interviewees, and responses were tape recorded. The investigators also took written notes during the interviews, highlighting key points made by the interviewees. Interviews were primarily structured, but in some cases the interviewer asked additional, more in-depth questions based on participant responses. Interviews lasted from 20 minutes to 2 hours. Average interview time was approximately 40 minutes.

Data Analysis

Audiotapes were transcribed for later data analysis. For each respondent, each investigator read the transcripts independently and identified important content from each question asked. The two investigators compiled their interpretations of the important content from each interview. Investigators then independently identified emerging themes from the data. Finally, the two investigators conferred and came to a consensus regarding the themes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Senior faculty at research institutions were interviewed to learn about the types of advice they give junior faculty whom they mentor or have mentored. Study participants represented successful academicians in the fields of health education and health promotion and, similar to Torabi's (2001) study, had much to say about the advice they give their junior faculty protégés. However, in contrast to Torabi's results, which revealed broad traits and characteristics of successful scholars in health education, senior faculty in the current study placed greater emphasis on the "nuts and bolts" or unwritten rules as they communicate them to the junior faculty whom they have mentored. For the current article, results are organized by research, teaching and service (see Figure 2).

Research

Themes related to research included planning for research; working with teams; knowing the expectations of one's institution; and choosing quantitative or qualitative methodology. Several respondents emphasized the importance of having both a short- and long-term plan for research: "they need to have some potboilers along the way so they can get started fast." The research should have "a focus and [there should be a] clear decision about how to commit time and energy to build around and contribute to that focus. I think it's a mistake for a faculty member to at an early state be all over the place, gathering a lot of different things and over time not developing a clear focus for their research." Having a focus does several things for a researcher. First, it helps the researcher develop an area of expertise that is readily identifiable. This expertise can then be translated into grant funding opportunities. Second, a focus can provide a structured approach in terms of setting long-term and short-term goals that build on one another. Finally, a focused research agenda is usually expected by promotion and tenure committees.

A second theme related to research was that new faculty members need to be part of a research team. "Don't try to start your career by yourself," commented one person. It is important to look for opportunities to become part of other senior faculty's research programs. "Get actively involved and learn by doing." One respondent said, "I don't believe that an individual can do substantive research alone anymore." He recommended getting connected with a multidisciplinary team. On the other hand, some recommended that new faculty have to team up with others but have some of their own (single-authored) "stuff" to have a mix of single- and multiple-authored publications on their vita. As discussed by these accomplished researchers, working in research teams has a synergistic effect as related to productivity and creativity that is not likely to occur when individuals work alone. Another advantage of working in teams is sharing resources such as facilities, expertise, and funding, all of which can expedite the process and enhance productivity. At the same time, junior faculty must

be able to demonstrate the ability to work independently, without relying on others for assistance.

The importance of learning the expectations of the institution as early as possible was a third theme. Some of the interviewees gave a specific number of publications (two to three a year) to be in the "safe zone"; others stressed understanding the "culture" of the institution, referring to the generally accepted levels of productivity. The expectations for meeting promotion and tenure of the institution where the junior faculty member is employed should influence the research agenda and goals, according to the senior faculty in this study. The earlier junior faculty make themselves aware of these institutional expectations the better and the more wisely time can be allotted to the areas deemed important by the institution.

A final theme for success in research was related to the merits of conducting qualitative versus quantitative research. New faculty would be wise to determine whether they are more highly skilled in conducting quantitative or qualitative research. Although quantitative research is generally more highly valued, some qualitative research is acceptable. The new faculty member also should be aware that qualitative research is more time-consuming and it is harder to publish; therefore, he or she should conduct a significant amount of quantitative research. Many journal reviewers prefer quantitative research when determining what will be published. Therefore, overreliance on qualitative work may result in frustration and reduction in productivity by the junior faculty researcher when attempting to publish the work.

Teaching

With regard to the teaching component of the study results, themes centered on working with students, using resources, and balancing responsibilities. A number of respondents emphasized how important it is to work well with students. "Students want you to be human." The professor should be available to students, but without being taken advantage of. "The more you get to know your students, the easier it becomes."

Figure 2. Key Themes Related to Research, Teaching, and Service

Research Themes

- Have a research focus: Have a consistent and cohesive agenda and short- and long-term plan.
- Develop and work with research teams: Work with others and have independent projects as well.
- Know the expectations of your institution. Learn these as early as possible.
- Balance quantitative versus qualitative studies in the research plan. Understand that qualitative tends to be more time-consuming and quantitative is more highly valued.

Teaching Themes

- Be aware that interactions with students inside and outside the classroom are important.
- Use available resources, develop skills in teaching.
- Maintain a teaching load that is balanced with other responsibilities.

Service Themes

- Seek specific types of service that are desirable for achieving promotion and tenure.
- Realize the quantity of service required is usually less than in teaching and research categories.
- Appreciate that the purpose of service is to provide learning opportunities or to make "connections."

Communication with students is important. Some of the adjectives used to describe the communication aspect of teaching were "be firm, fair, and friendly," in addition to being consistent. "[Be] honest with them and direct with them, let them also know what your expectations are in the classroom." It is also important to understand student expectations for the class. At the same time, a teacher should not let the desire to please students override the responsibility to make students skilled. There needs to be a balance between challenging students and giving them too much work. Most of the senior faculty agreed that working with students can be a gratifying and rewarding part of the academic life. In fact, several of the senior faculty, all of whom were highly accomplished researchers, indicated the most important function of the university is to educate students. Building on this value, many of the senior faculty mentors reported they advise their protégés to look at teaching as occurring during every encounter with students, whether in a formal classroom setting or informal chat in the office or hallway. Mentoring of students is always taking place, in one senior faculty's perspective.

A second theme related to teaching was making use of available resources to develop skills in teaching. New faculty should "study teaching as an art." In an effort to improve, teachers should observe good teachers, locate resources that are available for new faculty, learn from other faculty members inside and outside the department, and try to obtain feedback. At many institutions there is a teaching and learning center that is designed to provide resources for teachers and to evaluate teaching, if the teacher so desires. These evaluations usually are provided for the sole purpose of improving teaching and are not tied to performance evaluations. If this type of resource is available, the new faculty person should engage in the process of having his or her teaching evaluated. One respondent pointed out that if a faculty member is at a major institution and his or her strong point

or area of excellence is teaching, then he or she must have the teaching go beyond state lines by developing teaching models that are known and used nationally. In general, the faculty member should "be committed to teaching," "know your stuff," "be organized." Being a good teacher requires a high degree of skill; therefore, the faculty member must work to improve. Senior faculty mentors in this study often discussed teaching as an "art" that can and must be developed. In light of the importance of the role of being a good teacher, it was often mentioned that senior faculty advise their protégés to seek out available resources such as teaching and learning centers, experienced master teachers, and feedback from colleagues and students to continually work to improve one's skills.

A final theme was that teaching must be balanced with other responsibilities. Although all respondents thought teaching was extremely important, many cautioned that publishing is important regardless of teaching. New faculty were advised to work out a reasonable teaching load (keep assignments to a minimum) and not to volunteer for extra teaching. New faculty should also be cautious about planning new courses because of the level of preparation required that can take time away from other areas. One way to be more efficient is to try to have new faculty teach courses related to one another to minimize preparation time. The overall idea in relation to balancing teaching with other responsibilities is that the teacher should be very good at teaching, but should efficiently manage his or her course load. Interestingly, at the same time, these senior faculty mentors caution their protégés not to overemphasize their teaching responsibilities. It is tempting for new junior faculty to allot an inordinate amount of time to course preparation and student advisement rather than to other areas needing attention, such as research. Senior faculty often tend to warn their protégés to avoid this error because at most academic institutions today, even the best teachers will not receive tenure and/or promotion if they do not demonstrate scholarly productivity.

Service

Themes related to service included identifying appropriate types of service; quantity of service; and the purpose of service. Regarding the types of service that contribute to achieving promotion and tenure, it is desirable to volunteer for some committees for national professional organizations, allowing the faculty member to gain visibility without a large time commitment. However, it may be easier to start service locally before moving to service at the national level. Building service around teaching and research is also a good idea for both economy of time and for establishing expertise in an area. When he or she has sufficient research experience, a new faculty member should also review manuscripts for journals. It is important to have service related to the governance of the department and university, but these assignments should be limited. New faculty should avoid university committees unrelated to their academic area and also committees that require a great deal of work. Although it may sound harsh, one respondent recommended that new faculty also avoid spending time in service with volunteer agencies, presumably because they take a large time commitment and do not result in a lot of visibility. Senior faculty reported they guide their protégés to seek out specific types of service that will be advantageous to them; to keep a perspective about the amount of service to which they commit; and to know that the purpose of service is to provide a learning opportunity and help to make contacts in the field. With regard to the type of service recommended by senior faculty to junior faculty, junior faculty should seek out opportunities to serve on committees for professional organizations at the national level. National-level service is recommended because it helps the junior faculty develop visibility in the field, according to the senior faculty. This visibility can be a positive influence in the tenure and promotion process at many academic institutions.

In relation to the amount of service necessary for achieving promotion and tenure, respondents emphasized that service does not "count" as much as teaching and research. Although it is necessary to do some service, teaching and research cannot be neglected. "Don't spread yourself too thin," was one person's comment. Another said, "Learn to say no." Finally, one said, "We are a service-oriented profession, so no matter how you look at it you're going to do a lot of [service]. Sometimes people get too much into service [so] that they neglect the most important elements of the university and that is teaching and researching." In the area of service, the university is looking for minimal service, not a leadership role. Although all agreed that service is important, it must be limited so the faculty member has time to establish credibility in the other two areas (teaching and research). Senior faculty indicated they often warn their protégés not to overestimate the amount of service expected of them by their institution. As with research, junior faculty should ask colleagues and administrators about the institutional expectation regarding the amount of service with which they should get involved. Senior faculty mentioned they often observe junior faculty have misperceptions about expectations for quantity of service.

The final theme in the area of service is that service should be used as a learning opportunity or to "make connections." The type of service should be selected so that the faculty member uses it to build his or her skills to do other things. Similarly, one respondent stated "it's a good way to make connections for your students, for your classes, just to keep current in your field." Thus, the faculty member should perform service, but should use the service to grow professionally—through building skills, making connections, or keeping current in the field. Finally, the senior faculty interviewed for this study emphasized that service should be viewed as an avenue to learn about what is currently being practiced in the field and to make contacts with practitioners and others who may contribute to the other two areas, specifically, teaching and research. When junior faculty design the workload so the three areas of

responsibility complement each other, it minimizes the sense of being pulled in several different and competing directions.

This study has several limitations. First, the study is based on the opinion of a small number of senior faculty. The advice they offered is based on their experience only, and not the experience of all those people who have mentored new faculty. Second, the advice and experiences discussed here are specific to institutions requiring significant amounts of research by the new faculty member. Finally, academic success is based on a variety of factors, not just those mentioned here. Thus, although this study offers some practical suggestions, there are likely many other suggestions that could be made.

However, despite the limitations, the perspectives described in this article can be very useful to new, junior faculty in health education and health promotion, not only as a means to further careers, but also to make significant contributions to the profession. Well-prepared professionals in higher education are critical to the advancement of the field. This study contributes to that training by sharing the advice and experience of accomplished senior faculty.

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