



Becoming an Informal Faculty Mentor

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Think for a moment about your faculty colleagues who have generously shared their time and talents to help you thrive in academia. Much of your current success may be due to faculty mentors.

Two kinds of faculty mentoring

Faculty mentoring assignments are usually given by a department chair or dean to mid-career or senior faculty. These assignments aim to help newly hired faculty—both full- and part-time—understand their teaching, scholarship, and citizenship responsibilities. For full-time faculty, mentoring often includes guiding them through the tenure process.

In addition, faculty can create informal mentoring relationships. These can occur between full-time, visiting, part-time, or adjunct faculty and can apply to new, mid-career, or senior faculty. Informal mentoring is based on what the mentor can share and what the mentee wants to learn (Carpenter et al. 2022). For instance, a senior faculty member might help a new hire with citizenship assignments, or a new adjunct might teach a senior faculty member about using AI in test creation.

Informal mentoring occurs outside organized faculty mentee-mentor programs, allowing freedom and flexibility for participants to learn from each other. The duration of an informal mentor relationship can be days, weeks, months, or even years—whatever suits the purpose of that relationship. This flexibility should benefit both participants (Settle et al. 2024). Informal mentor relationships tend to be more specific than formal mentor assignments, with narrower goals.

Creating informal mentoring relationships

Informal mentoring relationships can be created in several ways:

- **Volunteering:** when one faculty member extends an invitation to a colleague to collaborate on teaching, scholarship, or citizenship opportunities.
- **Requesting:** when one faculty member asks another if they can work together. Often, the requesting faculty member will be less experienced than the colleague they are approaching.
- **Brokering:** when a third faculty member recognizes the possibility for a mutually beneficial collaboration between two other faculty members. While this is the rarest of the three relationships, it can result in meaningful experiences and increased productivity for both colleagues.

Formal mentee-mentor assignments are one-to-one relationships. Informal mentee-mentor relationships can be one-to-one or one-to-many. For example, when one of us was a newly hired faculty member, a senior colleague invited him and a few other recent hires to meet weekly to discuss research and writing challenges and successes.

Getting started

It doesn't have to be difficult or time-consuming to be an informal mentor. What it does require is intentional effort. Here are some suggestions for getting started:

- Do not wait for an assignment: Opportunities to help your colleagues are all around you. Be willing to take action when they present themselves.
- Take the initiative: Drop by to speak with your potential informal mentee.
- Introduce your informal mentees to other faculty: Help them build their own network.
- Consider meeting regularly—perhaps weekly, monthly, or quarterly—as appropriate. Schedule meetings in advance.

Specifically, you might do the following:

- **Visit each other's classes.** By providing class times and sharing your syllabus, you offer a clear framework for your teaching approach. When your mentee visits your class, they gain firsthand experience of your instructional methods, classroom management, and student interactions. After the visit, take the time to answer any questions they may have and provide constructive feedback. This exchange should be reciprocal: Visit their classes as well, observe their teaching style, and offer your insights. This mutual observation and feedback process fosters a collaborative learning environment, enhances teaching practices, and builds a supportive professional relationship. It encourages continuous improvement and innovation in teaching strategies for both parties.

- **Work together on research projects.** When faculty members share research responsibilities, they bring diverse perspectives and expertise to the table, enriching the project's quality and scope. This collaborative approach fosters a sense of camaraderie and mutual support, making the research process more enjoyable and less isolating. Additionally, working together can lead to innovative solutions and breakthroughs that might not be achievable individually. The adage "We together are always smarter than me alone" highlights the power of collective intelligence, where the combined knowledge and skills of the group surpass those of any single member. Ultimately, collaboration enhances productivity, encourages learning, and builds stronger professional relationships.
- **Collaborate on articles or conference presentations.** By sharing the workload, each person can focus on their strengths, making the process more efficient and less overwhelming. This collaboration allows for the exchange of ideas, fostering a deeper understanding of the subject matter. Additionally, sharing responsibilities for conference speaking and publication helps build confidence as both participants support each other through the process. Presenting together at conferences or coauthoring publications also increases visibility and credibility within the academic community. Overall, this collaborative effort not only enriches the content but also strengthens professional relationships and encourages continuous growth. (We recognize that collaborative publishing or presenting is not the norm in some academic disciplines.)
- **Serve on a citizenship committee assignment together.** By guiding an informal mentee through this process, you can help them understand the intricacies of committee work, including the responsibilities and expectations of faculty members. As they observe a professorial requirement, they gain insights into the importance of citizenship in academia, such as contributing to departmental goals, supporting colleagues, and enhancing the overall educational environment. This hands-on experience not only builds their confidence but also fosters a sense of belonging and commitment to the institution. Through your guidance, the mentee can develop essential skills and knowledge that will benefit their professional growth and future contributions to the academic community.
- **Identify a specific skill you would like to teach or learn.** Whether it's mastering new software, improving public speaking, or enhancing research techniques, pinpointing a skill provides clear direction for the informal mentoring relationship. Once you've identified the skill, set a realistic timeframe for teaching or learning it, such as a few weeks or months. This structured approach ensures that both mentor and mentee stay focused and committed. Establishing a goal for using the skill, like presenting at a conference or publishing an article, adds motivation and a tangible outcome to the learning process.

Summary

Informal mentoring can be a powerful tool for fostering growth and collaboration within your department. Unlike formal mentoring, which is structured and assigned, informal mentoring offers flexibility and freedom, allowing faculty members to tailor their interactions according to individual needs and interests. Embracing informal mentoring can lead to a more dynamic, supportive, and successful academic community, benefiting both mentors and mentees alike.

References

Carpenter, Russell, Kevin Dvorak, Michael G. Strawser, Vanessa Gonzalez, and Danielle Aming. 2022. "Situating Faculty Mentorship and Mentor Models," *Journal of Faculty Development* 36 (1) : 33–37.

Settle, Quisto, John P. Schoeneman Jr., Lauren Quinlan, and Lauren Lewis Cline. 2024. "The Mentor Network for Junior Faculty in the Discipline." *Journal of Agricultural Education* 65 (2): 209–25. <https://doi.org/10.5032/jae.v65i2.2490>

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