Advice to a white professor about mentoring scholars of color (essay)

Submitted by Kerry Ann Rockquemore on February 17, 2016 - 3:00am

Dear Kerry Ann,

I enjoy reading your columns. I'll be brief: I don't know how to mentor scholars of color in my department. I'm a white guy, and I don't experience the same things minority faculty members do in the classroom or on the campus. Because of that, I feel awkward trying to give them advice. I have a new mentee (a brand-new tenure-track faculty member, who is African-American) and I want to be helpful as her department mentor, but I honestly don't know how. Can I mentor African-American faculty effectively? Or should I try to connect her with a tenured African-American scholar in another department. (We don't have any.)

Sincerely,

Unsure How to Mentor

Dear Unsure,

Thanks for your honesty and your desire to support faculty of color generally and your new mentee specifically. I frequently hear senior faculty express the sentiment that they are unable to mentor underrepresented faculty because they haven't experienced racism/sexism/classism/homophobia or any kind of differential treatment and, therefore, have no meaningful advice to offer.

Oddly enough, they are so concerned about not knowing what to say that they avoid mentoring conversations altogether or they encourage mentees to contact one of a few senior underrepresented faculty members on the campus (who are completely overwhelmed with service obligations and people seeking mentoring). While well intentioned, this avoidance has a consistent outcome: faculty of color often end up with no mentoring at all.

I have some good news and some bad news. The good news is yes! You can mentor African-American faculty effectively. You don't need to be a person of color to mentor your African-American colleague. The bad news is that doing so will require you to take some time to examine your underlying assumptions, rethink what it means to be a mentor and change how you do the work of mentoring. Let me offer a few questions to guide that process:

What Limiting Beliefs Are Driving Your Awkward Feelings?

https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2016/02/17/advice-white-professor-about-mentoring-scholars-color-essay
I won’t assume to know your beliefs, but I do know that awkwardness and hesitation to engage in activity with someone whom you perceive as different (that you freely engage in with people who are like you) suggests some unexplored assumptions are at work. Another way of asking this question is to reflect on why you imagine you cannot mentor African-American faculty members.

Here are a few possible limiting beliefs that may be at work:

- Faculty of color can only be mentored by other faculty of color.
- Faculty of color only need mentoring on issues related to race.
- There are no needs that faculty of color have that can be met by you.
- Mentoring means giving advice to mentees based on your personal experience.

I’m not sure if you have any of these beliefs, but I’m articulating them to illustrate that they are limiting (they keep you from mentoring your new colleagues) and that they are beliefs (so they can be changed). I don’t know if your beliefs make you think you have nothing to offer your new colleague or that somebody else would be better, but getting clear about what those beliefs are is the first step.

**Are You Willing to Rethink Mentoring?**

We all use the word “mentoring,” but it means so many different things to different people.[1] What would happen if you stopped using the word and instead focused on three things: 1) the range of needs your new colleague has during her transition into your department, 2) which of those needs you can best meet and 3) how to act as a coach instead of a mentor in helping her to get her remaining needs met. If you can gain clarity on those three areas, you may end up being the best mentor your colleague has ever had and help her to become a better mentor for others.

**What Are Your New Colleague’s Needs?**

I haven’t met your new colleague, but I have worked with many brand-new assistant professors, a number of whom are underrepresented faculty members. I’ve observed that new scholars have a predictable and wide range of needs as they transition from one stage of their career (in this case, graduate student or postdoc) to another (faculty member). The most common needs are:

- **Professional development training** in any area in which they need to excel, such as academic time management, healthy conflict resolution, project planning, grant writing and how bureaucratic functions work on your specific campus.
- **Access to opportunities and networks at your institution** (such as research collaborations, connections to relevant centers or institutes, internal funding opportunities, etc.) as well as in their discipline more broadly.
- **Emotional support** to manage the typical stresses of the tenure track, the transition into their new identity as a professor and their life in a new geographic location.
- **A social and intellectual community** to support their transition and to continue to drive their research agenda forward.
- **Accountability structures** for all the aspects of the job that do not have built-in accountability on a daily basis (research and writing) so that the activities that do have built-in accountability (teaching and service) don’t overtake their daily schedule.
- **Institutional sponsorship** from people who will advocate for their best interest behind

closed doors and shape the emerging story about them as a colleague, teacher and researcher.

- **Role models** who are currently successfully navigating the academy and exemplify extraordinary success in a way they aspire.
- **Safe space** to discuss and process their experiences as an underrepresented faculty member without being invalidated, interrogated, devalued and/or disrespected.
- **Honest and direct feedback** on every aspect of the job that they will be evaluated for tenure, specifically their teaching, writing and service.

I'm presenting the typical set of needs of a new faculty member to make the point that it's perfectly normal for your mentee to have a long list of them during her transition from graduate student to professor. I also hope it's obvious that no one person could possibly meet all of these different needs. She doesn't require one mentor but rather a large and supportive mentoring network. And equally important, it is not your responsibility to build that network for her but instead to make her aware that mentoring networks will support her more than a single-mentor model will -- and to then help her to create that network.

**Which Need Are You Distinctly Able to Meet?**

If you look at that long list, I'm sure you can mentally check off a few areas that would not be a good fit for you. For example, I don't recommend that you position yourself as your new colleague's safe space, her emotional support system or her role model.

But I do recommend that you think about what your strengths are. In other words, what you can do for her that nobody else can? For example, maybe you've recently published a book with a high-prestige press, and you know that her primary goal is to revise and restructure her dissertation research into a book manuscript. Why not offer to walk her through that process, review her book proposal and/or introduce her to an appropriate acquisitions editor? Or maybe you're well known as a faculty member who runs a harmonious and highly productive lab, and you know this will be her first time running her own lab. Why not share with her your process for managing RAs and offer to be a sounding board for any questions that she has in that area?

What you'll notice about these examples is that they are highly specific and they occur in the sweet spot where your mentee's needs overlap with your expertise. That sweet spot is the place where you will be the most effective mentor. Managing microaggressions may be an area where she has needs, but it's neither in your experience nor part of your expertise. And you may have areas of expertise where she doesn't have a pressing need. And if you don't know what your mentee needs, just ask her!

**Imagine Yourself as a Coach Instead of a Mentor**

I hope you can already see how freeing it is to let go of needing to give advice in every area and instead picking one area. But your effectiveness in working with your new colleague will be further enhanced if you can **reimagine yourself as a coach** instead of a mentor. Why? Because you can best support her in making a swift and effective transition from graduate student to professor by helping her to build a **large mentoring network**.

Taking a coaching approach to your relationship is easier than it sounds. Specifically, you just have to change your standpoint from being the guru to being a facilitator in helping your colleague identify her needs and the person who can best meet them. If that sounds abstract,
you can try the following approach:

- Invite your mentee to coffee and have an open, honest conversation with her. Tell her that you want to be as helpful as possible and suggest that the best way for you to do so is by helping her build a mentoring network.
- Try using a Mentor Map [4] as a visual way to talk about building a mentoring network.
- Let her know the one place you can support her in her mentoring network.
- Offer to brainstorm with her about how to get her other needs met.

And if that seems too complicated, just forward her this essay (without revealing yourself as the letter writer) and ask her if you can talk about it.

It sounds like you’re invested in supporting your new colleague, and I believe you can be an incredibly effective mentor -- as long as you’re willing to rethink mentoring and help her to build a broad mentoring network that, as a whole, will support her in reaching her full potential as a teacher, scholar and colleague on your campus.

Peace and productivity,

Kerry Ann Rockquemore, Ph.D.

President, National Center for Faculty Development & Diversity [5]

P.S. I’m always happy to receive questions at DearKerryAnn@FacultyDiversity.org [6]. Your questions will be kept anonymous!

Section:
Faculty [7]

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