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Subject:	There Is No Guru

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There Is No Guru

We've all heard repeatedly how important "mentoring" is to our professional success, but if you scratch the surface and ask people what exactly they mean by "mentoring," you will find a wide range of responses. Too many new faculty members we know imagine that they will have a single guru-like "mentor" who will sense their needs, generously dispense wisdom, care deeply about their success, and gently guide them along the path to tenure and promotion. Since that rarely happens, we want to focus this week on Common New Faculty Mistake #14: **Looking For A Single Guru-Mentor.**

The problem with the idea that you will find one guru-mentor is that new faculty members have a wide variety of needs, and it is not only impossible but also problematic for all of those needs to be met by one (and only one) person. For example, if you are a typical new faculty member, you have some combination of the following needs:

Professional Development

You are looking for help in learning how to manage time, resolve conflicts, administer projects, organize your office space, teach efficiently and well, supervise graduate students, and make strategic decisions about service commitments.

Emotional Support

As a new faculty member, you are in the midst of a significant identity and role transition: from a graduate student (or postdoc) to a professor. As a result, you may need support in dealing with the common stress and pressures of transitioning to life on the tenure track.

A Sense Of Community

Given that most new tenure-track faculty have uprooted their lives to move to a new area, you may find yourself seeking both an intellectual and/or social community where you feel a true sense of belonging.

Accountability

The structure of your job likely provides the least accountability for the activity that is most valued (research, writing, and publication). In order to avoid getting caught up in the daily chaos, the vast majority of new faculty members need some form of an accountability system for writing.

Institutional Sponsorship

You also need to cultivate relationships with people who are invested in your success at your institution. By that, I mean senior faculty who are willing to use their power to advocate for your best interests behind closed doors.

Access To Networks

Because knowledge isn't produced in isolation, it's critical for you to connect with others to discuss potential research collaborations, navigate external funding, and access opportunity structures that might not be immediately apparent to you as a new faculty member.

Project-Specific Feedback

You will also need to regularly communicate with people who can provide substantive comments on your proposals, manuscript drafts, and new ideas.

We're listing these common needs to illustrate the point that no one person could (or should) fulfill all of them in your life! Expecting a single mentor to transition you from graduate student to faculty member will inevitably lead to disappointment, over-dependence on the advice of one person, and feelings of loneliness. For example, we once spoke with a tenure-track faculty member who had relied exclusively on her departmentally-assigned guru-mentor to guide her through the transition from graduate student to professor. The guru advised her when she arrived to "hold off working on her book for a few years to mature intellectually." In response to this *very bad advice*, she spent her first few years "intellectually maturing" instead of writing and then was shocked to receive a negative third-year review that focused almost entirely on her lack of published work and minimal progress on her book. Our point is that gurus are human; they make mistakes. Therefore, relying exclusively on one person can put you at unnecessary risk and leave you with many unmet needs.

This week, we want to encourage you to fundamentally rethink the idea of "mentoring" by asking yourself: ***What do I need, and what is the most strategic and efficient way to get it?*** Then, instead of looking for one all-knowing guru-mentor, you will start to realize that there are many different ways to get information, support, feedback, and advice. We can meet our professional development, emotional support, community, and accountability needs by connecting with professionals, peers, friends, books, and online communities. For example, it's probably more effective to hire a professional editor than to expect your departmental mentor to copyedit your work. It's probably more satisfying to meet with friends for emotional support than to expect it from your department chair. And, it's far more meaningful to join a writing group for accountability than asking your mentor to call you every week and make sure you're making progress on your writing.

Let us be perfectly clear. There are some needs (e.g., sponsorship, access to opportunities, project-specific feedback) that only senior people in your field and/or department can meet. The trick is to know the difference so that you focus the limited time you have with senior mentors on the things only they can provide for you while finding alternative ways to meet your other needs.

If There's No Guru, Then What's A New Faculty Member To Do?

Instead of focusing on any one particular person, we're suggesting that you imagine an extensive web of support that you create by **identifying your needs and proactively getting them met**. If we could construct an ideal mentoring network to support new faculty members, it would include all of the following:

- A broad array of mentors and sponsors that are located within and beyond your current institution.
- An **excellent coach** (or therapist) to help you transition through your first year.
- A local and extended network of friends who you can rely on for social support and stress relief.
- A group of scholars in your field with whom you can share drafts and ideas.
- A supportive community that meets your unique accountability needs and celebrates your successes.
- On- and off-campus professional development activities.
- A professional development fund that you can access to get whatever needs you have met in the most effective and efficient way.

In a perfect world, your department would be organized in such a way as to welcome and support you during your transition from graduate student to professor. In reality, it will most likely be your responsibility to identify your needs and find ways to meet them. Along with that responsibility comes the realization that you have tremendous power (even if it doesn't always feel like it). In other words, you don't have to be dependent on a single guru-mentor

because YOU have the power to create a network of support that is populated by people who are invested in your success. This collective approach will enable you to feel supported before, during, and after problems arise in your department. It will provide you with opportunities, connections, and reference groups that extend far beyond your college or university. And most importantly, it will serve as a buffer to decrease any alienation, loneliness, and stress that you may feel at your current institution.

The Weekly Challenge

This week we challenge each of you to do the following:

- Review the list of new faculty needs, and ask yourself two important questions: 1) *What do I need right now?* and 2) *What is the most efficient and effective way to get it?*
- If you feel resistant to reaching out, seeking professional assistance, or asking for help, gently ask yourself: *Why?*
- For every need that you identify, brainstorm at least three different ways to get it met. We keep a list of **resources and referrals** on the NCFDD website that may provide a good starting point.
- If you have not yet met the faculty development professionals on your campus, ask who they are, where they are located, and what services they offer.
- Write for at least 30 minutes every day (because people love to mentor, sponsor, and support productive new faculty members).
- If you want an intensive mentoring experience, consider joining our **Faculty Success Program**.

We hope this week brings you the energy to re-think your assumptions about mentoring, the clarity to identify what YOU need right now, and the energy to seek new and creative ways to get all of your needs met!

Warmly,

Kerry Ann Rockquemore, PhD
Founder, **NCFDD**

Anthony Ocampo, PhD
Academic Director, **NCFDD**

Upcoming Training

Faculty Success Program
Summer 2022 registration is open! Early bird pricing ends April 6!
5/15/2022 - 8/6/2022
Register Now

Core Curriculum Webinar: Mastering Academic Time Management
4/14/2022 (Thursday) 2:00-3:30 pm ET
Facilitator: Naomi Levy, PhD, Santa Clara University
Register Here

Guest Expert Webinar: How to Translate Your Research for a General Audience
4/19/2022 (Tuesday) 2:00-3:00 pm ET
Facilitator: Danielle Bainbridge, PhD, Northwestern University
Register Here

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