Mentoring at Wharton

Wharton – and indeed all of Penn – has a formal mentoring program that requires departments to provide a mentor for every junior faculty member. And yet, a formally required program cannot, of course, ensure that all faculty members involved either as mentees or as mentors find their mentoring relationships rewarding and effective.

To enhance junior faculty mentoring at Wharton, we contacted faculty mentees and mentors, asking them for their anonymous comments and suggestions regarding the mentoring process. Faculty members’ comments and suggestions were insightful and constructive, as the quotes below reveal. We offer these quotes as food-for-thought for both mentors and mentees. Not every comment will apply to every mentoring relationship. We encourage mentors and mentees to have an open discussion of the steps they can take to build a productive, useful, and comfortable relationship for both the mentor and the mentee.

What Should Mentors and Mentees Discuss?

We asked both mentors and mentees what topics were most helpful to discuss. Mentors and mentees showed close agreement in their suggested topics for discussion. Here is what they suggested:

- “Feedback on specific papers, and feedback on draft responses to journal referees”
- “Time allocation is usually a big topic of discussion – especially teaching vs. research as well as how many and what kinds of projects to have active at any given time”
- “Discussions of the journal review process”
- “Conversations about future research directions and how to expand impact”
- “Constructive criticism regarding internal perceptions of [the mentee’s] work. Suggestions on which faculty members to reach out to.”
- “Discussing how to balance exploitation of existing datasets versus the generation of new projects.”
- “What faculty seminars and workshops to get involved with. What conferences to attend (and not attend).”
- “Help with teaching materials and plans, in terms of what to do in the classroom and how to manage everything administratively outside the classroom.”
- “Insights on how to navigate the tenure process”
- “Suggestions on how to adapt to some of the unique norms at Wharton”
- “Suggestions regarding external fellowships to apply for to gain resources and visibility.”
- “Discussions of some issues junior faculty are interested in understanding better, but are too shy to ask – for example, taking a leave of absence, doing a visitor stint, etc. If mentors suggested to junior faculty that ‘anything goes’ in their conversations, this might help bring some other issues to light”

What Can Mentors Do to Enhance the Quality of the Mentoring Relationship?

What would make mentoring even more effective? Junior faculty members offered numerous useful and thought-provoking suggestions for mentors:
• “My mentor could be more proactive in checking in on me; when I contact him he always responds, but he
doesn’t initiate contact. It would also be helpful if he would proactively offer me “soft” advice, e.g. when
tensions arise in my department, how to address them.”

• “I would have been amenable to a bit more tough love. I think that this is an opportunity to find out what I am
doing wrong – what it is in my research portfolio or approach that might hold me back. The problem is that by
the time the 3rd year review comes around it is hard to make major changes before the tenure review. A frank
and timely discussion of the risks in my work would be helpful.”

• “It might seem obvious that an untenured faculty person would already have familiarity with the relevant
scholarly resources. But, insofar as Wharton often hires individuals who are “crossing over” into a business
school setting, such familiarity should not be presumed. Ensuring this familiarity need not fall to mentors (or
mentors alone); it would be really helpful if departments were to develop formal lists of the area-specific
societies, journals, list serves, blogs, etc., and disseminate these to incoming faculty.”

• “My department achieves good mentorship of juniors in several ways that I would recommend. Most
importantly by far, senior faculty are around, with open doors, and eager to talk about research-- my
research, their research, important recent papers by others, awful recent papers by others, ideas that might
turn into papers, etc. Nothing could be more important than the intellectual standard the senior faculty set
by example and by the questions they ask juniors. By reinforcing my natural obsession with research, they
sustain and enhance my delight in the day-to-day.”

Mentors also offered a number of suggestions for their fellow senior colleagues who also serve as mentors:

• “Suggestions such as ‘try to gain visibility’ or ‘start to concentrate your research’ are great but difficult to
achieve. Providing suggestions for specific tasks to achieve these more general goals is helpful in clarifying
these somewhat ambiguous suggestions.”

• “Meeting atmosphere: emphasize that this is not an evaluation meeting; it is two colleagues getting together.
Teaching: invite the mentee to attend one of your classes. This makes things concrete. Offer to attend one of
his or her classes, but make clear that this is not required. Prepare questions ahead of time: “Are there
specific things at Wharton/in your department” that are causing you sleepless nights / concerns / frustration?
Do more than just the minimum ‘let’s meet once’; use this relationship as an excuse to ask for coffee time /
lunch time; build relationships this way”

• “It’s helpful to ask the following kinds of questions of untenured faculty members to take stock of an
individual’s career trajectory and progress. These questions are not intended to put the junior faculty
member on the spot, but are a mechanism for getting the individual to think strategically about their career
and research choices:
  o How do you define your field or major area of interest?
  o Who are the top ten to fifteen individuals that contribute to this field?
  o What do you believe are the “A” journals where your work could appear?
  o What specific problems or questions have you addressed?
  o What are the topics you are just beginning to address or are thinking of addressing and how would
    those contribute to your field of interest?
  o How well known are you by the top ten to fifteen individuals you named above? How might you
    become better known to those individuals?
  o What do you hope that those individuals would say about your research if they were asked to write a
    letter about you at the time your case is considered for promotion to tenured associate professor?
  o If you were writing your research statement for your promotion to tenured associate professor, what
    do you hope that you will be able to say in your research statement? Are you on a trajectory to be
    able to say that? What do you have to do between now and then to be able to say that?
  o What are the ways in which you contribute to the intellectual life of the department?”
• “It’s important to be sure that the department is supportive of the junior faculty member and conducive to facilitating the junior faculty member’s development, so I like to ask the following questions:
  o Do you have specific concerns or issues that you would like to raise with me (us)?
  o Are there ways that individual faculty, the department or the school could enhance your research productivity and impact?
  o How do you find your teaching assignment? Are there ways that individual faculty, the department or school could help you with your teaching?”

What Can Mentees Do to Enhance the Quality of the Mentoring Relationship?

Senior faculty who serve as mentors also offered useful and thought-provoking suggestions for mentees, as the following comments indicate:

• “Involve the mentor in more frequent conversations about specific research projects, successes, failures, etc. The mentor will likely be very happy to offer advice and be a sounding board on many issues, but cannot be very effective if they do not know what the mentee is up to.”

• “Ask for feedback on papers. Ask for feedback on course evals. Ask to have lunch. Mentors are usually willing to share their time but are busy and don’t necessarily initiate it. At least once each semester there’s no reason why a mentor shouldn’t be willing to read a paper and discuss it (and other things) over a lunch or coffee.”

• “Mentees should get relevant data to the mentors with sufficient time to read through it – CV, papers and maybe teaching ratings/materials.”

• “This suggestion comes not from experience with my own mentee but from informal relationships with other junior faculty members in which I tried to play the role of mentor (unofficially). The biggest problem I saw was that people hear what they want to hear. Clearly, most department chairs find a “nice” way to provide the feedback to junior faculty. Unfortunately, some junior faculty do not unwind the friendly bias in the dept chair’s remarks. The mentee’s should be encouraged to listen carefully, perform an honest self-evaluation, and be ready to discuss the results with their mentor to make sure they got it right. As a mentor, it is much easier to be honest (harsh) if your mentee admits that they think X is a concern and asks if they have properly assessed the situation and what to do about it, than if the mentee asks for general feedback.”

• “My mentee comes to me to update me on progress he/she is making. This builds a wonderful bond.”

Mentoring Resources on Wharton’s and Penn’s Websites

Wharton’s Faculty Tools website now includes information about the tenure process. Documents regarding the tenure and review process available via the links below may be helpful for mentees and their mentors to discuss:


The first document is largely procedural. The second of the two documents, “Tenure Decisions at Wharton and Elsewhere: Some Factors Reviewers May Consider” may be particularly helpful to mentees early in their careers at Wharton as it gives some idea of how reviewers evaluate tenure cases. In addition, information about junior faculty mentoring at Penn, including descriptions of each School’s program is available at:

• [http://www.upenn.edu/provost/mentoring/](http://www.upenn.edu/provost/mentoring/)