

UNC Charlotte Mentor Program Supports Mid-Career Faculty

By Lynn Roberson

Universities generally do a good job in helping to acclimate new faculty, often through mentoring programs. But often mid-career tenured faculty are left to blaze their own trails for promotion to full professor.

We in the ADVANCE Faculty Affairs Office at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte are convinced that formal mentoring and other structured support can benefit mid-career faculty, especially women and underrepresented minorities, and particularly in the science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) disciplines.

Our university-wide formal mid-career mentoring initiative began three years ago under our National Science Foundation ADVANCE grant, now in its fifth year. The grant seeks to create an institutional environment to support the recruitment, retention and academic success of faculty who are women and underrepresented minorities especially those in STEM disciplines, and to increase the success of all faculty. We have now institutionalized several ADVANCE initiatives, including those for mentoring mid-career and new faculty. We continue to measure the impact and listen to our faculty.

Listen to faculty: Start by assessing needs

National research has identified common barriers for mid-career faculty, especially women and underrepresented minorities. Among the most significant are lack of clarity about promotion criteria, inaccurate perceptions of the roles of full professors, a lack of mentoring and disproportionate service demands.

To validate whether the same concerns existed on our campus, in 2008 and 2009 we held focus groups with STEM women faculty and surveyed all associate professors. They listed strikingly similar barriers to those in the national research. A majority of women and men felt criteria for promotion to professor were unclear; less than one-third reported receiving career guidance from their chairs; and more than half felt that mid-career mentoring would help them to prepare.

Women were significantly less likely to agree that promotion decisions are made fairly and not influenced by gender, race or other nonperformance factors.

Flexibility is crucial

We wanted to meet the common concerns of associate professors, while also responding to departmental or college-specific needs, plus create support structures specifically for female mid-career faculty.

A common development plan helps associate professors to more intentionally follow structured self-assessment and goal-setting processes. The plan remains constant, while the methodology for coaching and mentoring varies.

- Pilot efforts began with one-to-one career mentoring



Dr. Joan Lorden

for female associate professors in psychology, chemistry and physics. Initial results look strong, judging by feedback and the number of women planning to seek promotions.

- Another component is Focus Energy Friday sessions for all associate professors, to cross-pollinate ideas.
- A third, growing component is peer mentoring within colleges or departments, which began with women and men in the Lee College of Engineering. This year, women faculty in behavioral and social sciences and men and women faculty in humanities have started groups, and other departments have expressed interest.

Initial results signal success. We measure these factors: participation of eligible faculty, faculty initiation of peer mentoring groups, participant satisfaction and early promotion data. Five of the six women promoted to full professor had participated in at least one initiative.

Key leaders add credibility

The ADVANCE Faculty Affairs Office originated the initiative, while also seeking the active support of campus leaders. Dr. Joan Lorden, provost and vice chancellor for academic affairs, is principal investigator for the ADVANCE grant and is very visible in the mid-career mentoring efforts. Dr. Yvette Huet is faculty director and a biology professor. Dr. Kim Buch, a psychology faculty member and former ADVANCE faculty director, coordinates the mid-career mentoring.

To clarify promotion criteria and showcase academic leaders' support, we launched the Faculty Forum, a panel of all deans and the provost on the topic Pathways to Full Professor. To increase common understanding, all associate professors and members of review committees are invited to attend.

To bring others into the discussion, we organized a Charting Your Path Conference in spring 2011 for female associate professors in STEM disciplines and their administrators. Provosts, deans, associate deans and faculty members spoke to attendees from the UNC System campuses and nearby private schools.

Continually evaluate, seek feedback

To track progress, we conducted a follow-up survey of associate professors in fall 2010. Faculty participating in any of our initiatives were significantly more likely to have a mentor and to be actively engaged in career planning aimed at promotion.

When faculty had a mentor to help them plan and prepare, they were significantly more likely to perceive that promotion criteria are clear. Unlike the earlier survey, we found no significant difference of opinion between women and men on whether decisions are made fairly and without influence of nonperformance factors.

Evidence suggests there's progress. We will continue to listen to our faculty and to expand our work to help mid-career faculty to chart and follow a clear path to promotion. ■

Lynn Roberson is communications director for the UNC Charlotte ADVANCE Faculty Affairs Office. To learn more about UNC Charlotte's mid-career mentoring, visit ADVANCE.uncc.edu

Faculty participating in any of our initiatives were significantly more likely to have a mentor and to be actively engaged in career planning aimed at promotion.