

Mentoring First-Year Female MIS Faculty: Reflections on the Past Year

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Abstract

The key question from new teachers is usually “When will I know that I am good enough?” The purpose of this paper is to share the mentoring of a first-year female MIS faculty at a small liberal arts college during the past academic year. Two key mentors, both male, are from the computer science and management information systems disciplines respectively. The first-year faculty member was also able to tap the support of other faculty members from other disciplines. The two key mentors were able to give this first-year MIS faculty diverse opinions and perspectives on different academic and self-development issues. Perspectives and lessons learned by the new faculty and the MIS mentor also are presented in this paper.

Keywords: Mentoring, first-year female faculty, inexperienced teacher, role models

1. INTRODUCTION

Who is a mentor? Mentor is someone “who inspired you, helped keep you going, and showing you the ropes” (Portner, 1998). According to Sands, Parson, and Duane (1991), a mentor is a person who serves as a guide or sponsor, one who looks after, advises, protects, and takes a special interest in another person’s development. What is mentoring? Kronik (1990) states that mentoring goes well beyond teaching and advising; it involves friendship and providing guidance and nurturing in broadly defined professional and personal dimensions.

Is there a need for mentoring new faculty? Current research seems to affirm that the need is real (Sorcinelli, 1994; Fairbanks, Freedman, and Kahn, 2000). Sorcinelli’s study (1994) of new faculty cites inadequate feedback (such as unclear criteria for evaluating teaching) and lack of collegial relations (such as lack of support from senior faculty colleagues) as two of the key factors contributing to the stress level of new faculty.

Is there a need to mentor new female IS professionals? This issue was part of a panel discussion, “Retention of Women in the Technological Sciences: Issues Impacting Education and Career Advancement” held at the 1998 Information Systems Education Conference, “intended to clearly identify techniques and methods to improve the retention and advancement of women in the technical sciences and the work place, and to stimulate questions for additional investigations.” The importance of retaining female faculty becomes clear when we think of them as role models and mentors to our female students. In August, 1998, the ComputerWorld publication also reported on a panel discussion involving nine female senior IT executives from the San Francisco Bay area. Several of those executives indicated that mentoring plays an important role in women’s success and that “rather than one or two primary ones, they often had dozens throughout their careers and learned different things from each” (Gingras, 1998).

2. MENTORING A FIRST-YEAR FEMALE MIS FACULTY

A new female MIS faculty joined the Economics and Business department in the fall of 1999. She graduated with a computer science major several years ago from this college. She has several years of industry experience, has a masters degree in software systems, but has not taught before. She brings technical and business experience to the department. Her responsibilities for the past academic year were four sections of the Introduction to MIS course and two upper-division Systems Analysis and Design courses.

One of her key mentors, who was also responsible for the search and hiring process, was a senior MIS faculty who has over 14 years of teaching experience. He has taught both courses expected of the new faculty. The word, mentor, did not cross the mind of this senior MIS faculty; he just wanted to help the new faculty to learn the duties of a faculty member and to handle the challenges of a new teacher. Nothing formal was arranged between the new and senior faculty. He simply welcomes her to visit his office, which is next door to hers, whenever she has a question. And he makes it a point to drop by her office once in a while to see if she is doing well professionally and socially.

Another mentor who came along was from the computer science department. He has been with the college for at least 25 years. He was the new faculty's professor when she was an undergraduate computer science major. Both enjoy jogging and so soon after the new faculty comes onboard, they run once a week together. It is during these jogging sessions that issues pertaining to teaching and other professional topics are discussed.

What Worked for the First-Year Faculty

After the spring semester ended, the senior MIS faculty visited with the new faculty about the past year. The following are benefits gained by the new faculty through mentoring:

- Have a primary mentor: The senior MIS faculty took it upon himself to work with the new faculty. It is clear that a mentor must want to assume this responsibility and see the benefits of this mentoring relationship. Having a key contact person is important because this mentor can point out other resource persons to the new faculty when needed. During the first semester, they met daily and at least three times a week in the second semester to discuss diverse issues.
- Have a second key mentor: The new faculty benefited from the interactions with her former professor who is now her colleague. He knew the history and politics of the college better and was able to present alternative views to the new faculty for consideration.

- Have informal mentors: The new faculty also sought out other faculty, such as two from the accounting discipline, to visit about faculty responsibilities and teaching issues. Furthermore, the associate dean of the college also met with all the new faculty once a month to discuss topics such as faculty development and tenure and promotion. Indirectly, through the monthly discussions, the new faculty members also serve as mentors to one another.
- Knowing the college helps: Since the new faculty graduated from this college, the adjustment was less difficult. However, coming back as a faculty is very different from the experience of a student. Familiarity with the college also means knowing which senior faculty to approach for counsel.
- Mentor taught similar classes: The senior MIS faculty can talk about content with the new faculty about the courses he has taught before. Questioned posed by the new faculty definitely helps the senior faculty to see issues never thought of before. This sharing of ideas helps both persons to improve their teaching.
- Mentor sat in on a January-term class: The senior faculty decided to join the class because he lacks the knowledge in the topic area to be presented by the new faculty. However, before the course started, he was able to assist the new faculty to decide on the scope of the course and possible activities for the students. During the course, he was able to give feedback on the teaching performance of the new faculty.
- Mentors have different approaches and perspectives on teaching, classroom management, advising, faculty politics, faculty development, and non-work issues: By having faculty with different length of service to the college as resource persons, the new faculty was able to see how different faculty members approach different challenges and issues. This helps the new faculty to find an approach that fits her style and situation better.

What Worked for the MIS Mentor

As a faculty who started out not having the word, mentor, in mind, it certainly was a rewarding year working with a new faculty member. Several of the lessons learned by the senior MIS faculty are:

- Practice good listening skills: The more he lets the new faculty talk, the clearer the problem seems to become. It is important to never assume that we know what the problem is. Time has changed and we are all different teachers. Letting the new faculty talk is a good way to help her address her challenges and perform her best.
- Make time for first-year faculty: As much as possible, the senior MIS faculty will drop what he is doing to visit with the new faculty. This level of attention is important to building a trusting and welcoming relationship. This type of commitment

will mean less time for the mentor to do his work but it is a worthwhile investment because the new faculty will have a firmer foundation to build her professional career and this in turn will add to the strength of the department.

- Learn from the questions posed by first-year faculty: Since the new faculty has no teaching experience before, the questions asked challenged the senior MIS faculty at times. Why and How questions required him to justify why certain things were done. Also in the process, some changes suggested by the new faculty were adopted. A fresh perspective is very refreshing.
- Volunteer advice, suggestions whenever appropriate: The senior MIS faculty found that trying to anticipate questions or challenges faced by the new faculty helps their relationship. But knowing when to volunteer advice and suggestions is crucial because the new faculty needs to learn to deal with challenges herself.
- Give a pat on the back once in a while: The senior MIS faculty likes to affirm and re-affirm success observed. Little tokens of appreciation such as a word of thanks or a chocolate bar are wonderful things to have handy.
- Understand that first-year faculty can be overly critical of their performance: The tendency of new faculty is compare themselves to the experienced faculty. If they do that often, they will feel that they are not doing a good enough job. Hearing positive feedback from their students about the success of other faculty puts pressure on new faculty also. It is important for senior faculty to remind the new faculty that we are all still learning to be good teachers and any success in class achieved by the new faculty should be recognized to boost their confidence.
- Protect the new faculty: Politics in colleges are dangerous to the professional health of new faculty. It is important for mentors to help the new faculty navigate this mine field. Knowing what to say during department and faculty meetings, and when to say it, is important for new faculty to learn.

What Could Be Improved

- Sit in on mentor's classes: The new faculty has never sat in on the senior MIS faculty's class. Besides time constraint, the new faculty is concerned that after visiting the class, she might feel that she can never measure up to the senior faculty's teaching ability. An ongoing trusting relationship and a desire to excel will ease this concern. Visiting other classes is something that the new faculty should do next semester.
- Have more informal mentors in other disciplines: After the first year, the new faculty felt that more contacts with other faculty in other disciplines would help to improve her teaching and interactions with other faculty. The exchange of

ideas across disciplines is a value-adding activity for all.

- Develop a better balance between work life and life outside of work: The senior MIS faculty is not a good role model in this aspect. The new faculty needs to explore other faculty who are more successful in striking a balance in their lives.

3. CONCLUSION

The first year for any faculty, especially for inexperienced teachers, is a stressful one. There are so many things to learn and so little time. Who can help these new teachers establish a firm foundation for future growth and development? In their research, Fairbanks, Freedman, and Kahn (2000) state that establishing strong relationships based on dialogue and reflection between mentor and the person being mentored is an ongoing process. It is a relationship that should help the person being mentored define his/her own teaching experience and teaching life. Also, new faculty are expected to "unravel the organizational structures and values, expectations for performance and advancement, and the history and traditions of their new campus setting....The ability of new faculty to navigate these early years is critical to their success in and satisfaction with an academic career" (Sorcinelli, 1994). Therefore, the need to mentor new faculty is crucial to their short-term and long-term success. Nurturing new faculty will add to the strength and viability of the department and college.

In mentoring new faculty, it is important that the new faculty not look for a perfect mentor because there is no such person. It is important for new faculty to learn from everyone and every situation. Some mentors can come from unexpected disciplines. The only thing that will hold back a new faculty's progress is for him/her to not widen his/her horizon.

Finally, mentoring is a win-win process. In addition to the benefits gained by the new faculty, the mentors also gain from the new ideas and questions posed by the new faculty. In mentoring, the mentors are also learning to understand their own strengths and weaknesses, and to challenge their assumptions. "When will I feel I am good enough?" should continue to be a challenge to all new and experienced teachers. This past academic year has been a rewarding one for both the new MIS faculty and her two mentors.

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