

# Collaboration: *An Alternative for* Mentoring New Faculty

BY EARL THOMAS

**E**ach year, colleges and universities welcome new faculty members. These individuals are often not only new to the school but also to academia. Although well trained in their respective fields, they are entering an unfamiliar culture with unique politics, policies, procedures, and role expectations. Despite their experience in academia as students, their new roles and expectations are quite different.<sup>1</sup>

In my experience, new faculty members are often searching for an opportunity to partner with a trusted colleague who will help them integrate into their new responsibilities. However, university deans and department heads often assign new faculty to an experienced faculty member who may be overwhelmed with teaching, research, and service responsibilities.

## **What Is the Expected Role of a Mentor?**

Fraser described a mentor as a teacher, trusted guide, sponsor, counselor, advisor, coach, trainer, colleague, and role model.<sup>2</sup> However, one of the most essential attributes of a mentor is availability.<sup>3</sup> Faculty mentors who are occupied with heavy teaching loads, research, and issues of promotion and tenure are not the best candidates for guiding new faculty. The primary goal of the mentoring relationship is to nurture the professional development of the new teacher. Therefore, a trusting relationship may not develop if the mentor is busy and unavailable. As a consequence, the new faculty member must navigate his or her assignments and the politics of the university without assistance.

In most cases, new faculty members are seeking a collegial partnership, not just mentoring on how best to get things done. When faculty collaboration becomes a true partnership between the new teacher and an experienced colleague, this en-

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to work together in new ways. It is not an event but a process that, in turn, stimulates new collaborative ventures. Collaboration produces a wide range of results that empower people and systems to change.<sup>4</sup> The opportunity and challenge of bringing people together can produce outcomes that are greater than the sum of the individual efforts.

These joint ventures require individuals to explore, from the onset, their philosophical view of collaboration. Some may view collaboration as competition that threatens their turf, while others may philosophically support collaboration without being willing to spend the time and effort to make it succeed. Ideally, participants will perceive collaboration as an opportunity to break down turf barriers, identify common goals, pool resources, and implement strategies that will achieve positive results.

## **An Alternative to New Faculty Mentoring**

In my experience, stereotypes and misconceptions about faculty mentoring and academic work have been a serious barrier to faculty collaboration. Conventional stereotypes, which portray professors conducting research in the isolation of a laboratory or teaching alone in front of a classroom of passive

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## **Collaboration**

Everyone involved must have a clear understanding of collaboration before professors can implement it successfully. Collaboration is a process that encourages people

students, ignore significant aspects of modern academic life. Many professors now conduct much of their work (teaching, research, and writing) in partnership with colleagues. Faculty collaboration generally occurs in two principal areas: research and teaching. Learning how to collaborate will better serve the new teacher's future goals than being mentored on how to work alone.

### Barriers to Faculty Collaboration

Issues of promotion and tenure can foster an environment of competition rather than collegiality. Newly hired faculty may find it difficult to partner with others, especially senior colleagues who may be working toward promotion and tenure. As a newcomer to academia, I have found a lack of collegial spirit among faculty members, which I regard as disturbing. My prior experiences working for community-based nonprofit organiza-



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delivered. Course content is separated into discrete subject-specific areas belonging to a particular department. This often creates a barrier to interdepartmental partnerships, and may be perceived by faculty as a hostile and competitive environment.

tions had taught me that more could be achieved through collaboration than competition. But I soon learned that the structure of the university reward system often impedes collaborative efforts among faculty.

Another institutional barrier I discovered that impedes faculty collaboration is the way courses are designed and

Philosophical and personal differences among faculty can also deter collaboration. For example, in a pilot study of a collaborative teaching model involving two professors from different disciplines, Bowles<sup>5</sup> found that professors often disagreed on how to approach a course, address students' needs, and conduct collaborative teaching. Furthermore, McMillin and Berberet<sup>6</sup> discovered that faculty often perceive themselves as adversaries rather than collaborators.

### Overcoming Barriers to Collaboration

How can a university successfully overcome barriers to collaboration? I believe it is vital to focus on the benefits that can be achieved by successful faculty collaboration—both for those involved and for the university. Faculty collaboration can create connections between individuals, departments, and divisions. For example, teachers can begin to connect interdepartmentally by meeting to review and discuss the courses they teach, and jointly modifying curricula. They can thereby better utilize university resources and more adequately meet the diverse needs of their students. The not-so-obvious effects of these interdepartmental collaborative efforts are that faculty members discover and explore shared beliefs regarding teaching, research, and service. Even before teachers embrace the idea, university reward and pay structures can be adapted to encourage and reward collaboration. Senior faculty can negotiate a “we” reward system through the faculty senate and revision of university by-laws.

### Faculty Collaboration in Action

My previous work experiences in community nonprofit organizations taught me that collaboration is a process rather than a product. A successful collaboration pays direct attention to process. Winer and Ray<sup>7</sup> have proposed a collaboration process model characterized by stages: (1) choosing colleagues, (2) dividing the labor, (3) establishing work guidelines, and (4) terminating the collaboration.

Upon my arrival at the university, my belief in the power of collaboration empowered me to seek out a trusted colleague rather than waiting to be assigned a senior faculty member. After several years of working with a collaborative partner, my understanding and appreciation for life as an academic have been transformed. I've come to appreciate Solomon's observation that “Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their labor” (Ecclesiastes 4:9, NKJV).<sup>8</sup> I believe the positive work results of our collaborative partnership have been largely due to our understanding and application of Winer and Ray's process model of collaboration. By adhering to the process model:

1. We made a conscious decision to work together as collaborative partners;
2. We sought to divide the labor;

3. Each collaborative venture was directed by jointly established work guidelines; and
4. We established realistic time frames to benchmark the beginning and end of each collaborative venture.

However, underlying the success of our collaboration was a commitment to reserve time and be accessible to each other. As Gaskin, Lumpkin, and Tennant have suggested,<sup>9</sup> the development of a trusting relationship between the mentor and protégé requires that each be accessible to the other weekly. We met to discuss and review our work, problem solve, and develop plans for action. This has resulted in written grants, co-developed courses, and co-authored articles.

Both of us have made considerable gains in our academic careers since joining together as collaborators. Unlike the findings of Bowles, which suggested that faculty collaboration is difficult to achieve, we have discovered a context in which both of us can collaborate on teaching, research, and service in ways that meet our shared and individual goals.

### Conclusion

Collaboration is a process that can orient and integrate faculty into the professorial life and enhance their professional development. However, historically, the development of new faculty has been framed through a mentor-protégé model.<sup>10</sup> Gaskin, Lumpkin, and Tennant suggest that faculty mentoring should focus on formative activities, e.g., offering advice and providing constructive feedback. Although it's valuable to have experienced faculty mentors available to give needed advice, new faculty members need someone who is accessible and can meet with them on a regular basis to develop and implement shared projects. Here are some suggestions for establishing such a caring collaboration:

1. Experienced faculty who are often assigned to serve as mentors have limited time to do so due to their teaching loads, scholarship, and service activities. Therefore, the new teacher should request advice from these experienced faculty members on difficult-to-solve issues that do not require a major, ongoing time commitment.

2. Collaborative endeavors are more likely to support the development of new faculty when collaborators seek out each other, rather than being assigned by administrators. Therefore, it is helpful to seek out a colleague to work with who is at approximately the same level of development as you are in his or her university career.

3. Faculty collaborators must identify common goals and cooperate in developing work plans. Therefore, you need to schedule frequent meetings with your faculty collaborator to set goals, develop work plans, and assess progress.

4. Collaborators should discuss how they will share in the responsibilities and credits associated with collaborative teaching, research, and service.

Collaboration is a workable alternative to assigning new faculty to a senior professor for mentoring. It immerses new faculty from the onset into teaching, research, and service, and provides support in their integration into campus life. By collaborating, faculty can achieve far more than they could accomplish alone. ✍



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4. M. Winer and K. Ray, *Collaboration Handbook: Creating, Sustaining and Enjoying the Journey* (St. Paul, Minn.: Amerherst H. Wilder Foundation, 2000).
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7. Winer and Ray, op. cit.
8. The text credited to NKJV is from The New King James Version. Copyright © 1979, 1980, 1982, Thomas Nelson, Inc., Publishers. All rights reserved.
9. Gaskin, Lumpkin, and Tennant, "Mentoring New Faculty in Higher Education," op. cit.
10. Ibid.

