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A Time for Deeper Dialogue: Mentoring, Modeling, and Growing Your Own

Mildred M. Pearson

Introduction

We need deeper dialogue in order to learn, grow, and change as we extend a warm welcoming hand to individuals who aspire to join the professorial ranks. (Stanley and Lincoln 2005, 50)

Too often, new faculty members tackle teaching roles at an unfamiliar campus feeling lost and completely on their own. That is not a problem at Eastern Illinois University (EIU), where a rapidly growing faculty development program reaches out to new employees to encourage and support them in all facets of their lives, professional and personal. Eastern Illinois University began having deeper dialogue with faculty by creating the faculty mentoring circles connection (FMCC) program, a program that is relationship driven. Clearly new faculty members, like new students, arrive on most campuses highly stressed about the role of the professoriate and grappling with having found new jobs, new cultures, new goals, new adjustments, and new expectations. Many come from their graduate school experiences having never taught and are inundated with the demands of the department, learning how to write a course syllabus, participate in committee work, and offer university service while becoming acclimated into a new environment (Boise 1992; Sorcinelli 1994). In response to the overwhelming needs of new faculty members, institutions should ensure that a support system is in place.

Creating a faculty-friendly institution in which voices are heard, views valued, vocation appreciated, and victories celebrated requires establishing an environment that is inviting and nurturing. *Nurturing* in this context suggests an environment in which the academic climate focuses on issues beyond tenure and promotion. For increased job satisfaction, a new mentoring paradigm is essential. During new faculty orientation, it is critical to encourage all faculty members from diverse backgrounds to create an environment of collegiality and community building. It's time for deeper dialogue, a dialogue where gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and faculty of color, who often experience marginalization, can feel welcome and invited to participate in discussions of diverse issues, a dialogue where mentoring is at least offered.

Providing a mentoring program is critical, but before implementing a mentoring program for new faculty members, it is necessary to consider whether the program should be formal or informal and the purpose of the program—for example orientation, instructional improvement, or promotion of a specific institutional culture.

Setting Up the Program

At Eastern Illinois University, a formal mentoring program has been established to provide structure for the mentoring process and to ensure that the purpose of this program is followed. Mentors and mentees are initially paired at the beginning of the year. Relationships are organized across college lines, with no more than two individuals assigned to a mentor. Traditional programs usually include mentoring by tenured faculty only, but Eastern has included junior faculty, who can provide assistance to those working on their terminal degrees. Each partnership meets once or twice a month for coffee, breakfast, lunch, or dinner for at least one hour throughout the academic year. It is totally up to those in the partnership to work out the logistics of the relationship. After attending the first mentor-mentee training session, the partners determine the topics for the meetings, which may include teaching techniques, student academic integrity, strategies for achieving tenure, useful resources at the university, balancing teaching and research, maintaining a healthy balance between work and life, handling ethical problems, negotiating departmental politics, and navigating in the academy.

The FMCC set up the program goals to get university buy-in from all constituents. Program goals are as follows:

- To speed up the learning of a new job or skill and reduce the stress of transition
- To improve instructional performance through modeling by top academicians
- To attract new faculty in a very competitive recruiting environment
- To retain excellent mid-career and veteran faculty in a setting where their contributions are valued
- To promote the socialization of new faculty into the EIU learning community
- To create a collaborative environment and a relationship-driven program