



Mentoring Mini-Cases for Discussion

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Case 1: A Cursory Review

Assistant Professor Dr. Sandra Smith, an African American chemist, is meeting with her white male senior faculty mentor – Dr. Robert Caldwell – to discuss a paper she hopes to submit to a peer-reviewed journal. Dr. Caldwell hands her the paper and says, “This is pretty good. I can tell that you spent a lot of time on it. You’ll see that I’ve made a few notes in the margins. So is that it for today’s session? I’m really under the gun on a couple of writing assignments of my own and I’m teaching my graduate seminar tonight.”

- *What do you think Sandra is thinking?*
- *How should Sandra respond?*
- *How do you think Robert will respond? Why?*
- *What advice would you give Sandra?*

Case 2: Classroom Troubles

Dr. Susi Sanchez, a Latina chemical engineer, has requested a meeting with her white female mentor – Dr. Cassandra Lesley – to discuss issues she is having in a class she’s teaching. Susi finds that her predominately white students, mostly male, are dismissive and disrespectful. She tells this to Dr. Lesley who says, “Don’t you think that you may be over-reacting? What’s your evidence?” Dr. Sanchez cites several behavioral situations that have occurred during class and Dr. Lesley states, “Well, I guess you’re just going to have to figure out a way to deal with it. I suggest letting it just roll off your back and carrying on. That’s what I’ve always done and I’ve succeeded. And, quite honestly, you should spend less time worrying about your classes and more time focused on your research agenda.”

- *What do you think Susi is thinking?*
- *How should Susi respond?*
- *How do you think Cassandra will react? Why?*
- *Do you think there’s a gender dynamic here? What might be different if Dr. Lesley were a male?*
- *Is there a race dynamic? What might be different if Dr. Lesley were Latino?*

Case 3: Perceptions of Parenthood

Assistant Professor Dr. Xueli Tan, an Asian mathematician, is meeting informally with a senior member of her department, and Chair – Dr. Benjiro Soon Wong. Xueli says, “I’ve noticed that no one in the department ever mentions children. Doesn’t anyone have children?” Benjiro says, “Gosh, I’ve never really thought about it. Why do you ask?” “Well,” replies Xueli, “my husband

and I were thinking of starting a family and just wondering how that might be perceived here,” to which Benjiro responds, “Don’t you think you should have thought about all that before you started on the tenure-track here two years ago?”

- *What do you think Xueli is thinking?*
- *How should Xueli respond?*
- *How do you think Benjiro will react? Why?*
- *What advice would you give Xueli?*

Case 4: Early Promotion: a mentoring dilemma

“One last thing, Dr. Russell...I want to go up for Promotion to Full Professor this year,” said Dr. Regina Ell. She was wrapping up her annual review meeting with her Department Chair, Dr. Russell.

Dr. Russell paused, “Hmmm, no easy response to that,” he thought.

Dr. Ell, after a 10-year career as a research chemist in industry, had joined the faculty at WSU as an Assistant Professor. Dr. Russell had not been Chair then, but often thought it had been a mistake not to have hired her at the Associate Professor rank, or at least with some credit toward tenure. But, Dr. Ell had earned tenure and promotion to Associate Professor with no difficulty 6 years after her initial hire. Now after only four years in that rank she felt she was ready for the next step up the academic ladder.

Dr. Russell hesitated not because he didn’t think Dr. Ell was a productive faculty member. On the contrary, her track record in research was good (although perhaps not exceptional) and her teaching was superb. In his mind she was right on track for promotion...in another year.

In the last decade, Dr. Russell had seen a shift in the P&T culture at Wyoming State. The concept of “early promotion” was being applied strongly to candidates going from Associate to Full Professor rank. And, the campus P&T committee chair was on record as saying that the bar was higher for “early” promotion to Full, just as it was for tenure. Russell was worried that what would be a straight forward promotion next year could be contentious at this time. He did not want Dr. Ell to be disappointed, frustrated, or worse...disheartened by being denied promotion.

Dr. Russell was also concerned that good female faculty in the STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) departments were vulnerable to being recruited by other universities, governmental agencies, and in chemistry at least, industry. He didn’t want to lose Dr. Ell...either by not supporting her promotion; nor by pushing it too fast and having her turned down by the University, thus triggering her to look at other options.

- *Put yourself in Dr. Russell’s position...how do you mentor Dr. Ell in this situation?*

Case 5: Mentoring a New Faculty Hire

The Department of Biology has just hired Dr. Vishnu as an Assistant Professor. She earned B.S. and M.S. degrees in her native India and a Ph.D. in the U.S. She is the only non-native U.S.

faculty member in her department. Three other women, one Associate Professor and two Professors, were members of the Biology faculty.

In her first meeting with her department chair, he assigned her a mentoring committee comprised of 2 women faculty from the Departments of Chemistry and Art History. Both of these women were born in India; one (Art History) is an Associate Professor (with tenure), the other an Assistant Professor with 3 years on the faculty.

- *Would you have handled this the same way?*
- *What would you do differently?*

Case 6: The Reluctant Protégé

Dr. Anne Meyer was a Professor in Computer Engineering at Wyoming State University. She chaired the search committee that hired Dr. Joan Mertens into an entry-level, tenure track line in the department. Dr. Meyer was excited to mentor her new colleague and arranged to meet with Dr. Mertens soon after she arrived on campus.

At the meeting in her office, Dr. Meyer enthusiastically told Dr. Mertens of her plans to mentor her. She'd already spoken to their Dept. Chair, telling him that she would be Dr. Mertens formal mentor. She indicated she would help guide Dr. Mertens through the internal politics of the department, help her with the Promotion and Tenure process, and be there for her in way she could.

"And, I really hope we can be friends! And, that you can be comfortable sharing anything you wish with me," Dr. Meyer said. With that said, she launched into a detailed story of her own life. Dr. Mertens sat quietly, almost rigidly, as her senior colleague described her childhood, her academic career, her recent divorce, and the health issue she'd successfully conquered.

As time went on, Dr. Meyer was frustrated and disappointed in her protégé. Dr. Mertens was distant, rarely initiated an interaction, and seemed to be seeking out other senior faculty for advice.

- *Why do you think Dr. Mertens was resistant to mentoring from Dr. Meyer?*
- *What might Dr. Meyer have done differently to engage Dr. Mertens more effectively?*

Case 7: The Mentoring Committee

Dr. Childers first mentoring meeting...she had chosen her mentoring committee with care. Her formal mentoring group included a senior, male faculty member (Dr. Josef) from her department with experience on the campus Promotion and Tenure committee; a senior female faculty member (Dr. Harvey) from another science department; and a female Associate Professor from another college (Dr. Stewart) who Dr. Childers had met at a "new faculty teaching workshop."

The ensuing conversation focused on Dr. Childers research program and her engagement in national-level professional society activities. Dr. Josef indicated that he would be attending their national professional society meeting in 2 months and offered to introduce her to

colleagues with overlapping research interests. In response to a question from Dr. Childers about work-life balance, Dr. Stewart invited Dr. Childers to accompany her to a yoga class she enjoyed. Dr. Stewart talked about how she had handled being a mother during her pre-tenure years and how the university's tenure clock-stopping policy worked relative to pregnancies, family illnesses, etc.

The meeting ended with the group deciding to get together once a semester to talk over any issues Dr. Childers might have and to give her feedback on her progress toward tenure and promotion.

- *What positive mentoring strategies are apparent in this vignette?*
- *What's negative?*
- *What's missing?*

Case 8: A Changing Field

Robert Steele is a brand-new chair of a department with 29 faculty at a research-intensive university. He discovered that the department had several Associate-level professors who had not been promoted to full professor. These professors had been granted tenure based on a great potential that had not yet manifested.

For example, Evan Shilaley, an associate professor in his early fifties, told Robert, the new department chair, that his field has changed over the last twenty years and his area of expertise is no longer valued amongst his colleagues. He enjoys teaching and shared with Robert how he has developed new techniques for engaging and inspiring students. However, because of the lack of support and the perceived irrelevance of his research, he has been avoiding further pursuit of research. Because he feels unappreciated and thus insecure, he struggles to convey his ideas and projects to others.

- *How would you mentor Evan?*
- *What are the issues that this case study raises and what are the possible root causes?*
- *What are some strategies Robert might employ to improve the climate for associate professors?*

Case 9: Too Much To Handle?

Shirley Bonham is a beloved colleague who had been in the department for almost 10 years. Over the past few years, she had become unreliable, missing appointments with students and making only rare appearances at faculty meetings. She told her new chair, Greg, that she had been struggling with personal issues for some time. She was caring for an elderly parent, a partner with heart problems and had recently been diagnosed with depression. Greg found that her once-stellar teaching evaluations were now below-average and one of her PhD students was growing increasingly frustrated with Shirley's missed appointments and lack of support. Her peer reviews in her last annual evaluation noted some problems but seemed to stop short of criticizing her.

- *How would you mentor Shirley?*
- *What type of support would you, as her chair, offer her?*
- *What resources might be helpful to Shirley?*

Case 10: A Me Culture

Joseph Katz, a faculty member who had been a highly sought-after and hired as an associate professor from another university, had grown increasingly more difficult to work with. He has been known to disrupt faculty meetings with diatribes against others and spread gossip about other faculty to students. He had stopped participating in department committees and most of his service commitments were related to faculty senate.

In talking with Hank, the department chair, Joseph was very candid about the reasons for his disengagement and hoped that, in his new position as chair, Hank could turn the climate around in the department. He feels that the last chair promoted a culture of individualism which made him long for the collaborative culture at his last institution. "I think that is why my funding has dried up" he said. "I'm used to generating ideas with colleagues and that seems impossible in this "ME" culture." He told Hank he was open to new ideas to help him connect with his peers and get further funding.

- *What are the issues that this case study raises and what are the possible root causes?*
- *If you were Hank, how would you respond to Joseph?*
- *How would you mentor Joseph?*

Case 11: The Reluctant Mentor

Dr. Ed Norborn, Chair of the Physics Department at Wyoming State University, spotted one of his senior faculty, Dr. Louise Long at the mailboxes.

"Louise,...I just met with our new hire, Dr. Gene Morris, and we discussed the value of establishing a mentoring committee. It's up to him who he picks, but I suggested several possibilities including you. If he asks, I hope you would be willing. Your experience on the College P&T committee would be very useful for him."

"Oh Ed, I don't know," Dr. Long responded. I am very busy this year with our professional society; I just don't know that I can afford another activity."

- *Put yourself in Dr. Norborn's place. How do you respond to encourage Dr. Long to be a mentor?*