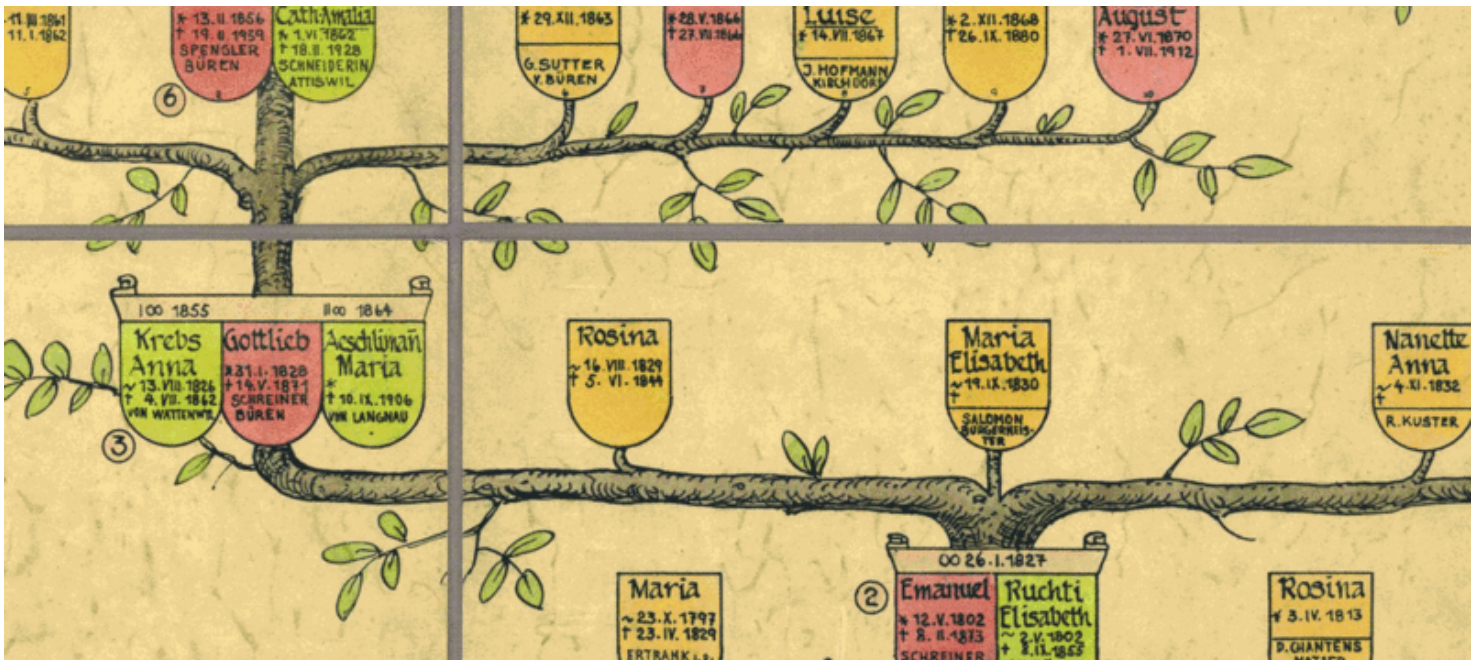




Kerry Ann Rockquemore

Founder at National Center for Faculty Development & Diversity

When It Comes to Mentoring, the More the Merrier



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As head of a faculty-development center, I visit a different college campus nearly every week. By far the most common complaint I hear from tenure-track faculty members is about a lack of mentoring: “Mentorship just doesn’t exist at this university,” for example, or “We’ve all been matched with a mentor but I only see mine once a year.”

And there’s truth in that venting: While everyone seems to agree that mentoring is crucial to new faculty success, many campuses have no formal mentorship program. Others have mentor-matching programs that are only marginally effective.

There are a few reasons why many colleges take such a flawed approach to mentoring. First, it’s

mentoring is often treated like a gift or a favor that's bestowed upon junior faculty members only when we like them, when they behave in appropriately deferential ways, when their needs support our agenda. The inevitable result is that some new faculty members get mentored well and others don't get mentored at all.

But there's another culprit: When there's no consistent definition of mentoring, everyone's in trouble. I often ask people what "mentoring" means to them, and I get a shockingly wide range of responses. For some faculty, it's an all-encompassing, quasi-parental relationship. For others, it's an obligatory 20-minute coffee once a year to answer questions.

Now, if you're getting all the support you want and need to be successful, great. Keep doing what you're doing. But if you're not getting the information, resources, access, connections, sponsorship, and encouragement you need, it's time to ditch the vague notion of "mentoring" and get in the habit of asking yourself: *What do I need, and where's the best place to get it?* Here's how to do that:

Stop looking for a guru.

Sure, it'd be nice to have your own personal (Dr.) Yoda instructing you in the ways of the academic force. But the idea that one person can meet all your mentoring needs and guide you throughout your career is a fantasy.

So stop searching for that one special someone. Focus instead on building a broad and deep network of people who can assist you.

Identify your needs.

Draft a list and *be specific*. Do you need productivity tips and professional-development advice? Encouragement and emotional support? Intellectual community? A role model? Someone to keep you on task or hold you accountable for your research? Access to grants or other opportunities? Substantive feedback on your performance?

Chances are that several of these are important to you—and that only some of them are being fulfilled.

Find the gaps ...

[Map out your current mentoring network](#) to determine which needs are being met, who's meeting them, and where the gaps are.

I've watched hundreds of new faculty members fill out a Mentor Map. And I've seen the same

If you want to broaden your network of support, pick one area that would help you move forward. In other words, what do you need right now? Maybe you need people to critique your manuscripts. In that case, it may be time to cultivate a network of readers, engage a professional editor to polish and format your manuscripts prior to submission, or start taking colleagues up on their offers to read (or discuss) your work. Wouldn't it be amazing to have a number of trusted assessors who could read your manuscripts at various stages, respond to specific questions, help you to target appropriate journals, and assist you when you get stuck?

... and go about plugging them.

But how to find the right people? Start by soliciting advice from colleagues who already have what you seek.

If you want to apply for a grant from a particular funding agency, who better to ask than a colleague who has recently received funding from that source? If you're struggling to find enough time for your work and children, why not seek out a colleague who has mastered the art of time management as an academic parent? And if you're struggling with a specific teaching issue, why not ask that award-winning colleague down the hall for some input or head over to your university's center for teaching excellence?

Wouldn't that be far more effective than repeatedly turning to a mentor you've been matched with who has never written a grant, has no children, and employs a teaching style that's radically different than your own?

Don't be afraid to ask.

Asking for help isn't something most new faculty look forward to or feel comfortable doing. I often hear young scholars repeat what I call "limiting beliefs"—powerful stories that keep them from requesting the resources, referrals, and support they really need.

Many of these are universal: "Who am I to contact [insert big name scholar]?", for example. Or "I feel like an imposter, and if I ask for help, people will find out I don't know what I'm doing."

Schedule your requests.

Limiting beliefs lead to procrastination: If you feel awkward seeking help in the first place, it's tempting to put it off. That's why I recommend scheduling your requests in your calendar each week at a specific day and time. That's right: Scheduling one 30-minute block each week to ask for what you need will pay enormous dividends in expanding your support network and getting your needs met.

And remember, when you do meet with a prospective mentor-to-be, know what you're going to say and be specific. Don't ask "Will you be my mentor?" unless you want them to say no. *Do* ask focused and informed questions about what you hope to learn.

Shifting from a guru-based mentoring model to a network-based mentoring model requires an initial leap of faith. But if you stop searching for that one all-knowing mentor and start focusing instead on your concrete, specific needs, you'll discover that a large network does more than one mentor ever could.



[Kerry Ann Rockquemore](#) is president and CEO of the National Center for Faculty Development & Diversity.

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