

AC 2008-252: NEW FACULTY MEETINGS: SURVIVING THE FIRST YEAR OF THE TENURE TRACK TOGETHER

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New Faculty Meetings:

Surviving the first year of the tenure track together

Abstract

The initial years of a tenure track position are difficult for a variety of reasons, including the lack of preparation and experience that new faculty members have for various aspects of the job. Much advice has been given regarding the use of mentoring and workshops to accelerate the acclimatization period, but these methods may not involve the relaxed atmosphere and open discussion conducive to the development and free exchange of ideas and ideologies. In this paper, we discuss our approach of regular peer meetings of such discussions. Peer meetings promote the discussion of problems encountered by new faculty as the problems develop. Not only does discussing problems in such meetings assist in the creation of solutions, but everyone who participates in the discussion is thereafter prepared to avoid similar problems in the future. Considerations of group composition, group size, and what topics to discuss are examined.

I. Introduction

Traditionally, Assistant Professors begin their career with a minimum of preparation for certain aspects of the job. For example, many new faculty members are straight out of graduate school without experience developing research directions or preparing classes. According to work by Boice, new faculty generally take 4-5 years to build necessary experience before starting to meet the standards set by their institutions.¹ Such lengthy adjustment periods have a negative impact on faculty performance and thus on the probability of tenure.

Common actions new faculty take to improve their performance include soliciting mentoring, attending workshops, and reading pertinent literature.¹⁻⁹ Such actions can significantly assist in answering questions and providing useful skills, but do not always provide the opportunity to explore multiple approaches quickly. For example, a mentor or workshop will often provide a single approach for a given problem, whereas performing a literature search can take a significant amount of time. Additionally, all of these actions can suffer from a lack of discussion, whether due to the size of the workshop or the dynamic between mentor and mentee. As a supplement to these actions, we consider regular meetings with peers specifically for the wide range of perspectives presented and the emphasis on discussion.

As three new faculty members, we met weekly throughout our first year in order to hasten our own adjustment period by learning about different research fields, sharing opportunities for collaboration, talking about experiences from the classroom, discussing grant proposals, and providing support for each other. We believe these meetings have significantly eased our entry into academia and improved our chances for tenure, both through shared information and through the resulting collaborative papers and proposals. To encourage the formation of regular meetings between new faculty members, this paper investigates the discussion topics and results of our meetings, along with our suggestions for maximizing the usefulness of such meetings.

II. Motivation

Getting tenure is a difficult process due to the inexperience of Assistant Professors and the scope of their undertakings in teaching and research.¹⁰⁻¹² Classes take significant time to prepare from scratch (choosing a textbook, developing a syllabus, writing the first exam, creating labs) and dealing with classroom-based difficulties such as incivilities or cheating can further decrease the time available for other tasks. Meanwhile, building research or developing industry collaborations from scratch also takes significant time and requires many choices about which projects and contacts to pursue. Though faculty have significant freedom in directing research and developing collaborations, new faculty often have little previous work to extend or previous contacts to build upon. Combined with a lack of experience, such freedom can be detrimental. For example, many projects may seem tempting or even urgent but it would be a mistake to perform a small amount of work in several areas without significant progress in any of them. Additionally, tenure-track problems are usually exacerbated by the fact that the faculty member is new to the geographic location and starts with a limited social network.

Regular discussions with peers in the same situation can accelerate the acclimation and thereby improve the chances of getting tenure.¹³⁻¹⁵ First, explaining and discussing any difficulties often provides multiple approaches which can then be considered and debated. Second, and potentially more useful than solving the immediate issue, is that the discussion provides a sort of immunization to the other discussants. Everyone learns from the mistakes or “interesting experiences” of each person, be it a classroom situation or research difficulty. This effect is strengthened since the group members are in similar situations and tend to experience similar challenges. Third, social experiences increase comfort which leads to confidence. To some degree commiseration can help mental preparedness. Fourth, good ideas may more likely be acted upon if they are discussed in a group as the discussion can improve the idea and because the idea is more likely to be heard by someone with sufficient time and motivation.

III. Forming a group

Structuring the meetings to realize such potential benefits can be difficult. Many factors can have significant positive and/or negative effects on the results of the meetings. The ideal new faculty meetings are situation-dependent, but our experience has highlighted three factors as vital for maximizing the benefits of such meetings: group size, the experience level of attendees, and the formality of the meetings.

Group size has had the biggest effect on our perceived benefit of the meetings. Our meetings consisting of only two attendees have been relatively ineffective due to the dearth of aggregate experience resulting in a correspondingly limited breadth in topics and a poor number of approaches for each topic. Our meetings with five or six attendees have experienced difficulties in fostering conversations pertinent to all attendees, and even then resulted in limited participation in the discussions. Additionally, the larger groups spawned disagreements about the methodology and formality of the meetings, areas that are more difficult to alter as the group size increases. Three or four people seem to provide a good balance between the above issues and resulted in the most productive meetings.

Other relatively new Assistant Professors tend to be most receptive to joining the group as they have similar requirements, levels of experience, and motivation. Tenured faculty, and even untenured faculty with several years of experience, are expected to have the direction and focus such meetings assist in developing. As a result, their words are taken not as an equal participant but as a mentor, which has the effect of changing the social dynamic, reducing discussion and providing a single “approved approach.” Mentoring can be very beneficial in another setting, but is not conducive to the free exchange of ideas and ideologies that is the goal of the new faculty meetings and which prepares one for the varied challenges of being a faculty member. Some research in educational literature even shows negative effects caused by the support of the status quo.¹⁶ Including senior faculty in occasional meetings is discussed below, but regular inclusion of senior faculty can prevent the benefits desired from new faculty meetings due to the mentor-mentee dynamic.

A further consideration is the structure and formality of the meetings. Some meeting elements that increase formality include a regular schedule, predetermined agendas, topic leaders, preparatory work before meetings, and meeting minutes. Informal meetings are easy to attend, low pressure, well suited for covering many small topics that cannot be determined in advance, and are agile, but they may stall without a serious topic to consider, or more likely can turn into a time to complain and air grievances instead of presenting and solving problems. Additionally, informal meetings do not provide mechanisms to ease the conversion of discussions into actions, due to the lack of an agenda, discussant leader, and previous meeting minutes. Any regular meeting, even the most informal, can improve the likelihood of ideas becoming actions simply through reminders of previous topics, but the aforementioned mechanisms codify and assist the process from idea to result. In the first year we heavily preferred an informal meeting over lunch as we often wanted to talk about several recent experiences. In our second year we have moved towards more structured meetings for the higher probability they will result in actions and more deeply considered topics.

A common recommendation for picking mentor-mentee pairs is for the two people to be in different departments so as to avoid departmental politics and to provide an “outside” viewpoint on the department. In our experience, including faculty from other disciplines into the new faculty meetings is desirable for similar reasons. One of the reasons the meetings are helpful is the way all the attendees bring separate experiences to the discussions, and so incorporating faculty from other programs or departments can yield even more diversity. Obviously a counteracting force also exists; the disciplines should not differ so greatly that teaching or research practices do not easily translate between them.

IV. Selected discussion topics

To illustrate the benefits of such meetings, a selection of topics covered in our meetings follows, along with our perceived benefits of those discussions. The group did not always agree on any one answer to these questions and members might not hold the same views upon revisiting a topic, but the discussions themselves provided the described benefits.

- How much time should be spent on research for publications and federal grants versus developing industry contacts and pursuing money from industry? This topic is an obvious result of our freedom combined with our inexperience and need for performance in

funding and renown. Discussing the notoriously low acceptance rate for federal grants, potential grant sizes, possible local industries to work with, and the relationship between grants and publications, made our options and their interrelations apparent. This conversation also led to further conversations with senior faculty about the perceived benefit of various factors in tenure package evaluations. The pertinent details of those conversations were then brought up at later meetings and led to discussions on tenure packages.

- How much time should be spent preparing for a class? Many books have been written about teaching and preparing to teach, two of the most prominent being by Boice and McKeachie.^{1,17} As we learned of such books and then read them, we revisited this topic multiple times. We talked about different methods for improving student learning, how to reduce time spent preparing lectures, whether to revise labs, how to structure exams, what type of homework should be assigned, and how difficult to make exams. Not only did we share tips that benefit ourselves and our students, but we gained an appreciation for varied styles of teaching. In some cases we shared alternative teaching styles that were more efficient in enhancing student learning with respect to our preparation time, whereas in other cases we agreed that certain aspects of teaching required significant time to do well. To single out one sub-topic and its impact, in our first semester one of us instituted student-led lectures in an effort to support active and life-long learning. The approach and results were discussed in our meetings and in the next semester another attendee initiated student-led lectures in a different class with a minimum of hassle.
- What approach is best to take for performing service actions? Service is the third tenure requirement, alongside research and teaching, and at first appears difficult to satisfy meaningfully while protecting time needed for teaching and research. Pooling our thoughts provided a large variety of general ideas, many of which could be related to our work in teaching or research.
- What precautions should we take when hiring assistants? Due to lackluster performance by the research and teaching assistants for two of our attendees, we discussed not only what to look for in an assistant, but what assurances we need about their work ethic and motivation. This topic is a good example of the discussions that immunize the group, preparing everyone for potential problems that could otherwise reduce productivity.
- What approaches can we learn from literature review and workshops? Collaborating in the process of gathering outside information has significantly improved our knowledge for a minimum of time spent. As long as at least one group member attends each available workshop on teaching or grant writing, the entire group can benefit from the main points of the workshop. Similarly, hearing about a book second-hand may not provide as much benefit as reading the book, but the most pertinent information can be communicated quickly along with a recommendation about whether the material is worth the time to read.
- What conferences should be attended? Evaluating the pros and cons of some conferences can be difficult, such as small local conferences where connections can be made with local people working on similar topics. This problem is connected to the question of how

to balance one's time, but conferences tend to require a significant lump of time and money while promising only a chance at a tangible benefit.

- How can we connect our classes together? As the three authors teach in the same program, it is possible for each of our classes to relate to the others in some way, such as having the students work on different aspects of the same project, or having similar projects in lower level and upper level classes. To date we have made little progress on this topic but the discussions have deepened our understanding of each other's teaching styles and class subjects while highlighting the way that the discipline is a continuous body of knowledge even though our classes cover discrete segments of it.
- How can we adapt to our new environment? Living in a new area leads to surprises and unmet expectations about mundane institutions such as grocery stores, restaurants, rush hour traffic, childcare, grade/high schools, parks, and libraries. Dissatisfaction in such nonacademic affairs can be a serious detriment to progress at work, while hearing how others are dealing with the same issues can provide unexpected solutions to issues. Some of these concerns, such as which restaurants are good, may best be discussed outside of the new faculty meetings, with people who have lived in the area for a longer period of time. Other problems, such as how to help transition children to the new area, profit from discussion by others dealing with the same situation.
- What projects can we collaborate on? Several of our accomplishments have been natural extensions of these meetings. Aside from this paper, we have co-written one other paper on education and one on non-education research. We have submitted one grant and are working on another, again in both education and non-education. We have also started a departmental research seminar to promote research and collaboration throughout the department.

By generalizing the outcomes of the above list, we can see some benefits that may be expected from regular meetings of new faculty members. Wasted time is minimized, whether a result of inefficiencies in class preparation, unknown options for service, or making poor choices in the balance between the many tasks that demand time from a new faculty member. Teaching is improved through exchanging ideas and lessons learned, providing knowledge of varied teaching styles. Collaboration in research and service generates new ideas and increases the probability that good ideas will be acted upon. Motivation and attitude are enhanced through encouragement and inspiration.

V. Discussion

Over the past three semesters of meetings, we have taken various actions for maximizing desired aspects for such meetings. In general, the results of a group are highly dependent upon the social dynamic of the group, so new faculty interested in learning more would be well advised to consider the psychology literature on group dynamics.^{18, 19} Further, social dynamics in such small groups are a function of the individuals, and so we do not claim that our recommendations are anything more than guidance.

The most sensitive aspect of forming a regular group is avoiding the appearance of exclusion even though the best meetings are limited in the number of attendees. Avoiding the perception that the attendees are separating themselves from others, particularly senior faculty, starts with clarifying the purpose of the meetings. Saying that the meetings are a way for new faculty to discuss situations with others going through the same experiences can prevent the appearance that senior faculty members are being excluded for politics or other reasons. Freely inviting people to sit in on a meeting or two is another approach that can prevent bad feelings. The concerns of new faculty and senior faculty are similar in general, but are actually quite different in details. The result can be miscommunication between new and senior faculty, or advice that solves symptoms but not the originating issue. We have had a good experience inviting senior faculty whenever we had specific questions, and we encourage them to sit in on the meeting if they happened to drop by. On the other hand, regularly having a senior faculty attend would be a detriment to the free speaking that occurs best among peers and would likely turn the meetings into one-to-many mentoring.

We believe these new faculty meetings have been strengthening our friendship and increasing our capabilities. Faculty members who are new to our department in our second year have joined our meetings. In the future, we would like to see a large scale study comparing the performance of new faculty that regularly attend peer meetings versus the performance of new faculty that do not attend such meetings. It is our belief that new faculty meetings, either alone or in conjunction with mentoring, workshops, etc., can accelerate the adjustment period of tenure track faculty.

VI. References

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